

# After Action Report: Operation Persian Freedom Phase III Mission

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11.12.04

“Coyote?” whispered Pokey to his squadronmate. *“Is this what I think it is?”*

*“Hang tough, Poke.”* Coyote was surveying the scene with his one good eye that could still focus properly. Moments earlier, one of the guards had injected him with some kind of sedative to make him unresisting and compliant. He was fading and could feel himself becoming very complacent, but he fought it as much as he could with what little strength he had left. With the drugs, the brightness of studio lamps hurt his eyes even more, but he could see their captors scampering around to set up a makeshift broadcasting studio. They were rolling out rolls of cable, connecting cameras, running checks, hooking up generators...he wouldn't be surprised if two Abkhazian anchorpeople came out in business casual attire to kick off the show like it was a newsbrief on a major network. Behind him, he could hear someone trying to hang a banner or flag or something or over up. *“Yeah, it looks like a public display of you-know-what, Pokey.”* He kept his voice low, hovering over the two of them was a single guard with his AK-47 pointed in their direction — but he can feel his tongue get slack and his speech begin to slur. Pokey gestured with his head in the guard's direction, *“That one must not be union since he's not doing squat. Ain't that right, rat?”* Pokey called to him loudly. Pokey and Coyote couldn't help but break into laughter. After all, when you're about to die, what else can you do but find everything funny?

The guard responded with a blow to Coyote's head. Coyote fell down just as the Sheikh walked in, yelling at the guard. Coyote didn't feel it too much though; the drug was kicking in.

Sheikh Muqtadeh was certainly not pleased with the strike. After all, he needed his prize to look beautiful on international television. *“You! Stop that! You may have the American to yourself later!”*

*“What the hell?”* yelled Pokey at Kemal. He had recognized the Turk who had promised to help them, but now he was not so sure. To Pokey, Kemal Volkan hadn't done a thing to help them from certain death right at that moment, and because of that, he was seriously doubting him. The Sheikh turned and looked at Pokey, and then motioned for his minion to administer Pokey's shot next. The man approached him with another syringe. Something told Pokey to keep his mouth shut and keep from blowing Kemal's cover. What Pokey didn't know was that Kemal's cover was already blown.

*“Holiness. This is utter madness!”* Kemal Volkan controlled himself with an effort. *“You cannot be in earnest!”* The tall, swarthy Turk spun on his heel to confront his mentor, his dark eyes blazing. Over his shoulder, the Sheikh smiled indulgently at the unfolding scene on the tarmac.

*“And why not, my treacherous friend? Why not? Allah demands American blood. These air pirates have committed utter blasphemy, they have defiled holy ground, polluted holy air with American bombs, in Iran. They threatened the followers of the Holy One. They will pay the price.”*

Kemal swallowed, straining to choose his words carefully as the hot Abkhaz sun beat down, seeming to make the airbase tarmac even hotter around him. His mind raced, trying to find a way to stop Muqtadeh before he ruined everything Kemal had worked for. Behind him, the two Naval aviators the IRLF held for their Iranian sponsors were forced to kneel on a red carpet stretched out between two trucks parked behind the base control tower, a large IRLF banner emblazoned with “Death to the Infidel!” in Arabic and English scrawled across it hanging as backdrop. Pushed roughly down by bearded mujahideen brandishing Kalashnikov rifles, the shock of their predicament on their drawn faces, the two Americans watched silently, waiting, as their masked executioner casually sharpened a huge, gleaming sword and two television cameramen struggled with their minicam.

*“We have given our word, Holiness. Do you wish to involve America even more deeply here than she already is? Do you want the Russian 41st Division to leave Gantiadi and come south before we are ready for them? In the Prophet's name-!”* The IRLF leader cut the outraged Turk off with a savage gesture.

*"Speak not of the Prophet to me, Kemal. Am I not directly descended from him? I speak for Allah, not you."* Reflexively, Muqtadeh touched his black cleric's turban, then continued. *"Remember, I only promised to trade the American pilots for Mohammed. I did not tell them that these air pirates would still live. I will keep my word. This Bones shall have his men, and after he suffers their loss, he will join them immediately thereafter."*

The Sheikh stroked his beard, smiling, staring into the distance. *"And then Shoura will come down from her perch in the sky, Kemal. She and that mongrel cur, Sandakchiev, that yaps at her heels, when I show her how these Americans she cares so much for will die at our hands, she will descend like a Valkyrie, to kill more of my people. And when she comes, my treacherous Turk, you will choose. Redemption, or damnation. Abu Jihad will be avenged, Kemal, you will stand witness. And then, for your soul's sake, you will choose."*

Kemal forced his fists, held rigidly at his sides, to unclench. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath. *"Holiness, I-"* His eye caught a movement in the sky over the Imam's shoulder, a flash of light reflecting off something, something moving, approaching fast. A jet! *"Holiness! Get down!"* Kemal reflexively pulled Muqtadeh down to the tarmac as the grey-blue Sukhoi jet screamed overhead.

In their weakened, beaten, and drugged state, Pokey and Coyote were nearly oblivious to the events happening around them. Everything seemed to occur in slow motion as the guards around them suddenly scurried about jabbering to each other while time for the two Navy pilots seemed to stand still. Pokey slowly looked up into the sun, the sweat dripping down into his eyes, stinging them. His hands were tied so he couldn't wipe his eyes clear, but in the glare of the sun, he could almost see an angel of death coming for him as the drugs began to take their toll. But I'm not ready to die, thought Pokey. I'm not ready to die...As if his thought had been heard from above, the angel appeared to change form as it grew closer. Well, that didn't make sense, Pokey thought. Now it looks like a Sukhoi jet fighter...

*"I'm not ready to die!"* screamed Pokey as his mind snapped back to reality and beat of the drug for an instant and with a sudden burst of strength he lunged off of his knees and managed to throw his body over Coyote's. *"Stay down, Coyote!"*

Coyote could do nothing more but lay there as Pokey struggled to provide cover for his friend with his own body. He lay on top of Coyote, putting as much of his own mass over him as possible and looked up to see where the Su-27 was. Instead, he saw the guard standing over them with his scimitar yelling something in a language he didn't need to understand. Pokey ducked his head down, continued to cover Coyote's body, and held his breath.

The burly man with the scimitar was momentarily distracted by the sudden boom of the Flanker's afterburners as it streaked through the sky. Involuntarily, he looked up at the direction the noise came from and realized it was the Sukhoi. Angered by the distraction, he held his scimitar up at the Sukhoi in rage.

Sacha Andreeva looked down onto the flight-line below as her cameras whirled into operation, seeing men on the ground building some sort of object on the tarmac near the ground-control center. She reached down into her flight bag and drew out her binoculars, banking the aircraft for a second pass. Flying parallel to the runway, she could see bright steel flashing in the sun, a burly man, stripped to the waist, brandishing a sword at her as she passed!

*"So, tovarisch. Is all you have left to play with a sword?"*

Laughing into her mask, Sacha pulled the Su-27 into a vertical climb, selecting afterburner, and executed a neat half-Immelmann, bringing the nose onto the apron. She flipped switches, selecting the zem-lya ground-attack mode, bringing up the aircraft's two B8M-1 82mm rocket pods.

Amidst the deafening sound of the Flanker afterburners, Pokey saw his opportunity. He swung his body around on his side while still lying on top of Coyote, bringing his legs around in a 180 degree sweep, catching the guard's heels. The guard feet flew up into the air as his body went airborne, and he landed on his rear, the scimitar flying out of his hand as his huge body landed on the tarmac with a dull thump. The scimitar bounced away with a clanging noise barely audible over the thunderous roar of the Flanker as the guard struggled to regain his footing and retrieve it. Pokey tried to worm his way over to the scimitar as well, but he was getting too woozy and when he looked up, he saw the Su-27 in a vertical dive headed back for them. He abandoned the scimitar and lunged to cover Coyote again.

*"Let me give you something other than your little game to consider, then."*

Gently squeezing the trigger, Sacha took aim, men scattering before the oncoming jet. The ground-control center next to the makeshift pavilion disappeared in a sheet of fire from the 82mm rockets, and the pavilion itself collapsed from the shockwave.

As the blue-gray jet howled past, disappearing in a thunder of afterburner, Muqtadeh slowly got to his feet, his black eyes burning, following the rapidly receding Russian aircraft.

*"Red-10. Did you see the number when she passed, Kemal? Did you see?"* His voice rose to a shriek. *"Shoura! I see you!"* Turning to Pokey and Coyote, who also were gingerly picking themselves up from the tarmac, he glared at them and spoke to them in a threatening, snake-like whisper. *"I will not kill you today, gentlemen. Not today. Your Russian angel has saved you today. Soon, though, she will not be able to save you, nor your captain. You will learn the price for defiling the Holy One in Teheran, and in mocking the Prophet. Come, Kemal. Attend me."*

The Americans looked at each other as the Sheikh stalked away. Kemal cast them a glance, grimaced, and shrugged, following him.

Coyote's bloodied head fell semi-consciously forward and it came to rest upon Pokey's sweaty forehead. The two stood there for a moment, continuing to fight the full effects of the drug they had been given and the waves of fear that had enveloped them...but they realized they were alive. Pokey couldn't help it but he started to laugh a little bit at first, then more and more, the volume of his laughter increasing as Coyote suddenly joined in. The two Jolly Rogers were laughing together almost in a drunken stupor and it culminated in whoops and cheers of joy over the sounds of flames and secondary explosions in the background. They were alive, and someone else on their side must know it. Then the drug tightened its hold on them, and they fell silent as the guards dragged them off.

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The jet's destination, of course, was Bahrain. At the international airport, it touched down, and taxied to the American airbase that is a part of those facilities. The Naval aviation detachment there was waiting for her, and for the films shot from the carefully-attached camera pod strapped to the big Sukhoi. Dan Phinin was there to meet her when the ground crew wheeled out the ladder, and she bounded down the ladder, pulling off her white helmet as she got to the ground.

*"Dan, you should look at the film at once. The Wahhabists were doing something at the ramp, I could not tell what it was. One of them brandished a sword at me! I have never seen anything like it. They all must have been there, not one radar painted me on the pass."*

Viewing the Sukhoi's wing, Phinin noticed the rocket pods, scorched and empty,

*"Why the rockets?"*

Sacha looked a little sheepish.

*"I interrupted their little game by blowing out the ground-control tower. We know that Pokey and Coyote are not there, they are held in the base hospital. I hope I did not do wrongly...."*

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*"Well, this can't be good,"* I said when Senior Chief Allanawek completed his report. *"So, basically you are saying that our airframes are getting way too much up time and not enough downtime. The man hours to keep them flying are getting higher and higher and available parts and supplies are spread thinly among all of the airwings in the NAG?"*

*"That's exactly what I'm saying, sir,"* replied Allanawek. *"We used to have a pretty good hold on this stuff, but that was because Naz was heading up the coordination on this between ourselves and CENTCOM."* The burly senior chief sighed. *"With Naz's passing, we've lost that strong link. His contacts are either gone with him or too busy fulfilling the rest of CENTCOM's needs."*

*"Battle damage, attrition, losses. Those all affect us too, as you know."* Allanawek pulled out a listing and continued, *"Right now, the only ones we have absolutely ready for any mission are Victory 220 and Victory 205. The others are either too damaged or they are operable but I can't guarantee at this point that they will remain so in-flight."*

*"Not even my lucky aircraft?"* I asked.

*"Well, she's still flying, sir, but she's due in for her preventative maintenance, and at the rate we are going I don't think we can afford the luxury of letting that slide at the moment."*

I furrowed my brow and said, *"With the losses we've had lately, I wouldn't want to risk anything in flight, just because we skipped out on an oil change. You're right to ground the aircraft that you did. We have a mission coming up that may be do-able with only two aircraft from what I hear, although that is really pushing it."* I shuffled through the paperwork on my desk to see if the mission overview was on my desk.

LCDR Phinin knocked on the door. *"Can I come in?"*

*"Sure, commander, come on in. I was just about to look into the next mission on the schedule."* The briefing caught my eye. *"Ah, here it is."*

*"Never mind about that, sir,"* said Phinin. *"That mission has been scrubbed. Well, it's being given to another squadron, anyway."*

*"Oh?"* I said surprised. So much for rifling through all my papers. *"Who's getting it? The Blue Blasters?"*

*"No, actually, there is a new mission coming up for you, and the Blasters will be supporting you on SEAD,"* Phinin said as he handed me the briefing.

*"You should know, commander,"* said the Senior Chief, *"That currently we only have two birds at 100%. The other birds are mission-capable but not with as high a confidence level. Can this mission be done with only two birds, sir?"*

*"We'll let your skipper decide that. If you'd like, you're welcome to sit in while I give him the intelligence briefing, Senior Chief."*

*"Thanks, but not thanks, I've got to get back to maintenance and reverify everything. Besides, that's officer crap, and I work for a living, sir,"* smirked Allanawek.

