

### **ML.63.The 'D' at Kadena Air Base**

The RC-135M models of the 82<sup>nd</sup> SRS were being cycled through modifications and could not maintain complete coverage in the Gulf of Tonkin (GoT). To retain overall coverage of the air war in SEA, I was selected to take an RC-135D to Kadena in June 1969. I remember the time frame well; it was the same time Rivet Amber, the sister ship to Rivet Ball, was lost over the Bering Sea with all Souls on Board.

One of my favorite mementos is a small hand drawn award, making me an honorary member of F-Troop. That designation came from the Kadena maintenance team charged with keeping our D model in the air. That team got the nickname from a TV show at the time; a period western featuring Forrest Tucker.

A typical mission profile: Takeoff was after dark, with a refueling abeam the southern tip of Taiwan. Even at night, I knew I would not be able to refuel in level flight to max weight at 25,000 feet due to the temperatures. I asked the staff for a 5,000-foot refueling block; the staff came unglued. After several "discussions," I offered to fly a test hop to prove the point. The staff declined the test and built in a block altitude so we could refuel in a descent.

The staff's argument was, the M's don't need a block altitude. I pointed out that the M model had fan engines, and the D model carried the original J-57 from KC-135A days. I also pointed out that with over 2,000 flying hours in the 135 airframe, I never had the opportunity to fly one with fan engines or thrust reversers.

I also recall one mission when the entire air refueling block was crowded with thunderstorms and turbulence. It turned into a "sweaty flight suit" party, descending and dodging weather to get the fuel on board. Fortunately, there were some very good tanker pilots stationed there as well.

After the first refueling, we flew south until we had a clear path around Hainan Island and into the Gulf of Tonkin. We transited north and began our orbit off Haiphong Harbor. After several hours on orbit, we headed south for more air refueling. Off the coast of South Vietnam, two tankers waited to top us off. The first rendezvous was southbound with the lead tanker, drop off, make a 180 degree turn and refuel northbound from the other tanker. I was teaching my copilot refueling techniques and let him go for the first refueling. He was doing a credible job closing on the tanker, but we didn't get any gas southbound.

Approaching the south end of the refueling track, I took the plane into contact and refueling began. At the flight pre-brief I learned I knew the lead tanker pilot from a previous assignment. "My friend flying the lead tanker called saying we're near end of track. I acknowledged and asked him if we could finish the first onload in the turn back to north." As I could recall, refueling in turns was not the most approved procedure; but there were times the rules needed to be nudged.

The lead tanker pilot simply made a radio call to the effect: "Roger, rolling into a 30-degree left turn...now." The first onload was complete by the time we were due to disconnect and slide over behind the second tanker.

These "fill in" duties became nineteen-and-a-half-hour flights, unaugmented, every third day. Counting mission briefing and maintenance debrief, it ended up being a nearly twenty-four-hour day. Good way to build flying time, but a grueling schedule.

## **Vital Communications**

There was a radio call most newbies were urged to make when in the Gulf of Tonkin. “We were told to ask Yankee Station, a U.S. Naval ship in the GoT, for a strum check. As we passed near Yankee Station, I requested a strum check. I heard the ship open his mike, and I don’t know what chord it was, but his guitar came over the air loud and clear. Baroom! Anything to break the monotony.”

## **One Last Proposal**

Do anything different to shake them up. That was the motto of Col. Robin Olds who dressed up his Phantoms to look like Thuds (flight profiles) and sound like Thuds (call signs) and send his air-to-air munitions loaded F-4s into the fray. It fooled the North Vietnam pilots and more than a half dozen MiG’s were shot down that day.

I proposed that during the two refuelings in the GoT, a pair of F4s loaded air-to-air join on our RC and the tankers at the south end of the refueling track. When the second refueling was complete, the Phantoms would tuck in tight on the recon plane and become a single radar blip. At the orbit off Haiphong Harbor, the flight would make a wide turn and approach land fall. If the MiG’s took the bait and scrambled, they were dead; if not, nothing lost. The proposal arrived DOA.

- *John Achor, Lt Col, USAF, Ret*