

SPLISH SPLASH

Zot Barazzotto

Returning from an assignment as an OV-10 FAC in Vietnam to fly RC-135s was a good deal. A trip through Castle AFB and I was qualified to sit in the right seat and fly real sorties. Because I already had hours from my SEA tour in a year it was time to go back to Castle for upgrade to A/C. When I returned to Offutt AFB the training continued as an RC-135 A/C had to be receiver refueling qualified. That is when the fun began.

There was no simulator so all training was done in real planes. I don't remember a lot of pre-briefing with all the scary little details being discussed but we were off into the wild blue to give it a try. My IP was very experienced but he wasn't a morning person and not very talkative. We did the safety briefing and I carefully approached the tanker. The RC-135 is anything but a fighter and flying it in formation takes a heck of a lot of skill to anticipate all the lags. One thing that wasn't talked about was the fact that the receiver wanted to fly right behind the tanker. If the receiver moved a little to the right the first inclination was to put a little left aileron in to bring it back. Wrong!! Using ailerons had about a 3 try cycle before you fell off the boom. Took a few humiliating disconnects to realize that all it took was a little pressure on the right rudder to slow the tendency to return to the center. Mastering that detail allowed the tanker to start pumping gas. That was when the fun began as the navigator excitedly called "Breakaway, Breakaway, Breakaway."

Being new I wasn't sure if this was part of the training but I complied, punched the boom disconnect and gently reduced power. Took a few seconds to safely separate from the tanker and for the IP and I to look back at the navigator getting drenched in JP-4 as it flowed out of the overhead right on to him. This is where it got interesting because there was no procedure in the RC Dash-1 for fuel spilled in the cockpit. The IP was about to do the IP thing and take over while I talked as fast as I could trying to explain why the newbie Captain knew more about this than the L/C IP. Turns out that I had a couple of years as a flight test engineer at Wright-Patterson AFB before I went to pilot training. As part of my job I got to qualify equipment in an explosion chamber to make sure that they wouldn't blow up the test aircraft. Since I also flew as crew on a bunch of different aircraft (B-52, B-57, WB-50 (now in the AF Museum) C-121, etc) I read all the Dash 1s. The B-52 DID have a procedure for fuel spilled in the cockpit. I was about to put a modified version of that procedure to the test.

The IP wanted to dump the cabin pressure but we were swimming in JP-4 and JP-4 has interesting explosion characteristics VS Jet A/JP-8/JP-5. The RC-135 also has a feature not found in the B-52. The radios in the B-52 are sealed. The RC's radios are

in racks behind the cockpit and they are cooled by cockpit air and are air insulated. Dumping the cabin pressure would turn the radio's high voltage power supplies into spark plugs over which the fuel vapors would pass. As I'm trying to explain this the IP is reaching for the ram dump switch. I'm thinking that if he goes for that I'm going to break his arm rather than let he do that. Fortunately, he bought my story and lowered his arm. I declared an emergency, started to dump gas (without bothering to ask the command post cause I was still not totally sacimscised) and I wasn't going to wait for permission to get us back on the ground. I also convinced the IP to turn the cabin temperature UP because that lowered the probability of JP-4 blowing up. Counter intuitive, but the right answer.

The landing was uneventful and then I did one of the dumbest things in recorded history when I taxied the plane back to its regular parking spot – wing tip to wing tip to other priceless RCs. We exited like nothing was amiss and gave the plane back to maintenance.

I still needed to get receiver qualified so a week later I was schedule for another try. Same plane with a different IP and maintenance assured me that the plane was ready to go. With a couple of minutes on the boom I was getting the hang of it so I got into position and the boomer plugged us. No sooner after the transfer started I heard the navigator say "Breakaway, Breakaway, Breakaway." This was a bad rerun, but I punched the disconnect button, reduce power and separated from the tanker. When we were clear I turned to look back at the navigator who was again awash in JP-4. Explained to the new IP (Jim Morrow eventually the 55th Vice Wing Commander) that I survived this last week and it might be a good idea to do it again. He agreed and we followed my improvised procedure as we headed back to Offutt AFB. This time I was a little bit smarter and we made a full stop on the hammerhead (closing the runway,) dropped two parachutes for chocks, had everyone exit slowly, remaining grounded to the plane as they exited and gave the plane to the fire department.

Flying is hours and hours of boredom interspersed with moments of sheer terror. Living though those moments makes some great stories over which to share an adult beverage.

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