*"Thanks, Senior Chief,"* I said as he stood to at attention. *"Dismissed. And please close the hatch on your way out."*

*"Aye, sir."* Allanawek turned on his heel, and walked out, closing the door behind him.

Sure that everything was secure, I turned back to Phinin. *"OK, Commander. Why the mission change? I know something must be up."*

*"You guessed right, sir. I was just bluffing inviting Senior Chief to stick around. I'm glad he didn't, because this is highly classified and extremely important."*

*"Intelligence has verified that Coyote and Pokey are in Abkhazia and they were about to be paraded in front of the TV cameras as a trophy prize for Sheikh Muqtudeh. We think he'd planned to flaunt his prizes in the worst of ways."*

*"Don't tell me. The whole beheading in front of the world's eyes again."*

*"Right."*

I looked at him narrowly. *"You were talking in past tense, Dan. How'd they get stopped?"*

Phinin smiled. *"We saw intel film the Russians sent us via Sacha Andreeva. She made her first camera pass, and caught what was happening. The cameras were still taping on the second, when she took a rocket pass down the Sukhumi flightline. She may have prevented them from carrying out the plan this time."* He thought for a moment, then continued.

*"We can't wait on this operation any longer, Bones. And as much as I hate to say it, I can't keep holding on to Mohammed al-Muqtudeh any longer either, though I'd love to. If we're going to save your men, I'm going to have to let the Sheikh know NOW that we have his son and are willing to make a trade. I really wish we could hold on to him longer, we have gotten so much good intel from him it's scary. But if we do, that's it for Pokey and Coyote."*

I breathed a worried sigh at the thought of Pokey and Coyote getting executed. *"I hate to see you have to give him up too, Dan, but I do appreciate what you're doing for us."* I was just as disappointed as Phinin was, but it of course was overridden by my wanting Pokey and Coyote back. Then it suddenly occurred to me.

*"Dan, you still need me for this operation?"*

*"That's right."*

*"And it is to remain covert?"*

*"If this mission gets compromised, that could spell the end of Pokey and Coyote. There are too many factors of intrigue involved as well. Technically, we are not supposed to be involved in the Abkhaz war. Sacha isn't supposed to be fulfilling the roles that she is either. Furthermore, the commanding officer of an active combat duty strike fighter squadron in the war against Iran is not supposed to be involved in anything else either, especially in terms of the war effort."*

*"So, how am I supposed to be able to participate in this operation without everything getting compromised?"* I asked. There had to be something more if it was supposed to be so covert.

Phinin confirmed my suspicions. *"That brings me to the other reason why I needed to brief you in private."*

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*"You're sure there is nothing else that you can give us to help?"* asked Sanchez in Farsi.

*"I have told you everything, and now, I just want to go to America. You have given your word,"* pleaded Mohammed. *"Please, we have an agreement."*

*"Yes, we do,"* Sanchez said, looking Mohammed squarely in the eye. *"Unfortunately, I am not the one in command here, and I cannot do anything without authorization. So,"* said the lieutenant as he kicked back into the chair and lit a cigarette, nonchalantly blowing the smoke into the air where the ceiling fan quickly dispersed the clouds, spreading it thinly about the room. *"You're going to have to just be patient and wait."*

The sheikh's son eyed Sanchez coyly, the slightest thought crossing his mind that something was up. His head cocked to the side like a dog picking up a sound, but he still couldn't place his finger on it. Besides, he thought he might just be paranoid. He didn't know it but Sanchez and his senior intelligence officer LCDR Phinin already knew that he was the Sheikh Muqtudeh's son a long time ago. Overconfident that he had kept up his cover as an Iranian senior pilot, he settled back into complacency, dreaming of his safe arrival in America with a new identity and far from death in his homeland at the hands of his father for his betrayal.

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Osborne was impressed with the improvement that his men were showing. They were now able to take down any room at any speed with any weapon at any posture, and come out with a lopsided score of all terrorists dead, no hostages or team members hurt or killed.

Today would be different.

*"Gentlemen,"* he said to them when the briefing began. *"You've certainly improved and you definitely have my respect and admiration. Your shooting is dead on, your movement is perfectly executed with intent and precision, and your target discrimination is top-notch."*

A smile formed on Osborne's face. He could see a smaller version of himself fighting to claw its way out from the inside of every operator assembled in front of him. Let's see if this last exercise will bring this beast out, he thought.

*"Today we're going to be moving the operations from the killhouse to a much more realistic setting."*

Osborne motioned to his Lieutenant, who pulled the tarp off of the framework that it was concealing. Underneath was a mockup of the passenger cabin of a commercial airline, complete with civilian and terrorist targets, narrow aisles, aircraft high-back seating, and squared-off oval windows.

*"Let's see how you do in a constricted unstable environment, shall we?"*

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"You're right, Dan," I said after going over the data. "We are going to have to figure out a way to get me over there and in on this without anyone knowing."

"Right now, we can't find anyway that is airtight and feasible. We could keep thinking things up, but the problem is we no longer have the time." The Lieutenant Commander pulled out another report. "Intel has it that the Sheikh is going to try and extract whatever last bits of information he can out of Pokey and Coyote to pass off to the Ayatollah, but he's done toying with them for the most part. They've spilt nothing and he is tired and frustrated with trying anymore. He's going to execute them in front of the cameras for the entire world to see any moment now, especially since Sacha thwarted this attempt. Some sick form of satisfaction, I guess."

"But wait a minute," I said. "No one knows he has Pokey and Coyote. He's not part of the war with Iran. If he reveals that he has American pilots that were from the Iranian campaign, he is going to bring more hell on himself and drag the United States into the war in Abkhazia..." then it dawned on me. "...Which is exactly what he wants to do, isn't it? The US is merely in the background on the war in Abkhazia, primarily because of Operation Persian Freedom, but also because it's a war that really involves the Russians and the Turks and so on, with just the US supporting. If he kills Pokey and Coyote on the air, the American people won't have it and we'll either get split between ending the war to end the senseless deaths, or jumping into Abkhazia full force, which will stretch us thin even more, and make the US look like a war-mongering nation pitted against yet another Islamic regime." I sat back into my chair, amazed as to how much everything affects everything on the grand scale of things, even though events may only be small, localized ones. If this happens, things will get way worse before they get better, if they even do get better. The war in Iran looked like it was near an end. If it turns out that it will instead continue in Abkhazia, the people of the United States—and the rest of the world—will not hear of it. Either way, we're sunk. It became even clear to me now why it was so important to get Pokey and Coyote back alive, without anyone knowing where they were. If we take away the Sheikh's key to success, there's nothing he can do to get those dominos of events to fall. "The way I see it, Dan," I said. "The Imam is a pretty good manipulator and strategist."

"You forgot one more thing, Bones."

"What's that?"

"He's also just plain insane."

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"Major Anderson, rise."

The United States Air Force pilot did what he was told by the judge. His counselor rose with him.

"Major Anderson, you are advised that this was not a formal hearing or trial, but a board of inquiry during which time your flight status was suspended pending the outcome of said inquiry." The general that was also the judge never even once looked up at Anderson, which both worried and annoyed him. "This Board of Inquiry has gone over the facts of the incident and from this inquiry, it was determined whether or not an Article 32 would be necessary, or otherwise, any other course of action. Do you have any questions, Major?"

"No, Your Honor," replied Anderson.

"Then we will proceed. Ladies and gentlemen, we have determined whether the incidents warrant further investigation and court martial. On said date, Major Anderson was involved in an altercation with other Coalition aircraft that resulted in several of these aircraft taking offensive stances in regard to each other which fortunately did not result in any injuries, deaths, or damage to government property. Major Anderson, you have been named as a primary participant both in the cause and result of this incident, and hence this Board of Inquiry was to determine if further action would be required, and if so, what that action will be. We also have reviewed the testimonies of those involved, including but not limited to the testimony of the likes of Captain Peterson, Captain Andreeva and so on. We now have our results."

"Major Anderson, I have read the sworn statements of all those involved. Normally we would require more than this but it seems pretty evident that this was a very bad day for everyone." The judge removed his glasses and placed it next to his gavel. "We are in the middle of a war and we need everyone who is able to help on hand, especially at this stage when victory is within reach."

Anderson's face went from solemn to quizzical.

*"Normally, disciplinary action would come swiftly and justly as a consequence of what you have done. It has not come to those others involved because of this need, and because of the lucky fact that no one was hurt or killed. It therefore will not come to you either."*

Anderson was almost afraid to breathe a sigh of relief. But he knew there might be more.

*"Do you think that you might be able to take this as a hard lesson in discipline and self-control, Major?"*

*"Yes, sir, I do."*

*"I certainly hope so. I therefore am recommending that the inquiry be discontinued and you return to duty provided you submit yourself to anger management training as soon as possible and for crying out loud, act like an officer not an immature teenager."*

The judge looked up for an instant and locked eyes with Major Anderson. *"Despite the nature of the events, it is our belief that you, Major, have not only a sound enough judgment to prevent a future occurrence, but also have a healthy enough conscience to realize that your involvement was wrong and not becoming of an Air Force officer."*

*"Yes, your honor."*

The judge continued. *"Therefore, Major Anderson is restored to full flight status immediately pending probationary status and his service record will reflect this incident and inquiry results as well as the order for anger management. Major, keep in mind that the service needs **active and available pilots**, not reckless and unrestrained. I expect that you will be more responsible than you have already shown. We'll be keeping our eye on you, Major. You can count on it."*

*"Yes, sir,"* said Anderson.

*"This inquiry is concluded,"* stated the judge as he lowered his gavel.

Wow, thought Anderson as he left the courtroom after all the formalities were over. I got off easier than I thought.

*"Anderson!"*

The major turned around to see his colonel standing there. *"Congratulations on the outcome. I hope we can trust that there will be no further incidents with you because we need you immediately. It's mission time. It's time to get back to base and I want to see you in my office ASAP."*

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I headed to the ready room to brief the squadron on our next mission. It was an important mission, alright, and instrumental in bringing the war with Iran to a final end. But if Pokey and Coyote were killed, this war would only be a battle in a bigger war to come. We had to rescue our guys, not just to bring them home alive, but because it will ultimately bring all of our Americans home alive. When I found that we were out of time, I just didn't have any idea how I was going to get away with sneaking off to be a part of this mission without anyone noticing, and apparently neither did Intelligence if they hadn't told me yet. I thought I had a lot more time to think this through, but now that the clock was ticking, the pressure was really on and it dangerously occupied my mind along with the mission. Being distracted like that wasn't a good thing at all. But it wasn't the situation with Pokey and Coyote that was occupying my mind. It was what Phinin and I finally decided to do.

As was explained in the ready room, the campaign in Iran seemed to be going well after long last, and CENTCOM had finally found its opportunity to drive a stake into the heart of the entire war. Every man and woman hearing this was ecstatic, and a few shed tears with the thought that the war would be over real soon and everyone could go home. The campaign road had been long and hard and we had lost many good friends, especially Pokey and Coyote, whom to those not in the know, were still missing. This was perhaps harder than them being dead, as there was no body to pay respects to, nor any explanation leading to any kind of closure.

With all of that in mind, there was not a single soul in the room who didn't want to do their part, no matter how tired or hurt they were, to end the conflict. Tonight was going to be the first real step toward doing that. The hard reality I couldn't share though was that if Pokey and Coyote were killed, the war itself would not really end, but just be a prelude to a bigger one.

"OK, guys," I said. "CENTCOM is going to execute a major, and I mean major, combined offensive against Iran over the next few days. Marine and Army units, not to mention Special Forces have taken and held so much ground in this campaign that the day has finally come where we're going to end this thing once and for all. Major advances are going to occur with some pretty important battles that will undoubtedly take place, and we're going to be a part of this."

"Part of this combined Coalition strike will be hitting the airbase at Khorramabad. This is one of the few remaining airbases the IRIAF has, and that also means they are going to defend it with their dying breath. To that end, they have deployed SA-11 SAMs, and we can't have them launching those suckers off at the airstrike. That's when the Jolly Rogers come in."



"The Snow Drift radar and the SAM command vehicles will be our primary target, but we also want to hit at least 3 of the 4 launchers if possible to make it that much more safe for the strike that will come from behind us. RAF Tornados will be leading that, we don't want our Brit friends eating Gadflies now do we? F/A-18Cs will escort us and perform SEAD so that we can concentrate on killing those sites. There are several areas that they will be working to keep the SAM threat clear."

