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Cliff Richards Junior and the Shadows Save the Day, Again!

Kevin McDermott

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Cliff Richard Junior and the Shadows Save the Day, Again!

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The pained look on Rich's face expressed my sentiments exactly.

An airman manning Hill AFB's flight planning area had just told us command post wanted me on the phone.

Rich, my copilot, and I were finishing the paperwork for our twelve-hour flight. Twelve hours is well beyond our cargo plane's range, so we planned to take on 80,000 pounds of fuel from a Bangor AFB based air refueling tanker. All the planning and coordinating took time and effort; I was hoping command post's call wasn't a sign we'd missed something.

Rarely do unexpected conversations with command post officers end well for the crew. Being summoned could mean anything from a miserable reassignment, to answering for a screwup, or some desk jockey complaining we were asking for too much fuel.

Rich followed me to the counter. He stayed close to watch my expressions and glean whatever he could from my end of the conversation.

"This is Captain McDermott."

"Good morning, Captain. I'm Major Blake. I just wanted to let you know we're here if you need anything. This is a high-priority deployment. A lot of leadership will be monitoring it."

"Thanks, sir, I think we're good. We'll just need a van in five minutes to get us to our plane."

"Your van is waiting outside. Fly safe and call if you need anything."

"Thanks again, sir."

Rich could see by my demeanor we were in the clear before I hung up, but he was still curious.

I confirmed his assessment by saying, "He was just asking if we need anything. He also felt compelled to remind me this is a 1B1 mission."

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Rich replied, “I filed the flight plan. I think we’re ready. Maybe if they stop ‘helping’ us for five minutes, we can get this mission off on time.”

“Yeah, I feel like kicking the next person who reminds us how important this mission is square in the nuts. Let’s go, I think we got everything.”

An overly eager van driver awaited us curbside. As we turned toward the flight line, I saw my four engine C-141 a half mile away. Painted in matte gray and peppered with hydraulic stains, she was a stark contrast to the sleek, twin tailed fighter jets lined up perfectly beyond her. At 325,000 pounds, 168 feet long and with a 160-foot wingspan, many at Hill AFB viewed her as a utilitarian, ugly duckling. When I looked at my “T-tailed, swept wing, bug sucking, whistling death from above” framed by Utah’s Wasatch Mountains, I saw the prom queen.

Before our vehicle came to a stop, a grinning Lieutenant Colonel hastily strutted over. His flight suit, aviator sunglasses, colorful scarf, and flight cap formed into an exaggerated canoe shape with the aft part pushed down in the classic ‘fighter pilot crush’ screamed, “I’m a fighter pilot, and I know I’m dead sexy!”

“Good morning, Captain McDermott. I’m Lieutenant Colonel Swanson, I’ll be the troop commander for the mission.”

We were supporting the deployment of an F-15 squadron to Moron AB, Spain. We’d do this by trailing well behind the gaggle of fighter aircraft with Lt. Col. Swanson’s maintenance troops and equipment. If a plane had a maintenance issue and had to divert, we would head to it so Lt. Col. Swanson’s personnel could fix it. If there weren’t any F-15 diverts, we’d follow the fighters to Spain.

I put on my best customer service smile and said, “Good morning, sir. Is everything alright? Do you have everything you need?”

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“Thanks, we’re good for now. My boys just finished loading the last of our gear. But I will need your help en route for some HF phone patches so I can update our command center of our progress. This is a pretty important mission.”

Out of the colonel’s field of view, Rich locked his stare on me. His tightly sealed lips, squinting eyes, and raised shoulders made it obvious he was holding back a serious case of the giggles.

“Ah, thanks, sir, I’m well aware. Please let us know if you or your men need anything.”

“Roger that!” And with that, Lt. Col. Fighterguy strutted with a sense of urgency toward our plane’s large, rear clamshell doors.

When I got to the cockpit, Rich was already in his seat, engrossed in loading the navigation computer. Matt and Steve, our two engineers, were behind him at the systems panel.

Steve was a pleasure, but I really loved flying with Matt. He had only been assigned to the plane a few years but had sought out and absorbed a lot of valuable corporate knowledge from the older engineers. With his frowned-upon mustache, porous filter, and eagerness to tell it like it is, he wasn’t the air force’s picture of political correctness. I valued Matt’s bluntness because many functional planes and good crews had been lost because someone with critical information felt it wasn’t their place to speak up.

I greeted Matt and Steve. “How’s it going, guys?”

