

COHO 12

BREAK-AWAY BREAK-AWAY BREAK-AWAY !!!!

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As a long time fan of the "Six" I was ecstatic to learn my night fighter air refueling initial qualification was to be with a flight of 3 F-106's out of Griffiss AFB. I was a recent graduate of the Combat Crew Training School at Castle AFB, California and had been assigned to Wurtsmith AFB in Oscoda Michigan as a line Boom Operator. It was the early part of 1986, probably late February or early March. I had completed all of my mission qualifications except for night fighter, they were the hardest to find and schedule (still are).

My instructor was the squadron senior boom operator. Mission planning the day before was routine. Some weather was forecast for the air refueling track but nothing to be overly concerned with. The crew showed up the evening of the flight and boarded the crew bus for Base Ops. First stop was the weather shop where we received a less than glowing report for the track. The weather was to be intermittent IFR with possible thunderstorms in the area. We still had a few hours before we launched so we proceeded with guarded enthusiasm and leaned forward. Pre-flight in the KC-135A took about 45 minutes at which time the navigator called weather and command post to be sure we were still a go.

The takeoff and en-route flight to the track in western New York was routine. The Nav had his face buried in the radar scope clearing us of some pop-up weather. Fifteen minutes prior to the air refueling control time we got the call from the -106's . They were en-route and on time. The rendezvous went well and soon the instructor boom and I, lying in the boom pod in the aft belly of the tanker, had the little red and green nav lights in sight.

The procedures for initial category qualifications are that the student must watch and listen to an instructor as he demonstrates the proper way to bring in and make contact with the receiver. Since we had 3 F-106's the instructor took some time with the first one and updated his currencies and contact count, (Boom Operators are required to log off a certain amount of contacts and night fighters per semester). The weather was a little bumpy during this time but not too bad. The navigator had his hands full keeping the flight clear of the weather with the radar that the -135 has.

It was my turn in the center position. I was anxious to show my squadron boom I was ready and able to do this. I cleared # 2 into the pre-contact position, which is 50 feet behind the air refueling boom. As he peeled off from the right wing to our trail position I could barely make out his outline. He stabilized at pre-contact and I cleared him verbally and came on the pilot director lights on the belly of the tanker. As he closed, the tail mounted floodlight illuminated that beautiful pointy nose, then the windscreen, then the delta wings and fuselage. The 49th kept their planes immaculate and it showed under the dim glow of the floodlight.

The turbulence was getting a bit more pronounced and we started to fly through some clouds. The Nav was doing his best with what he had to work with. I made a fairly good contact on the first try but knew I could do better. We offloaded his fuel, which took about 3 minutes, and he requested disconnect. The weather and turbulence was getting worse by the mile and we were doing 6 miles a minute. #2 cleared the boom and peeled off to the left wing.

I cleared #3 to the pre-contact position. He sort of stabilized back at 50 feet. The turbulence was getting pretty bad. I looked over my right shoulder at the instructor, he said we would try to get #3 his offload and call it a night and asked me if I thought I was up to it. "Sure" I said, not knowing how bad it could get. Again, I verbally cleared #3 to contact and came on the PDI lights. Both tanker and F-106 are pitching up and down now, flying at 335 knots indicated and 25 thousand feet above the Finger Lakes of New York. The nose, then canopy, then anti-collision light on the "six" pass under my boom. I'm trying to keep it well clear until he stabilizes and I can line up and extend into his receptacle.

It took two attempts by the 106 pilot to keep it in the contact position. He must have been sweating bullets, I know I was ! The third closure was sweet, I extended and made a good contact a little low in the air refueling envelope. We were pumping gas and listening to the Nav tell us we need to get out of the area as quick as possible. Then it happened.....both tanker and six were thrown wildly up, then down what seemed to

be hundreds of feet while still in contact. The disconnect calls were being yelled over the UHF by the “six” pilot and myself but the nozzle on the air refueling boom was bound in the –106 receptacle because he was too low in the envelope. “ COHO 12 BREAK-AWAY BREAK-AWAY BREAK-AWAY !!!” I yelled over the COMM 1 radio. Immediately the F-106 nosed down taking my boom with him. The gauge for boom elevation was past 50 degrees.....the lowest indication on the gauge and NEVER touched during any air refueling operations. The nozzle of my boom popped out at the last possible instant and the boom, all 27 feet of it plus the length of the fully extended inner tube of the boom (20 ft.) came hurtling back up toward the tail of the tanker. I had full up stick pressure on the boom ruddervator control stick while the “six” had my boom at the “Bottom of the Block”, and when the nozzle let loose, here she came ! Luckily as the boom zoomed up to the tail, I forced it back to the middle of my envelope, but did I do it in time to prevent further damage to the boom and empennage ?

The tanker aircraft commander maintained control of our jet and the “sixes” disappeared into the clouds below. There was a lot of talking going on the radios but I was oblivious. “That was a close one” was all I remember my instructor saying or doing. The Break-Away was terminated and we all tucked our tails between our legs and headed home, the Nav picking our way through the storms all around us.

After landing we reported the “Brute Force” disconnect to maintenance personnel who found 5 bent screws on the top of the nozzle where it was bound in the F-106’s receptacle. No further damage was found on the boom or the tail of our plane. My aircraft commander called the 49th and tried to get a hold of the pilot to #3. He had landed about an hour and a half prior to us and had gone home for the night. The AC told the guy on the other end of the phone at Griffiss what had happened, the guy had talked to the crews but they made no mention of the near catastrophe. Ah, to be a fighter pilot !