"This is the overview of that area. Take a good look and note that the method of approach will be from the southeast. If we egress to the northwest after the first run, we can pick off any of those launchers that were missed before the RAF gets there by hanging a left turn and coming back around from the southwest. No sense in letting them shoot in the same direction as they first pointed themselves at."



I looked at the squadron to see several of them taking copious notes. These were the ones I was planning on choosing from to take with me. I continued:

*"Take a good look at this satellite photo. We believe it to be up to date as of 12 hours ago. That's not the most up-to-date info in the world, but it's the best we have. They look to be dug in so I doubt they'd be changing the position any more than what you see here."*

I looked back at the squadron after completing the mission briefing. Of the original group I had already singled out, "Spoon" Thornton especially had a look of resolve in her eyes. I knew who I was going to take along.

*"Spoon, I would like for you to come with me on this hop. You look like you are really up to it."*

*"Me, sir?"*

*"That's right. Is there a problem with that?"* I knew there wasn't but I wanted to keep her on her toes.

Spoon's blue eyes lit up even more and she quickly answered, *"No, sir. It just seemed as if there are a lot of other people who are just as qualified. Why me?"*

*"Because,"* I answered. *"I think you are ready and rested. Everyone else around is ready, you are right. But take a look around you. Look at the exhaustion on their faces. I need someone fresh."*

*"Yes, sir."*

*"The rest of you, take a break. You deserve it. But just in case, go over the mission profile."*

Allanawek handed out the printout to every member:



"Because if something goes wrong, and we need to launch a ready 5, you better be ready to go. Creeper?"

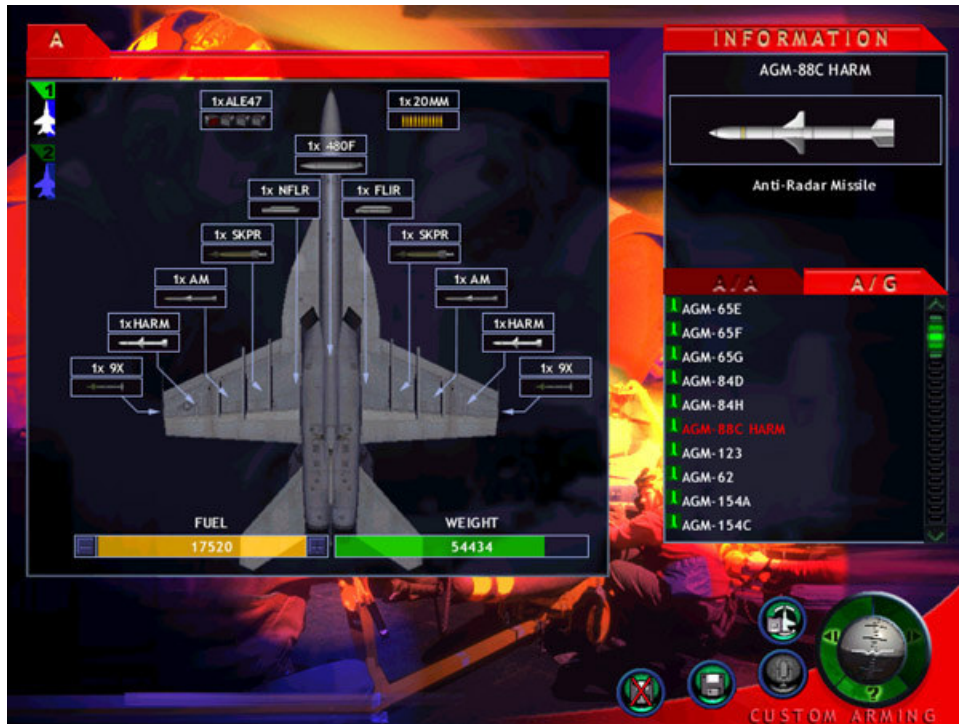
"Yeah, Bones."

"You are on ready 5 lead. Pick whoever you want to fly your wing."

"Roger that."

Guns handed me the manifest. "The birds are armed, fueled, and ready to go, sir."





*"Thanks, Guns."*

I sat in my stateroom in silence. I had the lights dimmed and my attention focused on a single point on the dark bulkhead, thinking things through. There was only a few more hours until the mission to strike the airfield. In those short hours, Pokey and Coyote can be killed and then all bets would be off, wouldn't they? But there was always still that one chance that they would be alive by the time we got there. But I had to get there. I had to get there in secret, for their sake. For all of our sakes, if you really thought about it.

I knew exactly what I was going to do. I thought it over, and I knew that as crazy as it sounds, it was what had to be done. Would I be able to do it, when the time came?

Seeing Coyote and Pokey in my mind's eye, laughing, living life, and suddenly seeing that vision metamorphosize into the image of their battered and bruised faces blindfolded with a sword hovering over their heads, I knew what the answer to that question was for sure.

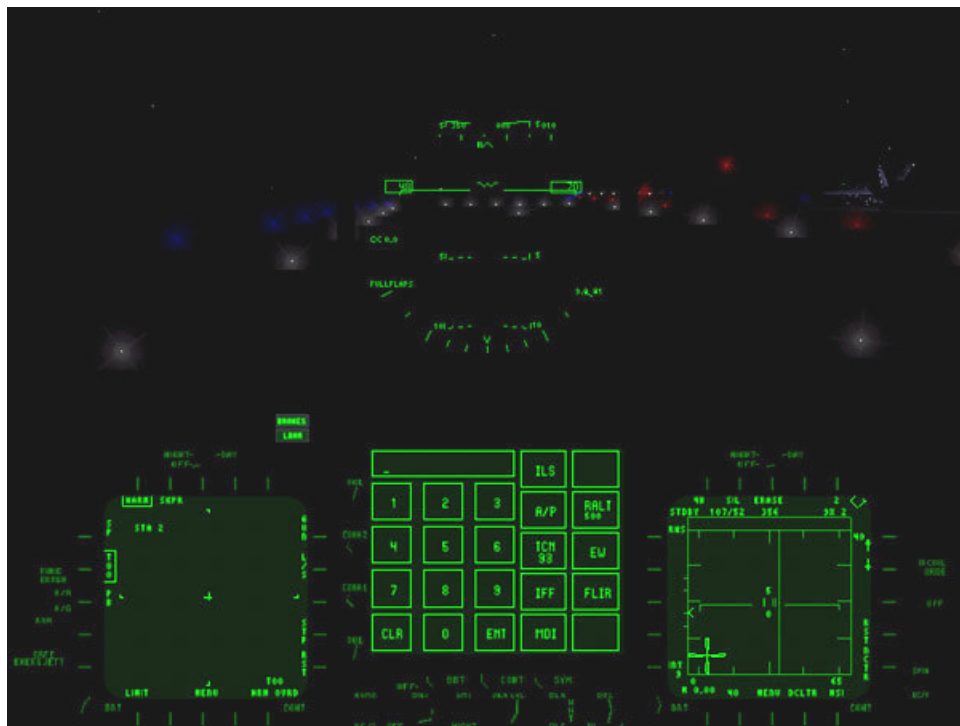
Strangely enough, the darkness on the flight deck was not that much different from the darkness of my stateroom. I felt the deck pitch up and down under my feet as I walked to my Super Hornet with Spoon walking beside me.

*"You ready for this one, Spoon?"*

*"Of course, Bones."*

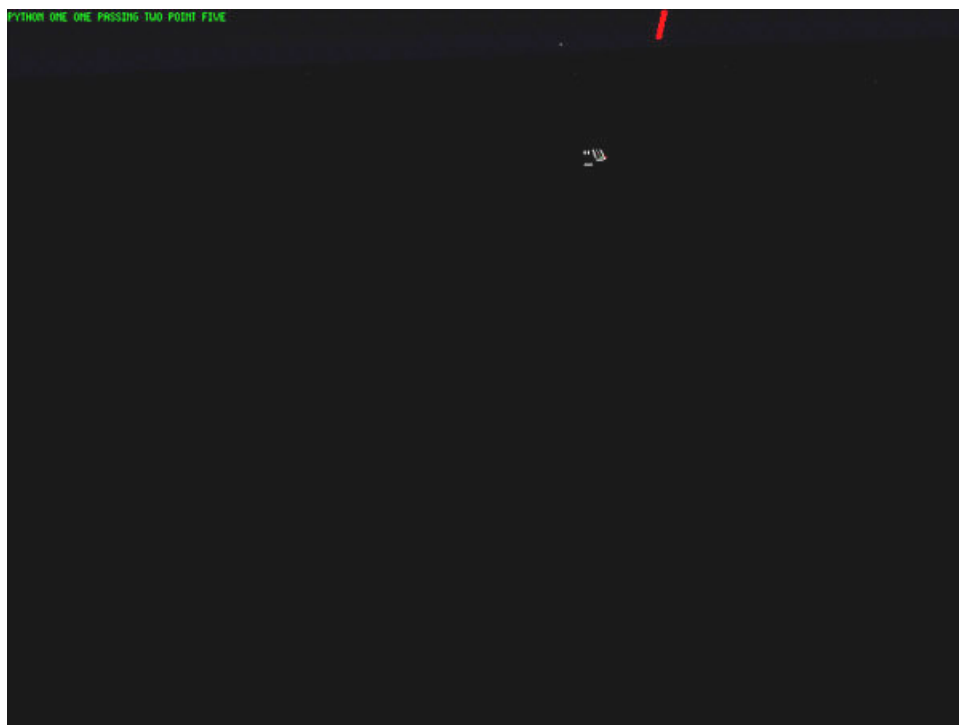
*"Good to hear it,"* I said as I patted her on the back. We arrived at our aircraft where the plane captains were ready to lend us their birds. After pre-flight and strapping in, we fired up the aircraft and followed the usual routine to getting locked up onto the shuttle of the waist cats, Spoon getting set on the bow cat. The night was unusually dark and gave us the feeling that we were not sailing at sea but rather floating in deep infinite space.

Moments later, we were catapulted into that space, our bodies hurtling along at over 200 mph off the deck.





The Reagan was nothing more than a tiny array of lights as she fell away into the black hole of the night:



I can't wait to see what happens next, thought Anderson as he walked to his aircraft. Just when he thought he was going to be Article 32'd for sure, he had dodged the bullet and been restored to flight status, AND given a refueling mission to fly. The brass must really be needing everyone for this, and he was a bit annoyed that he had so much time wasted sitting in courtrooms and such when he could have been in the air flying. What a friggin' waste of time, he thought as he got more exasperated with it. His commanding officer's voice was ringing in his ears. He had ripped him a new one upon arrival back at base:

*"You had best get your head unstuck out of your six right now Anderson! You may have gotten out of the hearing, but you are still in my squadron, and you better believe me that even though you might not have to pay the Air Force, you certainly are going to have to pay ME!"*

Anderson didn't want to know what that payment was going to be, but it was making him even angrier. Didn't anyone take his side at all? The only one who seemed to was his boom operator, who was actually going on this hop with him. Good, he thought, because he wanted crew people that he was familiar with to make their teamwork better. He just didn't want his co-pilot with him. That bastard tried to hang him out to dry, and the newbie flying in his place was not making it better.

I really can't wait to see what happens next, thought Anderson again as nothing seemed to be going to his liking.

At least he was flying again. Flying this mission might take the edge off a bit, he thought. The night missions always seemed to be more relaxing to him. But just in case, he double-checked to make sure that his go-pills were still in his flight suit pocket. They were. He was certainly surprised that no one hung him out to dry over those pills before the hearing, and no one thought to check for them afterwards. After all, he didn't want to get busted like those Illinois Air National Guard guys in Afghanistan a while back.

-----

Again, I must have been zoning out as we suddenly arrived at the coast of Iran. The sun would soon be rising so we would be losing our cover within the hour. I watched as the horizon, once pitch black and blending with the sky, began to emerge with a dark shade of blue. We needed to be as invisible as possible.

*"Spoon, we're going feet dry, come down to the deck with me."*

*"Roger, following you in,"* called Spoon after a brief radio crackle.

I nosed the aircraft over toward the coast...

