



was leading a division of Hornets, the sweep element of a strike package, in support of Operation Southern Watch. We had just exited Iraq, with the remainder of the package close behind. It was late afternoon, and the recovery aboard USS *Independence* (CV 62) was scheduled to begin in 20 minutes, which didn't leave much time to get everyone through the backside tanker. Since we were out in front, I pushed up the throttles to expedite the flight's transit to the tanker. The quicker we could get in and out, the better, I figured.

The weather over Iraq had been CAVU, but as we entered the Gulf, it began to deteriorate rapidly. I picked our way through various layers en route to the scheduled tanker track. I checked the flight through Kuwait Center and Strike before reaching the tanker frequency. The tanker was a

Vapes and Skidding Dogs at the Tanker

by Lt. Tim O'Hanlon

KC-10, and Strike had confirmed that it was on-station. However, the tanker was definitely not up the briefed primary or alternate tanker frequencies. I showed a single contact on the air-to-air radar, located directly over the tanker track, but no joy on the comms. I briefly switched back to Strike, because the tankers would normally monitor that frequency as well. They weren't answering there, either, although Strike repeated that the tanker had checked in earlier and reported on-station.

Fifteen miles from the tanker, it was clear that communications wouldn't be the only challenge. The entire area was one big milk bowl, with multiple layers, a visibility of three miles, and little to no definable horizon. I quickly crunched the fuel numbers one more time—we would be priority on the ball at best. With the marginal weather and an entire strike package low on fuel, the chance of things going from bad to worse was about as high as the chance that



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the Air Force guy driving the tanker was wearing a neckerchief.

One last look at the radar showed no one between me and the tanker. I told Dash 3 to continue to search for any other contacts while I locked the tanker. At 10 miles, the tanker was still obscured by a milky layer. A normal rendezvous would have us fly to a point one mile aft and 1,000 feet below the tanker. From there, we would close the distance, stepping out to a 45-

degree bearing line and climbing to the tanker's altitude. Given the conditions that day, however, a more conservative approach was required. Using the radar and making calls in the blind, I led the flight to a point three miles aft and 1,000 feet below the tanker. From there, we began a slow rendezvous. At two and a half miles, I could see the tanker. I was relieved that the flight would be able to cycle through the hoses, although it would definitely be a bit gamey.

Still no luck on the communications, but comm-out tanking was not unusual in the Gulf. Since we were a good five minutes in front of the rest of the strike package, and no one else had checked in, it looked like we would have a couple of extra minutes to get everyone through the basket. We had closed to one and a half miles, still directly aft of the tanker, when the chance of things going from bad to worse became reality.

Movement caught my eye to the left of the nose. As my head snapped over, I saw the belly of an FA-18 in a hard left turn, rapidly growing wider in my canopy. One of my wingmen emphatically called, "Left ten, left ten!"

I began my own call: "Unload, unload!" As I pushed the stick into the instrument panel and tensed up for the impact, I saw a second aircraft—a Prowler—in trail of the first. The Hornet passed 30 feet above my canopy, with a high left to right crossing rate, as he overshot the bearing line. He met all the required criteria for a defensive BFM reversal, and I momentarily envisioned selecting guns to riddle my "opponent" for the error of his ways. I noted the vapes that were draped along the leading edge extensions and wingtips as he passed overhead—telltale signs of a high-performance turn.

The Hornet quickly disappeared into a layer off to the right, and I directed my attention to the Prowler who passed behind and above the flight. He clearly could not hack the Hornet's hard turn, and was split well to the outside of the turn, doing his best impression of a nugget on his first WUOSX.^{*} We all later agreed that paddles would have told him to take it up the right side.

I visually checked the status of my division. I counted four, including myself, and other than

producing a couple of new items for the ship's laundry, we had escaped unscathed. I throttled back and stepped out to three miles to let the guest players sort themselves out. At this point, the lead Hornet checked in on tanker frequency.

"Dragon Fifty-One, flight of two, joining."

Still no reply from the tanker, but you can bet I had something to say.

"Dragon, this is Chippy, we are three miles in trail."

"You're at three miles? We're at one mile."

"Yeah, you passed right over us."

"Oh...well, I'm directly over the tanker now. We'll descend and join."

"Copy."

I slowly closed the flight to within visual range of the tanker, and this time executed a benign rendezvous to port observation. As I waited for the section to complete refueling, the tanker began answering the radio calls of the rest of the strike package as they checked in. Apparently, the tanker had selected the frequency of a different tanker track and had just caught the error. We eventually cycled the division through the tanker, in some of the most vertigo-inducing conditions I have ever experienced. There were repeated requests from various members of the strike package for the tanker to find a better altitude, but conditions were pretty much the same from 10,000 to 30,000 feet. Tanking complete, and happy to be alive, we picked our way back to the *Indy*, for a Case I recovery.

Our flight discussed this adventure at length during the debrief, as well as with the "guest" section. There were plenty of lessons. For starters, weather always complicates things and mandates a shift in our thinking to a more conservative mindset. Sometimes we let external factors, such as hurrying to get back to the ship for recovery, distract us from an otherwise simple decision to take things a bit slower. I know I was feeling pressure to expedite our tanking, and the other Hornet lead was certainly feeling the same. When we don't take a step back to examine the situation, we miss information that would have otherwise helped us make a better decision.

We have standard procedures for a reason. Every squadron has an SOP; every air wing has a TACPRO. Just about everything we do on a routine basis has a standardized approach. Tanking is probably one of the most dangerous missions we do, even when the weather is cooperating: as many as 20 aircraft, arriving from different directions, all striving to reach the same point. In the Hornet lead's case, his high-speed, high-G, non-standard rendezvous was dangerous, even in good weather. Arriving at a point above the tanker and descending to port observation jeopardizes the tanker and any other nearby aircraft. Following the procedures keeps everyone going the "same way, same day."

If we don't learn from our mistakes, we will repeat them. I'm proud of our community's willingness to stand up and confess when we do something wrong. That principle is the foundation of this magazine. Any aviator, from a nugget to a skipper, can stand up at an AOM, leave his rank and pride in the ready-room chair, and tell his story without fear of repercussions. Nothing has done more to foster an atmosphere of learning and safety than these confessions.

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*WUOSX stands for "Wrapped Up Over Shooting Start," a standard LSO comment. A typical new pilot will experience several of these overshooting starts until he has some experience under his belt. The maneuver is affectionately known as the "dog skidding across the linoleum floor." The pilot is in a hard left turn, trying to roll out on his final approach, but because he started his turn too close to the ship, he is overshooting. No matter how hard he tries to stop, he just keeps on sliding past (like the dog attempting to turn a corner on the kitchen linoleum floor). Any time this occurs, anyone on the ship watching gets a good laugh, because they have been there as well. If an LSO comment is underlined, it means it was an exceptionally gross deviation; in other words, he really screwed up. In those rare instances where the overshoot is so gross that the aircraft couldn't get back to the left side without hitting the island, the LSO will tell the pilot to stop the approach, set up for another one, and take it up the right side of the island. You rarely see an aircraft fly up the right side of the island on the carrier. 🇺🇸