Matt said, “We’re ready to go if you can just keep that lieutenant colonel from crawling up our ass. Jeez, this guy is pinging like a six-year-old after chugging three Mountain Dews.”

“Yeah, he’s pretty ‘motivated.’ Let me know if he gets in the way again and I’ll use my aircraft commander charm to de-ass him. Do all our fuel numbers look good to you?”

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“Yeah, they look good. I’ve never taken on 80K during an air refueling. Hell, that’s gonna be at least twenty minutes hanging on the boom. I guess this is a pretty big-time mission.”

Rich’s head jerked in my direction. Before we made eye contact, I turned my face aft to avoid his smirking gaze.

Rich was in his mid-twenties, lean and tall, and always sporting a tight haircut. He moved fast, but his mind moved faster. I was pleased to get him for our mission because he was incredibly skilled, had a great sense of humor and always had your back. He came to our squadron from initial pilot training in the mid-1990s. At that time, the Air Force was going through a pilot drawdown and most pilot training graduates went to desk jobs with a “promise” to get back to the cockpit in a few years. Doing well enough to score a desirable assignment like the C-141 spoke highly of his abilities.

After our final checks, paperwork, and briefs, we brought our plane to life.

Designed in the early ’60s, the C-141 was officially named the Starlifter but affectionately called the Starlizard. Crewed by a minimum of two pilots, two engineers and one loadmaster, it was designed purely for function. The engineer sat sideways behind the two pilots and managed the mostly manual three- by four-foot systems panel. The pilots’ forward and overhead panels had big analog gauges with no CRTs, and all the knobs and controls seemed oversized by 1990’s standards. She was an honest and dependable aircraft. I quickly fell in love with her.

Taxiing out, I was gentle with the engines. Our jet wash could send objects flying toward the surrounding fighters, damaging the delicate swans. I also squared my turns to avoid clipping anything with my tail.

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With our checklists complete, tower cleared us for takeoff. I pulled onto the runway.

Holding the brakes, I set takeoff power. Eighty thousand pounds of thrust pushed against our airframe. The sound was deafening. The plane shook.

Brakes released, we started to roll, a lumber at first. As we picked up speed, the engines gulped more air and produced more thrust, a virtuous cycle that helped us accelerate.

I steered via my rudder pedals, my left hand on the yoke with my right hand on the throttles, ready to rip them back for a reject.

Takeoff is always the most critical phase of flight. If we lost an engine or had another malfunction, I'd have to make a split-second decision whether to stop our heavy aircraft or nurse it airborne. Our data showed we could make it off the runway after an engine failure, but the margins weren't the best. Short runways, high field elevations, high temperatures, and heavy aircraft weights can negatively impact takeoff performance. We had three of those variables working against us.

Everyone was silent. Matt was looking forward from the engineer's panel and surveying his systems. His keen eye would be the first to spot a problem. Steve, sitting next to him, was backing him up. Rich looked forward and monitored our engine instruments. His hands were close to the throttles and his yoke, ready to assume control. Lt. Col. Fighterguy, in the cargo bay, fussed with his scarf.

Passing 120 knots, we were committed to takeoff. We'd run off the end of the runway if we tried to stop. If we lost an engine at that speed, we could takeoff, but we'd need to accelerate another 20 knots before rotating.

At 140 knots, Rich said, "Go." That was my prompt to rotate the aircraft.

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I pulled the yoke back. The nose slowly rotated; the Starlizard transitioned from earthbound beast to a machine held aloft by only the low pressure created by its wings.

I said, "Positive rate. Gear up."

Rich replied, "Gear up," and raised the handle.

We then retracted our flaps, accelerated, and headed northeast.

En route, we managed our speed to ensure we rendezvoused with the KC-135 tanker aircraft at our scheduled time, six hours after takeoff. Two hours before our scheduled rendezvous, we made our final speed adjustment and got a radio phone patch to our command center. We needed to confirm our tanker was still on schedule and we didn't need to divert for any broken F-15s.

We learned that all the F-15s, several hundred miles ahead, were in great shape. That negated the need to divert but meant we had to air refuel to make it to Spain.

Nearing the air refueling airspace over the North Atlantic, we accomplished our air refueling checklist, which had us slow, configure the fuel system to accept gas, stow our loose gear, and make sure our passengers and cargo were strapped in. Turbulence, tenseness on the controls and flying through the tanker's wake would often cause a bumpy ride.