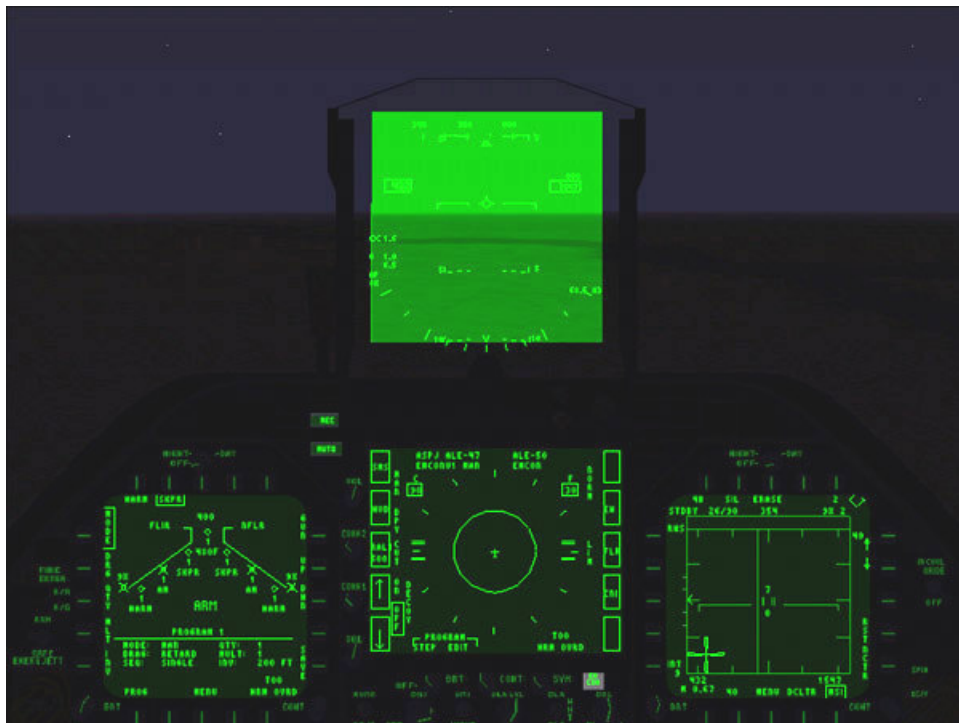


...and switched off the external lights. *"Go dark, Spoon, let's not let them see us."*

*"Roger,"* she replied as we extinguished our lights:



Fingering the panel switches, I switched on my NAVFLIR. The terrain ahead of me lit up in an eerie green giving me the night vision I needed to continue the flight in the dark. Spoon undoubtedly did the same:



I looked over to Spoon who was flying a nice disciplined line abreast formation completely dark. Only her silhouette gave her position away:



*"Nice job, two. I knew I picked the right person to fly with tonight."*

*"Thanks, lead,"* said Spoon. I couldn't see her but I was sure her face was red from blushing.

Turning my attention back in front of me, I called, *"Begin checks."* That was our cue to make certain the systems were ready for combat. We simultaneously began to configure our systems for the strike. There was still no enemy contact from either aircraft or ground defenses. Either we were stealthy enough not to be noticed, or Iran had taken so much damage from strikes that they simply didn't have an air defense network anymore.

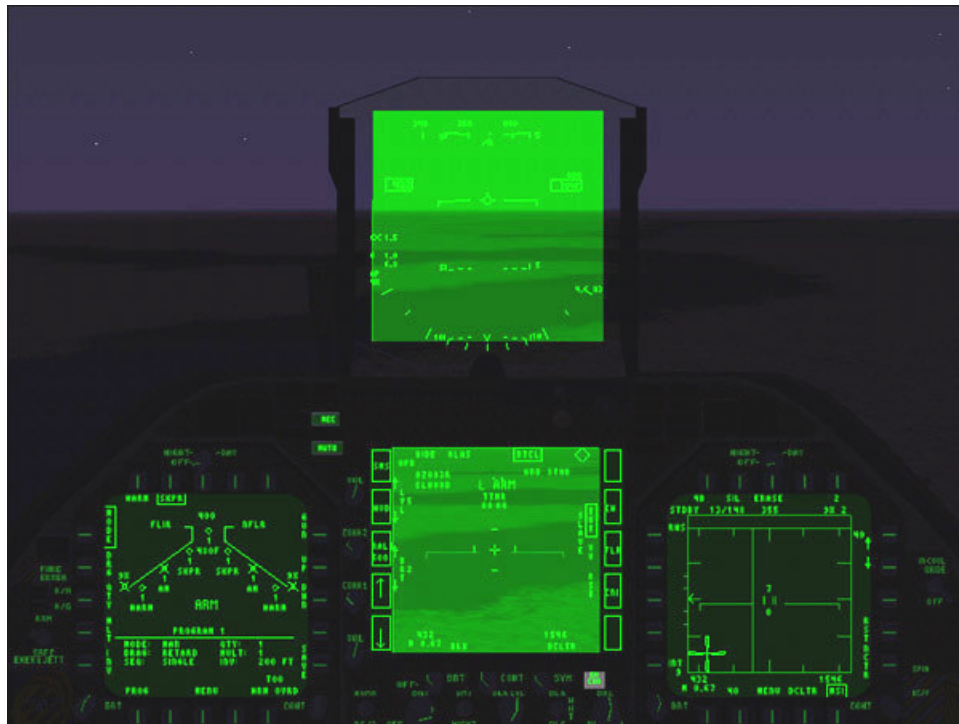
Or both.

*"Two, set up the Skippers. Make sure they're a go. Let's try to take the targets out way ahead of time if possible."* I had specifically asked for the Skipper because our JDAM and GBU supplies were running way low and no one had really used the Skipper yet, so there was a pretty good supply of them.

*"Copy that. Skippers armed and ready, looking good."*

*"Hot dog,"* I laughed. *"OK, safe them up and keep them handy. We'll be at the refueling point soon."*

I switched on the ATFLIR into the center MFD to verify that it was working. The entire cockpit was filled with a soothing green glow:



Our fuel was getting burned away. I was glad that the tanker would not be far.

-----

Anderson was feeling antsy simply sitting in his seat. He had been flying this racetrack pattern over Iran for what seemed like forever now, and the monotony along with the dark void in front of him was getting to him. He fidgeted in his seat, distracted for a moment by his co-pilot, Captain Jackson. *"You OK, sir?"*

*"Of course I am,"* answered Anderson. *"Just friggin' bored, you know?"*

*"I learned a long time ago to not ask for action at quiet times like these, sir."*

*"It's quiet times like these that I begging for action,"* said Anderson in reply.

*"Tango 31, fuel mission. Inbound aircraft 12 miles."* Came the call over the radio.

*"Roger. Ready and waiting, Tango 31,"* replied Anderson over the radio. *"See?"* he said as he grinned at his co-pilot with a look in his eyes that made the man next to him uneasy. *"Ask and ye shall receive."*

*"More like, 'be careful what you ask for,' sir,"* replied Jackson nervously.

-----



*"Pluto 11, tanker bearing 337, 12 miles, 19 thousand."*

*"Copy tanker, Pluto 11."* I responded. Just minutes from now and we'll be getting the gas we need to keep us going. Still nothing on the threat display too.

After momentarily switching our radars on to help us find the tanker, a blip appeared on the scope signaling that we were nearing it. That would be good as the sooner we can get gas, the sooner we can finish this mission and make it in time for the Royal Air Force. *"Spoon, we're going to have to make this refueling right on the first time, we don't have time to waste."*

*"I'll do my best."*

*"Let's hope so. Night refueling isn't a walk in the park."*

*"I'm on it,"* replied Spoon.

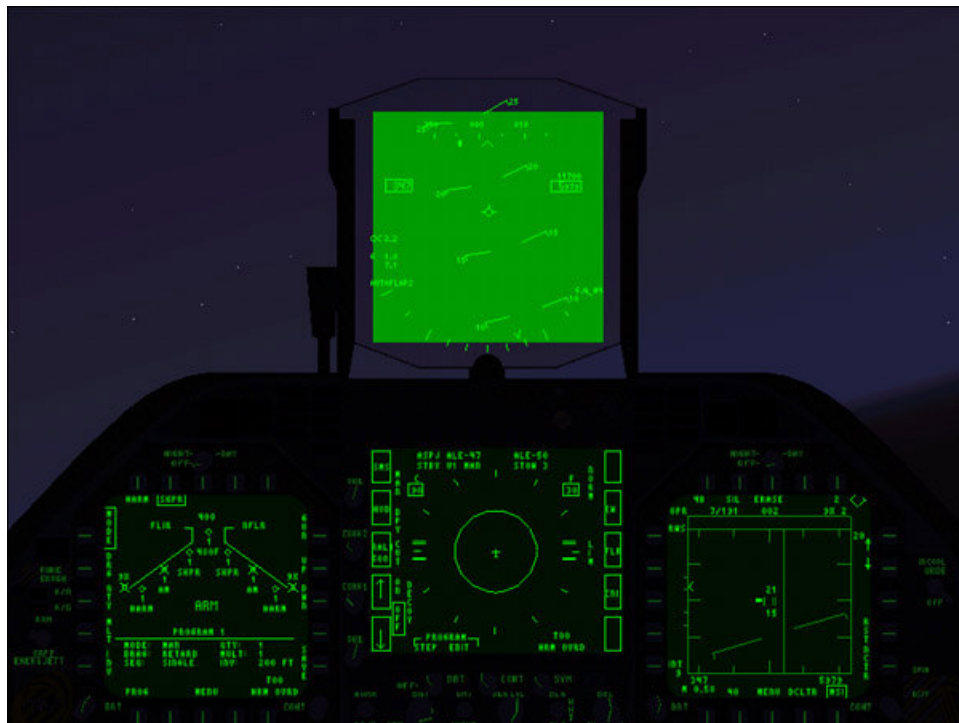
*"OK, let's go."* I pulled back on the stick and banked right toward the tanker. I didn't like leaving the radar on as it announces our presence to the enemy, but it would help us find the tanker faster and finish up right away. Besides, there still were no threats on the display:



The MiG-23 had always been a pretty durable aircraft. Designed with harsh conditions and field ops in mind, the Russians insured that the MiG would be able to fly even if there was no formal airstrip to fly from. This was unfortunately an advantage to the enemies of the Coalition that flew the MiG-23. Several of their aircraft had secretly been moved to a temporary location with field conditions that were rough, but well within the design constraints of the Flogger aircraft. What the Coalition did not know was that one of these makeshift fields happened to be in the area of operations for this mission, in an area where the strike package would overfly well before they arrived at the airfield that the MiGs were moved from. No one in the Coalition expected this, nor the chance that these MiGs were about to go up for a CAP mission concealed from their enemy in order to surprise anyone who would try to attack their former base which was nothing more than bait for them at this point.

*“Tango 31, Pluto 11 switches safe, nose cold, looking for 9K.”* Anderson heard the call for fuel come in over the speakers and immediately flew a straight and level flight to allow the aircraft to catch up and refuel. There was something familiar about that voice, but he couldn't place it. Besides, the go-pills were kicking in and making it hard for him to think straight anyway. Hey keyed the mike and confirmed the call.

