

# Plenty of Skippers, Not Much Fuel

by Lt. Chris Churchill

I was scheduled for the second event of the day: a trip to the carrier to pick up our ship's CO and the CO of a CG and return them to their respective ships. The crew that dropped them off in the morning told us we wouldn't be able to refuel aboard the carrier when we arrived that afternoon. I thought that was strange, but since we were dealing with ships' COs, I figured the ships would stay close enough to the carrier.

During the preflight brief in CIC, the fact that we couldn't refuel aboard the carrier was reiterated over Navy Red. I asked, "How far away is the carrier, and where is it headed?"

"Sir, the carrier is fifty miles away, and we're headed toward each other."

The CG, which was our first stop after the carrier, was keeping station five miles from our ship. Everything sounded good to me, so I got the card of the day and went to the hangar to brief the crew.

During our briefing, we discussed bingo fuel and the squadron SOP that limited ship-to-ship distances to 80 miles. The VIP kits were installed, and we were ready for our flight. We spun up and asked for pigeons to the carrier. Combat responded that the carrier was 65 miles away. A warning went off in my head.

1+50 Fuel—We took off from our ship and began to climb so we'd be able to contact Strike as soon as possible. As we flew, the HAC conducted training by asking me questions and evaluating contingency plans.

1+30 Fuel—We finally got a TACAN lock with the carrier at 50 miles. We checked our ship's TACAN and determined that the ships were actually 70 miles apart. At 140 knots, we'd be at the carrier in less than 25 minutes. If the ships stayed this far apart, our bingo fuel was 0+40.

1+15 Fuel—Within 10 miles of the carrier, we were told to enter Port Delta. The air boss reiterated the unavailability of fuel. The carrier was facing us as we approached, indicating that they were closing the distance with our ship. As we entered Port Delta, the carrier began to turn to obtain the best winds for a recovery cycle. Reassessing our bingo fuel, we decided that if we weren't off the deck of the carrier with at least 50 minutes of fuel, we'd have to ask the boss for fuel anyway. The boss proved how quickly he wanted us on and off his deck by telling us to hold close aboard the ship, inside the downwind leg of the fixed-wing landing pattern. We held and waited as the jets landed.

1+05 Fuel—Cleared to land, we landed on Spot 3. As we waited for the COs, I called Strike for pigeons to the CG and to mother.

0+55 Fuel—Still no sight of the COs and no updated pigeons from Strike.

0+52 Fuel—The COs got on board. In addition to the two original captains, we had to take a destroyer captain back to his ship. We got an immediate green deck from the air boss and departed on the reciprocal course from which we came.

0+48 Fuel—Strike finally gave us pigeons to our ship. We were 75 miles from the carrier, and it would take about 38 minutes to get to our ship. We decided that if we didn't get a TACAN lock on our ship or the CG by 35 miles away from the carrier, we would turn back. To add to our stress, our ship's CO stayed on ICS and listened to all of our discussions.

0+35 Fuel—We finally got in touch with our ship at 30 miles out from the carrier and 45 miles from our ship. During the 12 minutes prior, I tried to contact the CG, while the HAC tried our ship.

The HAC asked our ship to set flight quarters, so we could land there for fuel if we had to. He also asked them to contact the CG on Navy Red and tell them to monitor their land-launch frequency. Finally, he asked them their course and speed. They replied they were headed away from us but only at five knots. He told them not to go any faster, since we had their CO, and we were going to be tight on fuel.

0+30 Fuel—The CG finally answered us on their land-launch. We asked them for an immediate green deck and fuel as soon as we landed. For the first time during the flight, a warm and fuzzy feeling was possible. We were 35 miles away and would have a green deck at our ship if necessary. The CG was only five miles from our ship, so we would most likely make it there without having to leapfrog.

0+15 Fuel—We passed our ship, and the CG gave us a green deck, so we continued on.

0+12 Fuel—We landed on the CG and off-loaded the passengers.

After the flight, we debriefed the things we had done right and wrong. First, we felt we should have been more vocal with the people in CIC about closing the distance between our ships and the carrier. After all, we were going to be picking up the COs of all three ships that were ultimately going to be together. During the brief, we could have found out if the ship conducting plane-guard duty would have been available to give us fuel. The burden of carrying three COs also added to a dangerous feeling that we had to get the job done.

Overall, we felt our crew had done everything in our power to adapt as conditions changed. We continued throughout the flight to reassess our situation and make contingency plans. Though we were pushed to our limits throughout, we never painted ourselves into a corner and always had a way out. I left the flight feeling that I had learned more about being an aircraft commander than in any other flight. 🦅

Lt. Churchill flies with HC-11, Det. 2, and recently deployed onboard USS *Camden*.



**We were at  
48 minutes  
of gas, and it  
would take  
about 38  
minutes to  
get to our ship.**

Photo by CW02 Seth Rossmann  
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