We entered the air refueling airspace at 24,000 feet, and the autopilot flew its programmed left-hand racetrack pattern, which had two fifty-mile straight legs.

Rich called out on the common frequency, "Reach four two one entering AR20, twenty miles west of the IP at flight level two, four, zero."

Three seconds after that call, our tanker crew responded, "Bangor three one five on AR20 at flight level two, five, zero, five west of the IP."

I pushed up the throttles and responded, "Roger Bangor three one five, looking for you."

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I was flying the identical racetrack pattern as Bangor 315, but I was fifteen miles behind and a thousand feet below. As per procedure, we entered at the same speed, so if I accelerated, I'd eventually catch the tanker. The only thing we needed then was to spot the tanker, so I could complete the rejoin visually.

We entered a 180-degree turn while Rich, Steve, and I craned our necks at the windscreens to catch sight of the other plane. I also worked the weather radar antenna tilt to get a primary blip on our screen for relative bearing.

As we rolled out of our turn, I got Bangor 315 on our radar and announced, "He should be at eleven o'clock, thirty degrees high and five miles."

Steve, who was standing behind my seat, shouted, "I got him!" and pointed to the tanker.

I followed his arm, caught sight of the tanker then transmitted, "Reach four two one has Bangor three one five in sight."

Bangor 315 responded, "Roger. Reach four two one is cleared to precontact."

I replied, "Reach four two one cleared to precontact."

Bangor 315 had cleared me to maneuver my aircraft to twenty feet below and fifty aft of the boom operator's pod at the tail of his aircraft. Once stabilized there, I'd be cleared into "contact" position for refueling. My aircraft's nose would be under the tanker's tail cone in this spot.

I pushed the throttles up further and manipulated the autopilot to turn and climb toward the target. I kept him "painted" on our radar screen for distance and bearing, crosschecked that information with the distance shown on one of my forward panel gauges and monitored my speed to avoid excess closure.

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As usually happened when we went visual, my adrenaline kicked in. That, plus the two cups of coffee to compensate for my abused circadian rhythm, had my heart racing. I tensed. I often joked that if I sat on coal briquettes before an air refueling, I'd be pulling diamonds out of my boxers by the time we were done.

With air refueling, even the best can have a bad day; and I never considered myself one of the best. If I couldn't stay connected to the tanker refueling boom long enough, we'd have to divert for gas, and a lot of people with fancy-ass scarfs and ginormous watches would be very disappointed. I'd also have to explain to my squadron commander why I blew the mission and live with that stigma for some time.

At least a hundred people were involved in getting me and this tanker together. Now, none of them could do anything else to help. It was all up to me.

I thought, "Okay Kevin, you need to relax. If you don't, this isn't going to go well."

Maneuvering a giant cargo plane twenty feet under a comparably sized tanker aircraft could be a head game. You used a lot of fine motor skills to keep your not-so-nimble C-141 in position, so being relaxed was essential. I'd tried all the tricks to calm myself: chewing gum, listening to music, deep breathing, etc. None of those worked. Then, I stumbled on a practice that worked like a charm—thinking of my family. But I wasn't just thinking of my family in a generic sense; I had a specific memory that always unwound me. That image was of me in my lounge chair with my two toddler sons in their fleece footed zip up pajamas watching *Thunderbirds Are Go!*—a 1960s sci-fi puppet movie. We're singing "A Shooting Star Will Shoot You" with Cliff Richard Junior and the Shadows band in the movie. My lovely bride sits on a nearby couch.

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Two miles from the tanker, I replayed that image in my mind. While everyone on the flight deck was dead quiet, except for an occasional required callout, I was mentally singing that song with Pete and Tim while Kate rolled her eyes. Kate was the wise and capable lady who married an awkward meathead without two dimes to rub together and the partner who never lost faith in me, even after some biblical blunders. And she was the incredible mother of the kids whose innocence and unconditional love inspired me to be a better man. I couldn't get enough of them, and they couldn't get enough of me.

The tension drained. My heart calmed.

I accidentally exhaled a small laugh.

A concerned Rich asked, "Kev, you okay?"

"Yeah, Yeah, I'm good. Sorry, I just thought of something funny."

I clicked off the autopilot and continued the rejoin manually.

One hundred feet behind, we passed through the tanker's wake turbulence. Since we were aligned with his centerline, we didn't get the violent rolling forces normally associated with it.