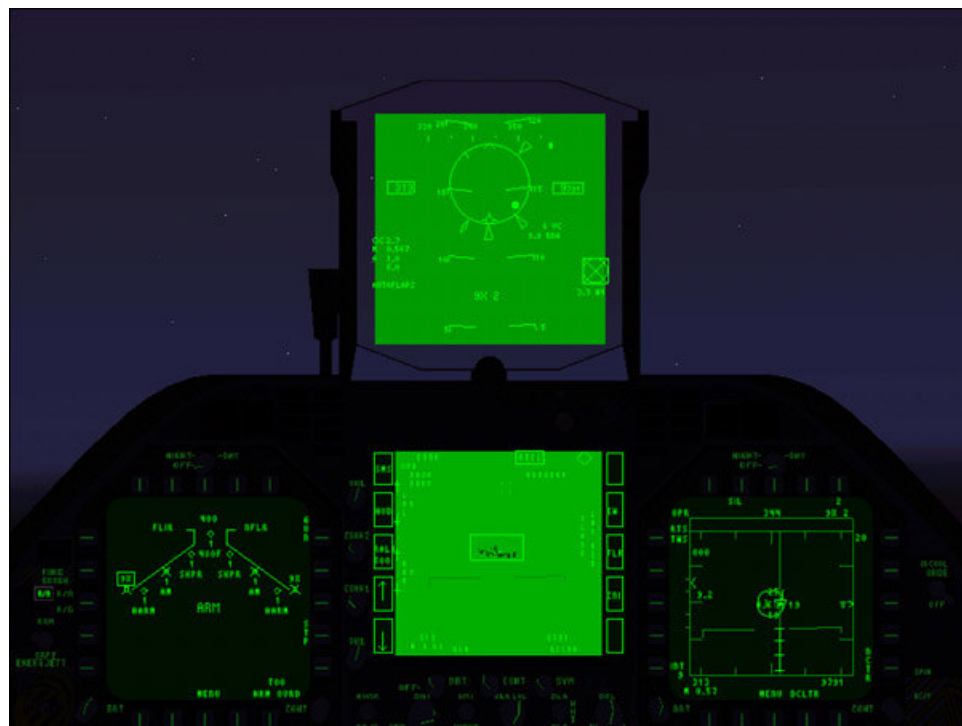
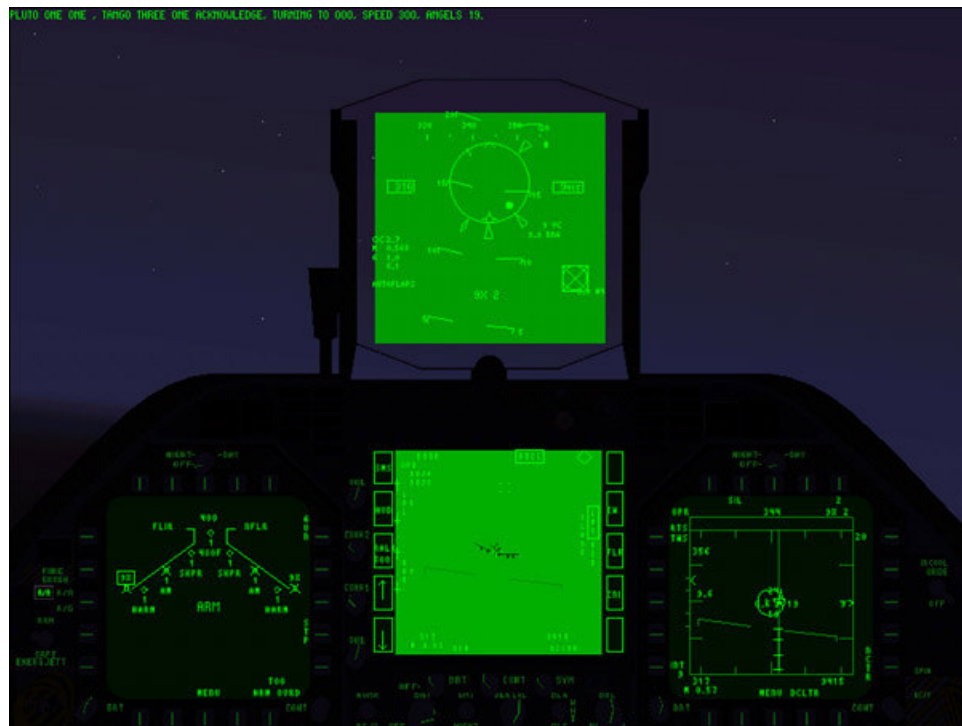
I turned my aircraft toward the tanker as Spoon followed in suit:

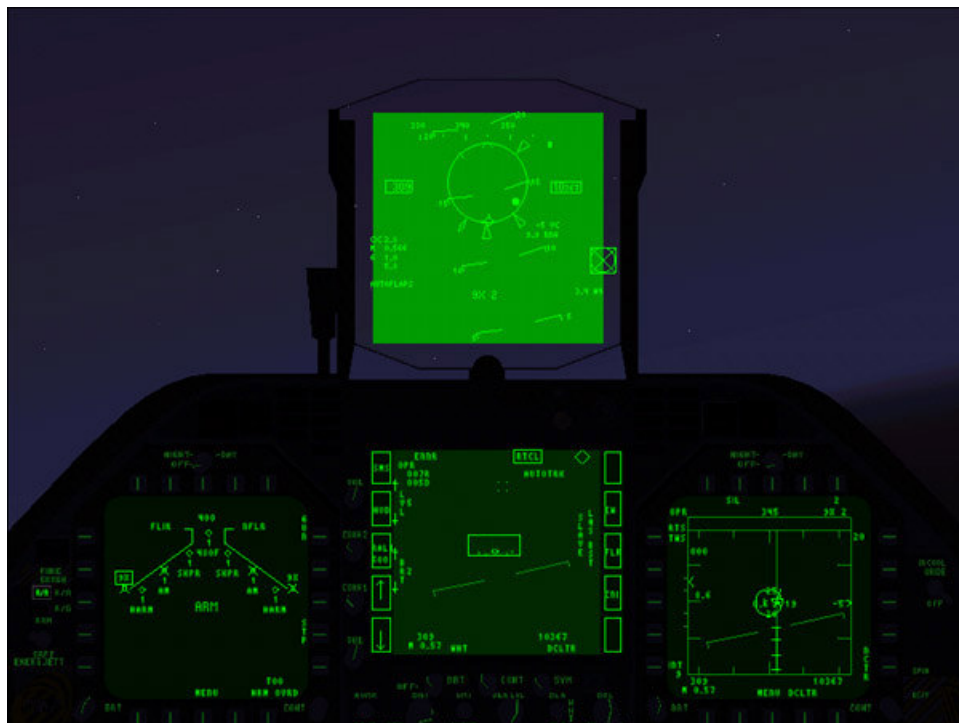


I had already made my tanker call and predictably, I got a visual on the tanker flying straight and level before switching off my radar:



"Pluto 11, Tango 31 acknowledged, turning to 360, speed 300, angels 19," came the tanker driver's voice over the radio. I saw him in my ATFLIR as well and wanted to get close enough before turning off my radar. I worked to line him up for my approach:



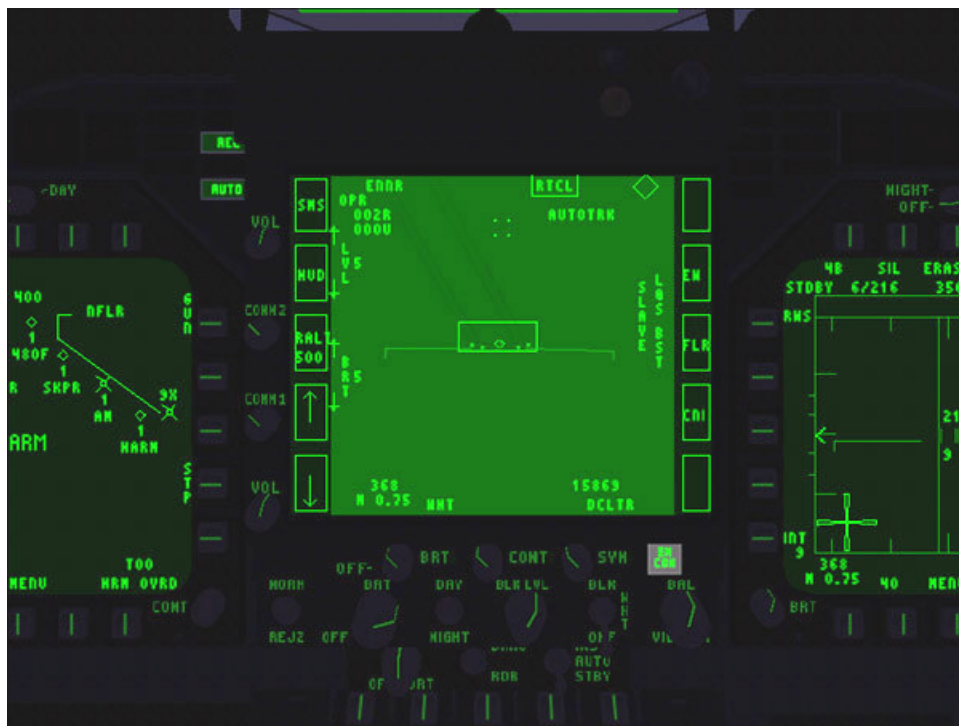
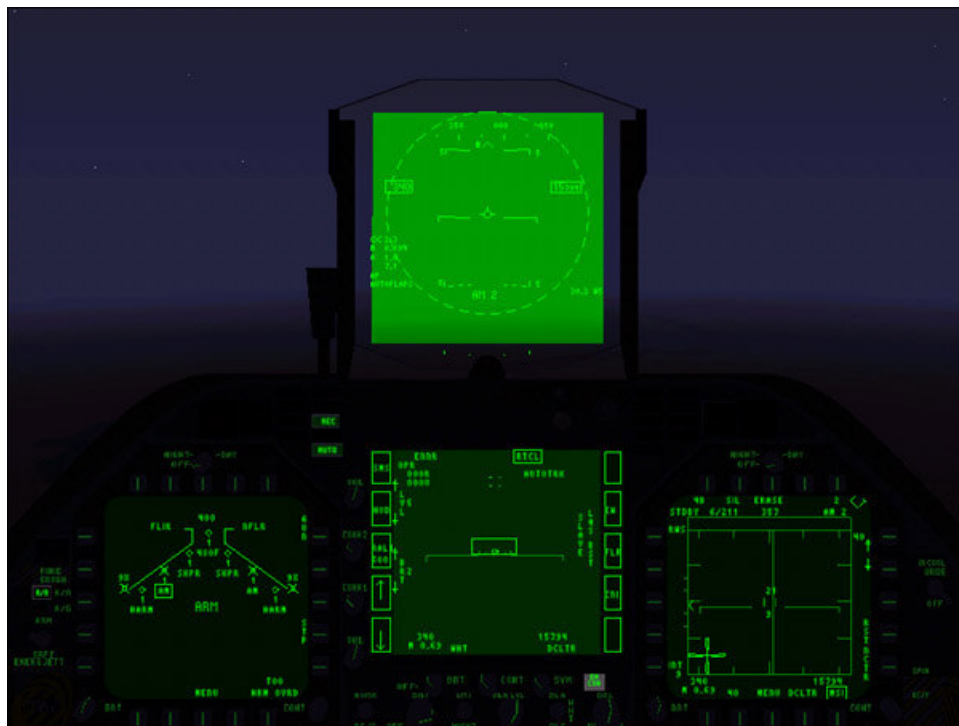


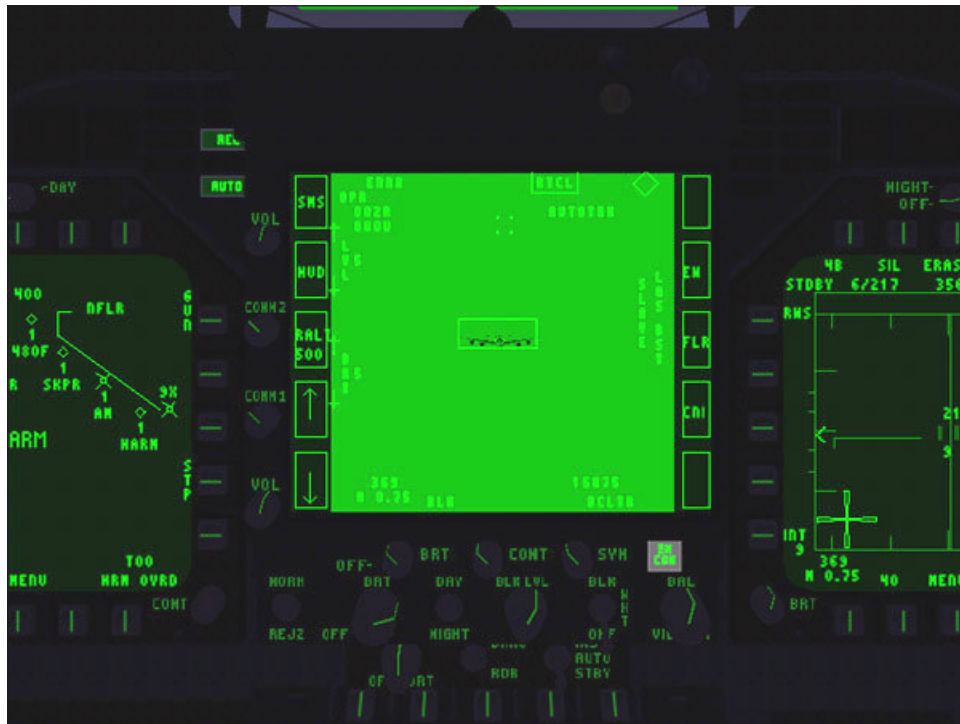
As he was being acquired in my ATFLIR, the tanker driver called in that he was ready if we were. "*Pluto 11 cleared precontact.*" As I reached for the button to turn off the radar, my brain again hinted that his voice sounded familiar. Well, of course it did, I shrugged. A lot of the same tanker pilots fly the same area as we do.

The iron cross symbol on the radar screen turned on signaling that the radar was off...



...as I continued to monitor the approach with the infrared:





"Friendly inbound," called the sergeant who was operating the refueling boom. "I can see him and his wingie coming in."

"Copy," replied Anderson from the front. "Initiate."

The sky was beginning to brighten as time went by and I could see now that we were over a mountain range. I was inching closer and closer to the tanker with Spoon in formation with me; we had already decided that I would refuel first:



Only a little bit further and we could be on our merry way.

-----

The MiG-23s were already in the air headed toward their CAP station. The Iranian commanding officer decided that now that his aircraft were safely in the air, it was safe to turn on their air defense radar and scan for threats. The sooner they find any, the sooner his aircraft can ambush and destroy any Coalition aircraft that should be headed their way.

The general nearly dropped his cigarette from his mouth when he saw several blips appeared on the screen immediately. The Coalition were already on their way. Immediately, he issued the orders to destroy them.

-----

"Hey Boss," called the boom operator. *"I can see the customers coming in. You won't believe who's asking for gas."*

"Who?" asked Anderson.

*"They've got that stupid pirate thing on their tails."*

Anderson's jaw dropped. He couldn't wait to see what bad thing would happen next, and here it was. Now he knew why the voice was familiar. Well, well, well, he thought.

He keyed his mike.

-----

I was surprised to hear the tanker driver's voice come on the air when he said, *"Well, well, well. We meet again. You gonna try to shoot me down again?"*

I couldn't believe it. It was the same tanker driver that gave us a hard time where we ended up in a Mexican standoff in the air, weapons armed and ready on each other.

*"Look, we don't need any trouble, we're just here for the gas and we'll be on our way."*

*"Real easy for you to say, for someone who didn't even have to show up for a hearing. How convenient being brass and all." I could hear the sneer in the pilot's voice, and I could feel my annoyance rise inside my heart. "Well, I had to sit through that. I had to be the one yelled at. I had to be the one who took the blame because your high and mighty brass butt was too high up the chain to get busted for anything!"*

-----

Jackson, Anderson's co-pilot, already nervous, was even more afraid hearing what was going on. He was paralyzed as Anderson continued on.

*"And now here we are again, with you needing gas. Always needing something from me and getting off clean without any problems, while I take all the blame. Well, not this time. If I'm gonna have to take the fall, I might as well get something out of it..."*

-----

My blood turned cold as I heard the tanker driver's words.

*"...and that is the satisfaction of watching you beg for your precious fuel."*

I was becoming unfurled. *"Look, you're going to give us that fuel, or..."*

*"Or what? You're gonna court martial me? Take your best shot man!"*

-----

"Sergeant!" yelled Anderson at his boom operator.

"Sir!"

"No boom and no fuel until the squid begs, you got it?"

The boom operator smiled. "Yes, sir."

-----

I couldn't believe what I just heard. I seriously doubted that the tanker driver accidentally keyed his mike when he told his operator that we weren't to get any fuel.

"Did you hear that?" asked Spoon who was getting nervous.

"I sure did, Spoon. Don't worry, let me handle this." I keyed the mike and called back. "Look, I'm not going to beg. I'm going to ask you one more time for gas. We are on a mission and you are an integral part of that mission with the gas you are carrying. So set everything aside for the moment and think about this mission and give us the gas."

"Don't patronize me," came the answer. "You're going to beg, and when I'm satisfied, you'll get your gas."

That was the last straw.

-----

"I'M NOT GOING TO BEG! GIVE US THE GAS NOW! YOU FRIGGIN...!"

Anderson keyed the mike, cutting off the yelling pilot, and laughed into the mike.

-----

He's laughing at us! I thought. He's laughing at us like this is some friggin game. I had to restrain myself when I heard him call, "How's it feel, man?"

"What are you on drugs or something?"

"Oh, you gonna have me take the blame for something else then, man?"

"Is there something else for you to take the blame for?"

-----

How the hell did he know? How the hell did he know ANYTHING? asked Anderson of himself. The edgy feeling of the go-pills were really working him now, and with the combination of adrenaline, he was breaking into a cold sweat, panting, and getting visibly erratic and paranoid. He impulsively reached into his flight packet pocket to make sure the pills were still there...maybe the Navy guy had them, no, wait how could he? He's in that stupid airplane over there...or maybe the dude told him. Anderson didn't know, he was getting too confused. So confused that he didn't realize that he pulled the vial of pills from his pocket, and his jittery hands lost his grip on it as it fell to the floor, and rolled toward his co-pilot, whose eyes got wider at seeing what they were. He picked them up and was immediately greeted with a scream.

"YOU GIVE THOSE BACK TO ME, LIEUTENANT!"

The young aviator nearly dropped them from being so startled, but managed to hold them tight. "No," he quietly said. "Give them the gas, or I'm turning this in to the colonel."

Suddenly Anderson grabbed at Jackson, knocking the yoke and causing the plane to lurch to the side.

-----

"*What the...?*" I muttered as I saw the boom swing away as the aircraft swung in the opposite direction. Something was going on in there.

"*Oh, no!*" called Spoon.

"*What is it?*" I asked. Before she could answer, I saw exactly what the problem was.

"*Spike, Tin Shield and...*"

"*Yes, I see it, crap!*" I broke in. "*Tin Shield and MiG-23s, 11:00! Let's hope the CAP can take them. We need that gas.*"

Then a thought occurred to me. "*Spoon, stay close and get ready. If they get past the fighters, they're going to go after the tanker. She's an easy target and too important for the mission.*"

"*Roger,*" she replied nervously.

-----

"*We got company!*" yelled Captain Jackson. "*Fighters inbound!*"

Anderson heard the call too and muttered something profane under his breath.

"*Those CAP fighters better take care of them or we're sitting ducks here with thirsty fighters on our butts,*" said the co-pilot.

"*I can hear Oscar and Python responding. Let's get the hell out of here,*" said Anderson.

"*We can't, we have to get fuel to those Super Hornets out there, they're running dry. Let Python and Oscar take care of them.*"

"*Jackson, there is no way I am getting shot down over two thirsty fighters!*" Anderson frantically keyed the intercom mic. "*Sergeant, disengage and strap in we're bugging out!*" Anderson then pulled the behemoth that was the KC-135 into a hard climbing left turn."

-----

"*I don't believe this!*" I exclaimed as I flinched my aircraft away from the tanker, trying to avoid a collision with the boom. "*He's bugging out!*"

I could barely believe my eyes as I watched the KC-135 turn away in the ATFLIR:



I turned back hard to keep ATFLIR contact on the tanker.

*"Tango 31, Pluto 11. Get your six back here and give us that fuel! The CAP fighters have got you covered! Give us the gas right now!"* I screamed over the radio after I reacquired the tanker ahead of me:



Taking a closer look at the tanker on the ATFLIR I could see the infrared plumes coming off of its engines. She was at full power running scared:



Suddenly I heard the CAP aircraft over the radio. “Oscar 12, triple A spotted! GAH!” With a burst of static, all traces of Oscar flight were gone.



“Did you hear that, Pluto 11?” called the tanker. “Oscar flight just got iced, and Python is probably dead too!” There was a marked amount of terror in his voice. “We are out of here! You have weapons, we don’t. You take him if you want, but we are GONE!”

“Tango 31, get back here!”

“One unable to comply,” came the response. Again, I watched in horror as the tanker ran for it, turning hard left to get away with MiG-23s still bearing down upon us on the threat display:

ROTOR ONE ONE, TRIPLE A SPOTTED, ATTACKING  
ONE UNABLE TO COMPLY



ONE UNABLE TO COMPLY





*"Do you think it's true, Bones?" called Spoon. "Are they really gone?"*

I tried to raise the CAP several times on the air, but no response. I had a sinking feeling that the fighters or the AAA got them, or both.

*"Master arm on, Spoon. We're on our own."*

Spoon nervously took one last look at her fuel display, then took off the safety and selected A/A mode on the left side of her cockpit dashboard. The light turned on as the weapons system came to life.

*"They're coming in fast, Spoon. Cover my wing!"*

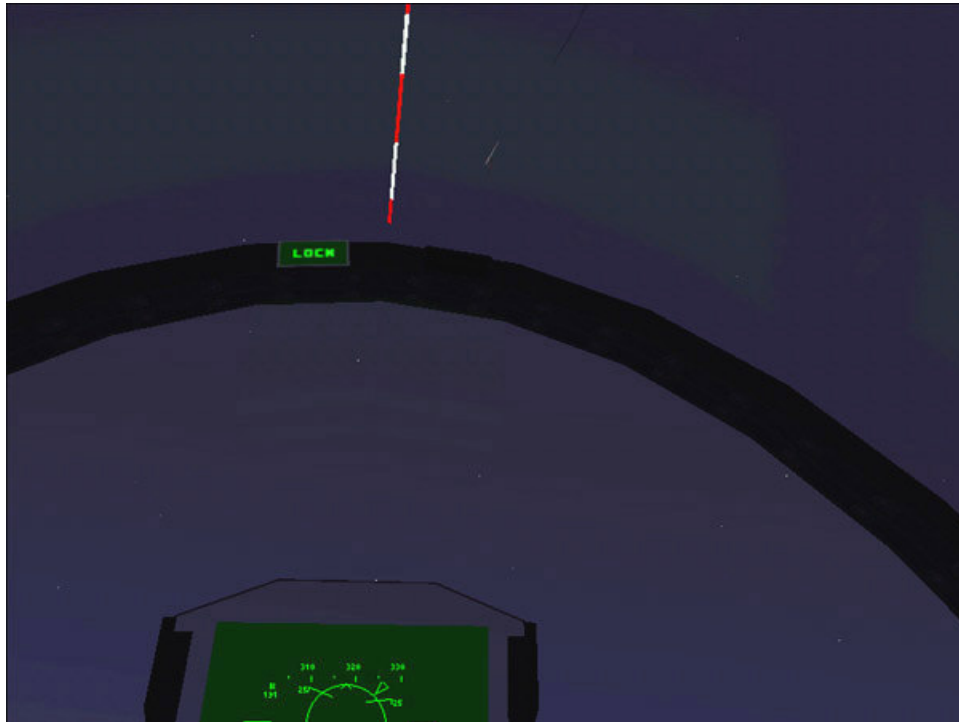
*"Roger!"*

I pushed the throttle forward to afterburner and popped the radar on. I wanted to close the range as soon as possible to deny them the use of radar guided missiles as I knew their heat seekers weren't as good as ours in the all-aspect arena. In fact, my Niner X-Ray was already growling pretty loud as I got a good tone.

*"FOX 2!"* I yelled as I hit the weapon release:



I was holding my nose up the entire time, and struggling to keep it there as the flight computers screamed in protest. I could feel the DFLCS trying to dampen out my high alpha as the missile streaked toward its target...



...and I struggled to keep my nose up to maintain my tally on the enemy:



The flash of light didn't coincide with the silence that accompanied it, but my mind filled the void with what I imagined the explosion sounded like. What I did hear was Spoon yelling excitedly, *"You got him! Pluto 12 confirmed, that's a kill!"*



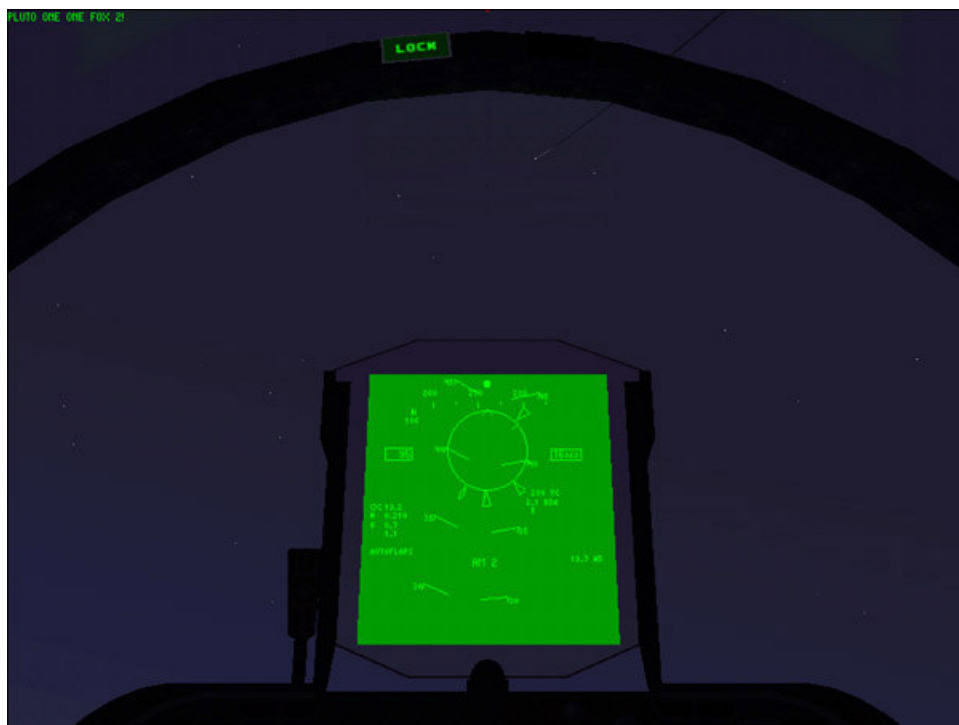
Just then, I lost my fight with the nose as it lurched down toward the earth, trying to recover from the high angle of attack:



Amazingly, the nose fell in such a way that the radar cone was swept down upon the 2nd bandit. The radar automatically locked him up and displayed a shoot cue in the HUD:



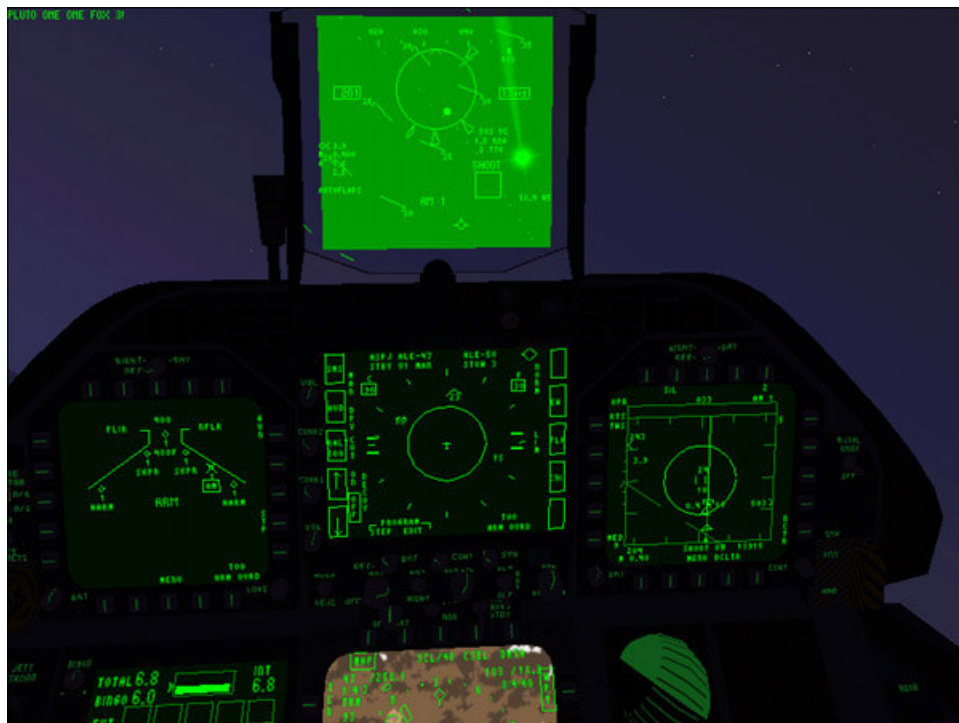
I laughed to myself, shrugged, and pickled off another Sidewinder:



The result was a near miss that didn't finish the Flogger off...



...but I was able to back off a smidgen to allow for the Flogger to barely slip into AMRAAM minimum range. "Fox 3!" I called as the AIM-120 flew off the pylon:

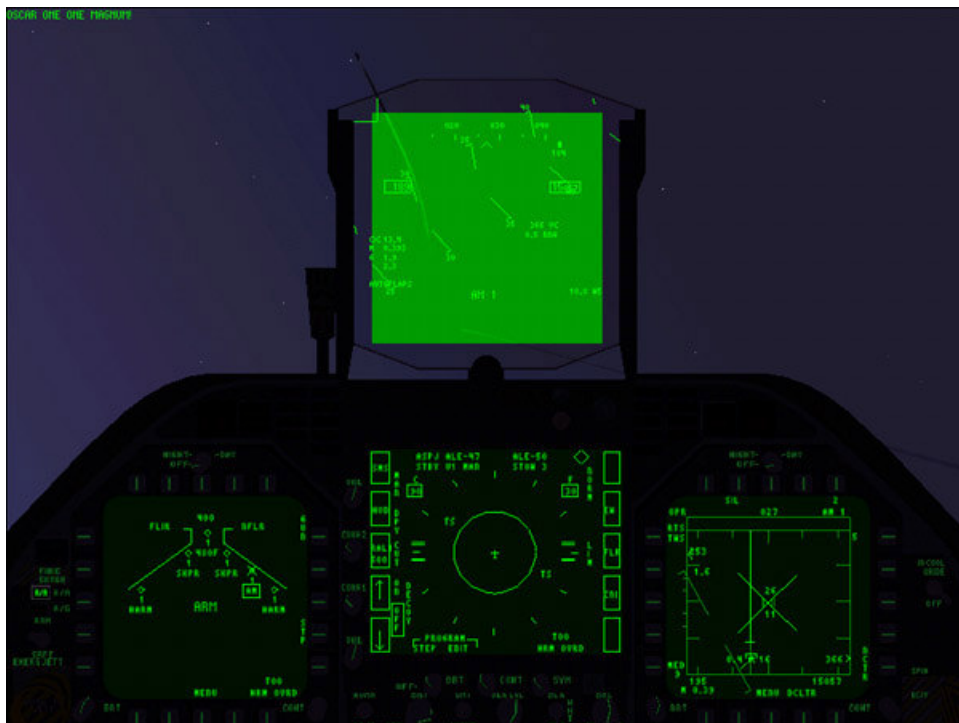


The nose dropped again and I cursed to myself at my amateurish mistake depleting my energy like that. I beat myself up a bit more seeing how close I was to the mountaintops:



*"Am I trying to get myself killed?!?"* I screamed to myself.

A brilliant light flashed in the night sky and I saw a plume grow from behind the Flogger. The AMRAAM had found its mark:



*"Pluto 12,"* called Spoon. *"Roger, confirmed, that's a kill!"*



"Oscar 11 magnum!" came the separate radio call. Someone in Oscar flight survived and was frantically firing off their Mavericks!

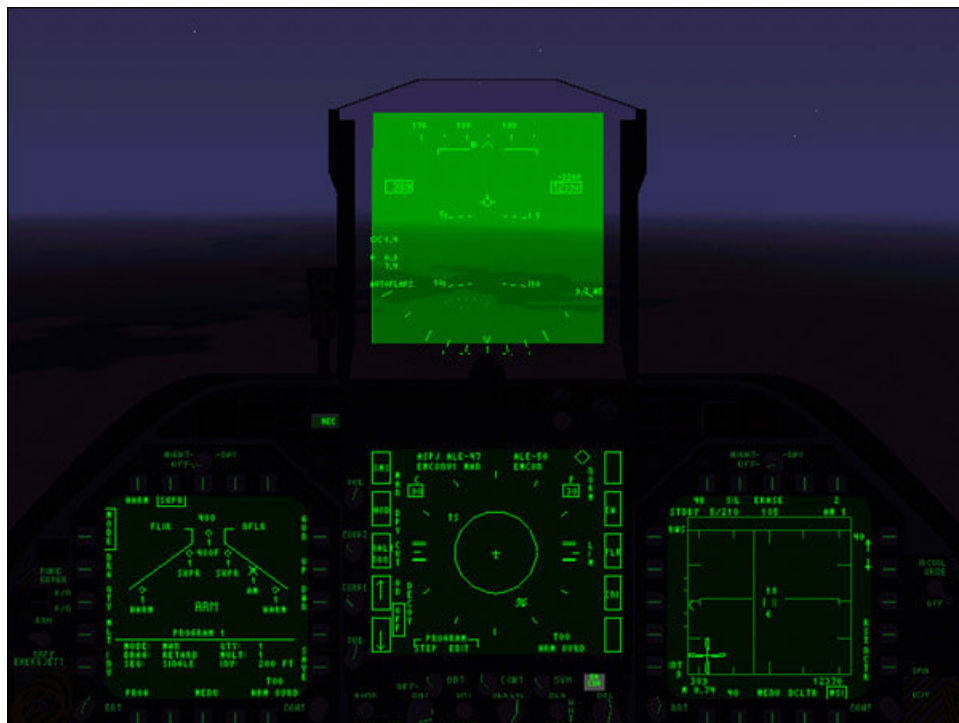
*"Spoon, looks like that's all of them," I called. "How's your gas?"*

*"Not good, Bones. But the good news is I think I have the tanker still in the area. Bearing 104, only 23 miles away."*



*"Tango 31, this is Pluto 11. We killed off your bandits, you are clear and safe, now give us that friggin fuel!"*

I pulled level and waited for the reply:



Anderson was frozen at the controls, except for his heavy panting. He was clearly freaking out. Jackson got on the horn and was about to respond when Anderson suddenly stopped him. *"It's ok, Jackson, I have it."*

Jackson gave him a grave look, but backed off. Anderson took a deep breath, sweating profusely, and answered the call.

*"Thanks, Pluto 11."* I was stunned to hear the pilot's voice reply in such a way. It was suddenly calm yet disturbed. *"You didn't have to do anything for us, but you did anyway, despite how I treated you. Thanks for saving our lives. I'm...I'm sorry I was such a motherf---"*

*"Don't worry about it, Tango 31,"* I said cutting him off. *"Let's just please have that gas, OK?"*

*"Copy, Tango 31 slowing and continuing straight heading."*

Anderson clicked off the mic and switched to intercom. *"Sarge, get that boom and fuel ready."*

*"Yes, sir."*

*"Well whaddya know?"* I muttered as I saw the KC-135 level off...



40



I checked my six to make sure I didn't lose Spoon. *"You still with me, two?"*

*"Roger,"* said Spoon. *Sliding around your six."*



*"Looks like we're going to get our fuel after all."*

*"Yeah,"* I said, sighing deeply. *"It's about time. That was too close."*



---

Anderson sat in silence, noticeably calmer, but seemingly oblivious to everything going on around him. He shook himself back to reality when the sergeant reported, *"Refueling operation complete."*

*"Roger, sarge. We're going home."* Jackson looked at Anderson and gave him a quick but nervous smile. Anderson returned the gesture and reached for the external light switch.

---

I saw the tanker pull away from us after we finished topping off our tanks, and then I saw the lights flash on and off as if they were saying good bye and thanks. *"Spoon, let's peel off and get this mission back on the road. Follow my lead."*

*"Roger."*



-----

Anderson switched his lights back on full and gently banked the aircraft back to base.

-----

*"OK, Spoon. Back on EMCON, 14 miles to next waypoint. Get your air to ground checked and let's move out."*

"Copy," she replied as I switched on my HARMs to see who was scoping for us that I could kill:



It looked clear except for a few search radars. They would be of little consequence to us as we made our approach masked between the mountains.

At last we arrived in the target area. I didn't want to waste anymore time. "Two," I called. "*Break EMCON. Cleared hot! Let's get 'em!*"

"Copy, Spoon is in hot."

"Bones in hot!"

I immediately caught some of the target SAMs both on my ground radar and on my HARM display:



"Crud, Spoon, watch it, there's a fighter about. Keep pressing, I'll take him on."

I hurriedly switched to A/A mode, terrified that a fighter had caught us too preoccupied with a ground attack. It was just pure luck that I happened to see him fly by. I turned toward him and set the radar for vertical scan in order to grab the fighter before it could turn away:





"Good kill, *Pluto 11*," I called as I switched back to the bombing mission and brought my nose down toward Earth:



I overflowed the airfield trying to get my bearings. I could see behind me that my and Spoon's weapons had hit their targets:



*"I got all of my assigned targets, Lead," reported Spoon. I took some flak on the way out though. Hydraulics are bent and I'm losing fuel...am at bingo right now." I pulled over the mountains as I listened to grimly listened to Spoon:*



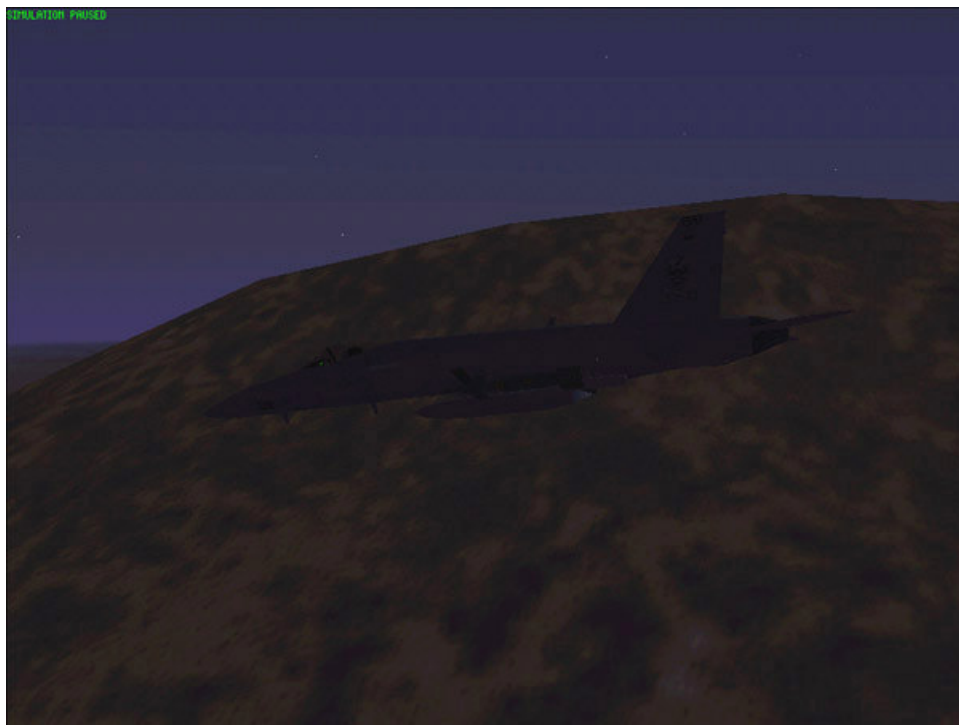
*"Roger Spoon. Good job, head to home ASAP. Don't worry about me, I'm not hit. Get home and get home safe, you hear? I still have one more launcher left."*

*"Roger, as long as you are right behind me."*

*"I am, don't worry, just get home. I'll take care of this launcher and see you on deck. Go on now."*

*"Roger," said Spoon as she turned toward our egress waypoint.*

I looked outside of the cockpit to make sure she was clear and that I was sufficiently covered by the mountains:



I knew I had one target left, but I had to get my bearings and find it first. There was no way I was going to have Spoon stick around with her being hit—I didn't even have a scratch. Besides, I had two Skippers on me which would give me enough standoff range to kill the launcher without being threatened by it...maybe even from behind the mountains if I was lucky enough. Now if I could just find the damn target...