I finally reached precontact position and held my plane there for a few seconds. From there, I could clearly see the forty-foot refueling boom and the boom operator lying on his belly in the tanker's tail. He would control two small wings on the boom to fly it toward my plane, then extend the telescoping end to latch it in my air refueling receptacle, which was eight feet behind and two feet above my head.

Satisfied my plane was stabilized, I transmitted, "Reach four two one, precontact."

The tanker crew responded, "Reach four two one cleared to contact."

That cleared us to twenty feet below and thirty feet aft of the boomer's pod.

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I added power again. As I inched closer, I saw the two strips of colored director lights on the tanker's belly. One strip showed the corrections necessary to get to the vertical center of contact position and the other showed fore and aft.

I felt my aircraft slowing. Our plane's air "bow wave" was hitting the tanker's tail, so I added a half knob width of throttle. With their autopilot off, the tanker pilots could feel that compressed air mass push their tail up, making their nose go down.

My head was locked on the tanker at an upward thirty-degree angle, and I was moving my huge plane inches at a time. I made small corrections while constantly rocking the yoke side to side and fore and aft. Small wrist twists and finger movements of my cupped right hand advanced and retarded the throttle levers a half knob width at a time. Rudder inputs could overcontrol you, so my feet rested on the floor guarding the pedals.

Rich was also staring up at the tanker while regularly monitoring our instruments and giving me information on closure and when to expect another turn. Steve, our third set of eyes, was strapped into the jump seat between us.

With the tanker's director lights centered, and staying that way, I called, "Reach four two one, contact."

The tanker crew replied, "Roger contact."

A few seconds later, the boom "flew" from its stowed position down toward my aircraft.

We heard, "Swoosh, clunk," as the boom flew over our heads and plugged our air refueling receptacle.

Matt said, "We got a good latch."

That was confirmed when I saw the green "latched" light on my forward overhead panel.

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We were attached to the plane ahead, and it was the job of me, my kids, my lovely bride, and Cliff Richard Junior and The Shadows to keep my air refueling receptacle within an approximate ten foot wide, eight foot tall and eight-foot-long box (the boom's travel limits) for the next twenty minutes. I could disconnect any time via a button on my number one throttle and the boom operator could do the same. After that, we could always reconnect, but it was best to stay on with the first plug, so you wouldn't psych yourself out.

The boom operator transmitted on our crew intercom system via a magnetic com link through the boom, "Good afternoon, Reach four two one, I'm showing a good latch. How much will you need today?"

I replied, "Good afternoon, we'll need the full 80,000."

"Are you configured to receive fuel?"

"Yes, configured to receive."

The jet fuel rushed through the six-inch diameter pipe above our heads.

Matt said, "We're taking on fuel." He then manipulated the fuel panel to make sure it went to the correct tanks to keep our center of gravity in limits.

I was making dozens of small corrections per minute to stay in position during our racetrack pattern. Matt gave us an update of fuel boarded every 10,000 pounds.

As our plane took on more fuel, it got heavier and reacted differently. I made pitch trim inputs with my left thumb and continuously "walked" the throttles and yoke.

After fifteen minutes, two 180-degree turns, and 50,000 pounds boarded, I was getting tired, and my eyes were burning on westbound legs from the setting sun. Channeling my inner Cliff Richard Junior, I stayed in position.

A few minutes later, Matt announced, "70K unloaded."

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I thought, “Not much more now.”

Then, twenty-two minutes after we latched, the boom operator announced, “That’s 80,000 pounds,” and the fuel flow above our heads stopped.

Matt said, “Yup, that’s 80K. We’re reconfigured and you’re clear to disconnect.”

I said to the boom operator, “Thanks for the gas. Reach four two one disconnecting.”

He signed off, “See yah.”

I hit the AR disconnect button. We were two separate planes again.

The boom operator flew his boom a safe distance away while I backed up to precontact position.

Once stabilized in precontact, the tanker crew read us our new ATC clearance so we could separate our formation.

We thanked the “Maine-iacs” for their help and headed on our way.

With the threat of a midair collision behind us and a full belly of fuel, we all de-clenched.

Matt exclaimed, “Damn! 80K in one plug, that’s shit hot!”

Rich followed with, “You dah man! How the hell did you do that?”

I said to Rich, “You’ve got the aircraft.”

He replied, “I got the aircraft.”

With a grin, I slid my seat back, exhaled, and said, “Thanks. I just went back to the basics and used what matters most.”

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A special thanks to Cliff Richard Junior and The Shadows

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5zVq0wTNfM>