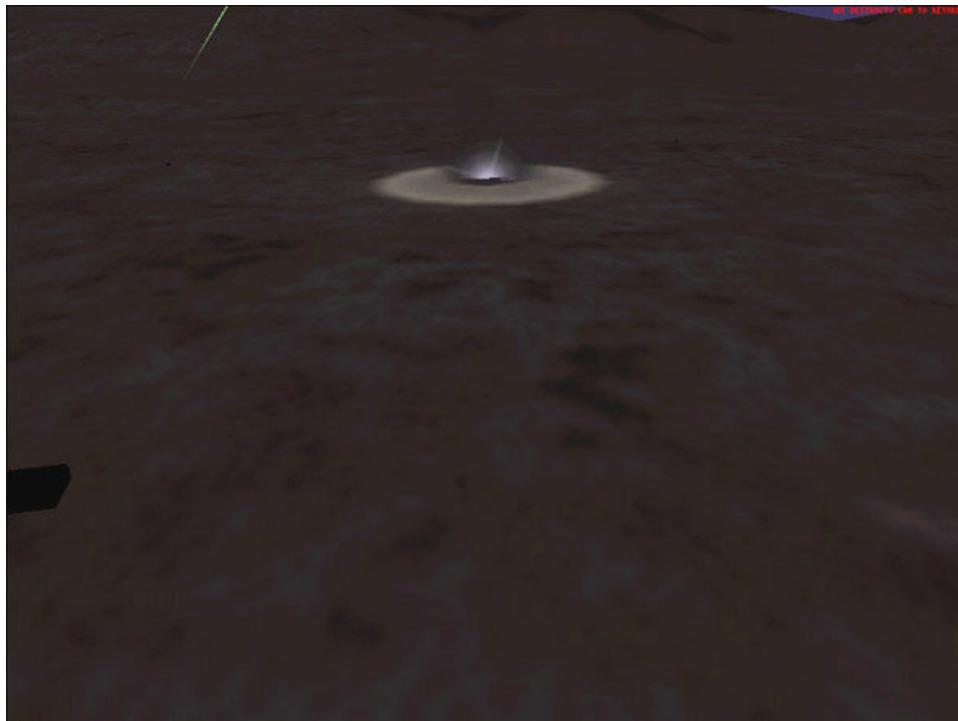
I pulled up high over the mountains and reversed course toward the airbase, setting my radar sweep to a wide angle to grab as much ground info as possible. A single blip caught my eye...it can't be, could it? It was too easy, and that made

me simultaneously happy and worried, as if a trap was going to be sprung upon me. I slewed the cursor over to the blip, locked it, and slaved the ATFLIR to the radar.

The launcher showed up perfectly in the green ATFLIR display. I got the jump on him, he wasn't even facing me,



but it surprised me so much, I flinched, accidentally pickling the Skipper I had armed. “Aw, crap!” I muttered as I realized I wasted a Skipper by panic firing it outside of its launch envelope. The Skipper flew off harmlessly into the ground, exploding as it impacted and attracting the attention of all ground forces in the area:



“So much for the element of surprise!” I said to myself as I pushed the throttles forward and rushed the launcher, turning hard into it and hoping to kill it before it could kill me:



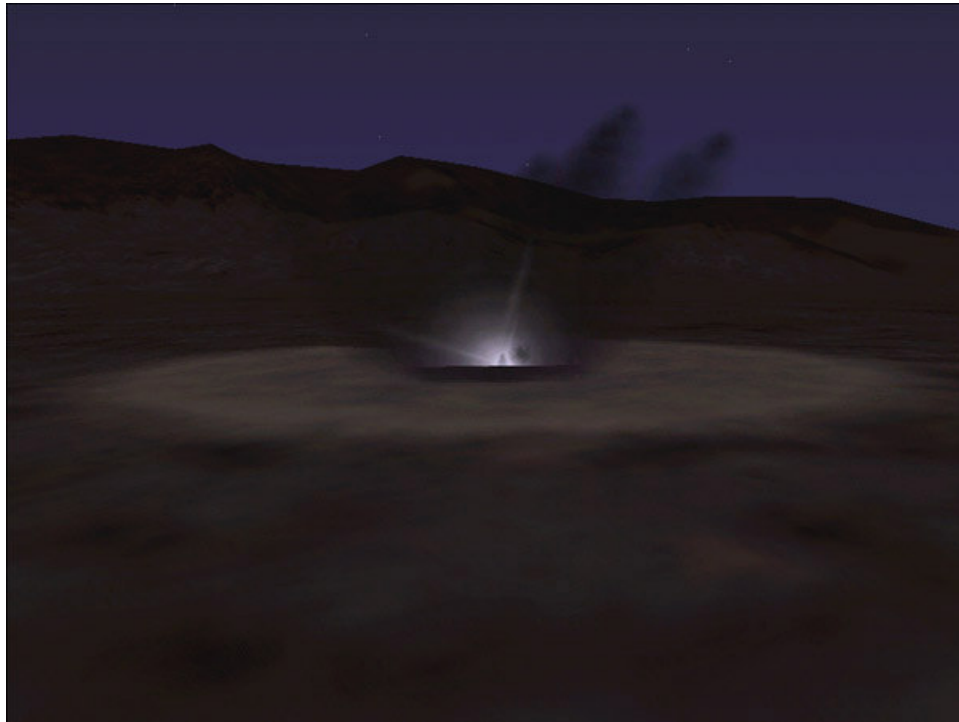




"Aw, hell, I'm being too perfectionist!" I said as I pressed the launch button:

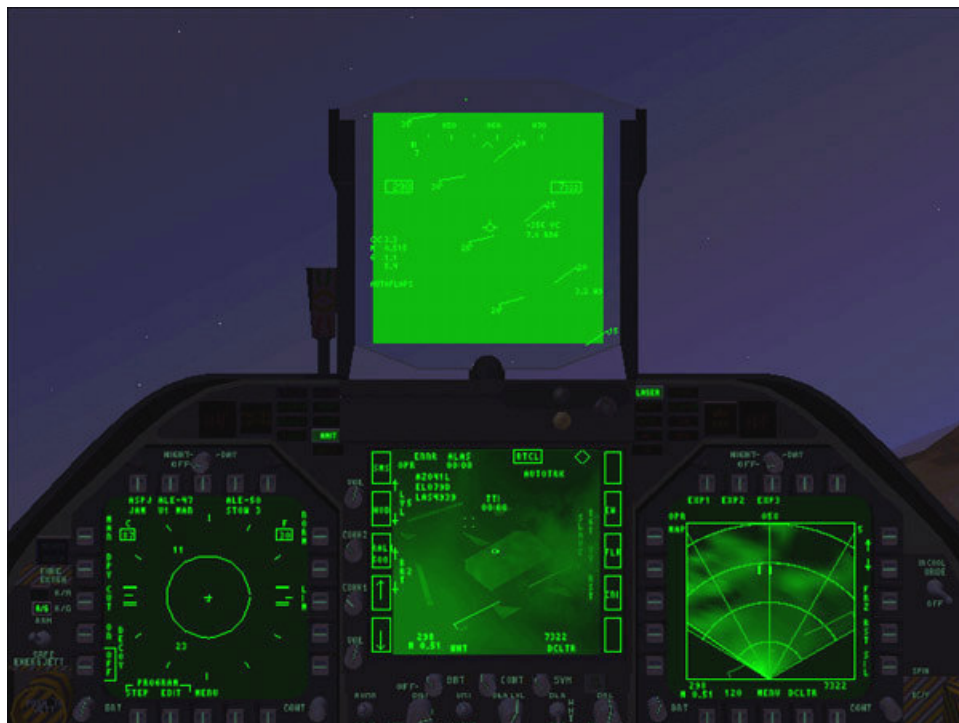


The Skipper rushed off into the breaking dawn, guiding directly to the launcher and obliterating it:



The ATFLIR confirmed the kill for me, as I turned away to high tail it out of the battle zone:





Nothing but smoke and wreckage, I smiled. But this was, not for me, the hardest part of the mission. That part had finally arrived, and it was hard because I had to struggle within myself over whether to do it. Should I? I had come this far, and I had despite unforeseeable events such as the fighters bouncing us or the tussle with the tanker...I had still arrived at the point that I simultaneously wanted to be at—and didn't.

I even was able to get Spoon to leave the area so she wouldn't get involved. Ha, imagine that? Spoon's concern for my well being and want to help would actually get in my way!?! How contradictory a thought that was.

Ahead of me, I could see it. The site that was kept off of the mission briefing, purposely removed from the photos and briefing by Phinin himself with approval of senior command, but kept under the eternal dark shadow of classification. It was another SAM site that was hidden in the valley from the Coalition, but purposely so, in order to keep it from being destroyed. How crazy was it to be glad that Spoon was hit? It was crazy, but only because her being hit gave me even more reason to get her out of the area where she would not be seen by this site, or see the site itself.

It almost seemed as if I was flying in slow motion toward it, as if time itself had slowed to allow me to make a final decision:



My thoughts went back to Phinin, back in my stateroom earlier on:

-----

*"...Sacha isn't supposed to be fulfilling the roles that she is either. Furthermore, the commanding officer of an active combat duty strike fighter squadron in the war against Iran is not supposed to be involved in anything else either, especially in terms of the war effort."*

*"So, how am I supposed to be able to participate in this operation without everything getting compromised?" I asked. There had to be something more if it was supposed to be so covert.*

*Phinin confirmed my suspicions. "That brings me to the other reason why I needed to brief you in private."*

*The intelligence officer sat down and said, "You know how when a prize fighter gets so far and the manager gets equally far if not further with the mob and gets into trouble?"*

*"Yeah?" I asked.*

*"Well, command is kind of like that manager, and what does the manager end up having to do for everything to work out?"*

*"He tells the prize fighter to go for a few rounds, but then he has to...he has to throw the fight." Then I understood. "You want me to throw my fight. You want me to somehow get shot down ON PURPOSE?"*

*"It's the only way that we can 'insert' you into the operation without raising suspicion. You don't have to worry, we will be watching via satellite, UAV, and with a SpecOps helo ready to pick you up and take you to the operations area where Coyote and Pokey's rescue will be staging from."*

*"This is friggin' nuts, Dan! We are already low on aircraft, pilots, and morale. What's it going to do to our squadron losing another aircraft, let alone the Skipper?"*

*"A lot less if Pokey and Coyote are killed, and the squadron—and eventually the rest of the world—finds out that we knew they were in Abkhazia all along and we didn't do anything. Then we will be dragged into an even bigger war, and VFA-103, already low on aircraft, pilots, and morale, as you put it, will be worse off, thrust into the bigger war along with other squadrons where there will be more death and dying to be had."*

*Dan stood up with a grave look on his face. "That's what it's going to do, Bones."*

*I stood there in silence, aghast.*

*Phinin added one more remark. "No one is saying you HAVE to do this. But we don't see any other way. But it's still up to you. But if you do decide to this, you have to let us know NOW so that we can set up the necessary satellites and helos and so forth."*

*"You don't give a man a lot of time to think, do you?" I said, still in shock.*

*"No, sir, in this case, I do not."*

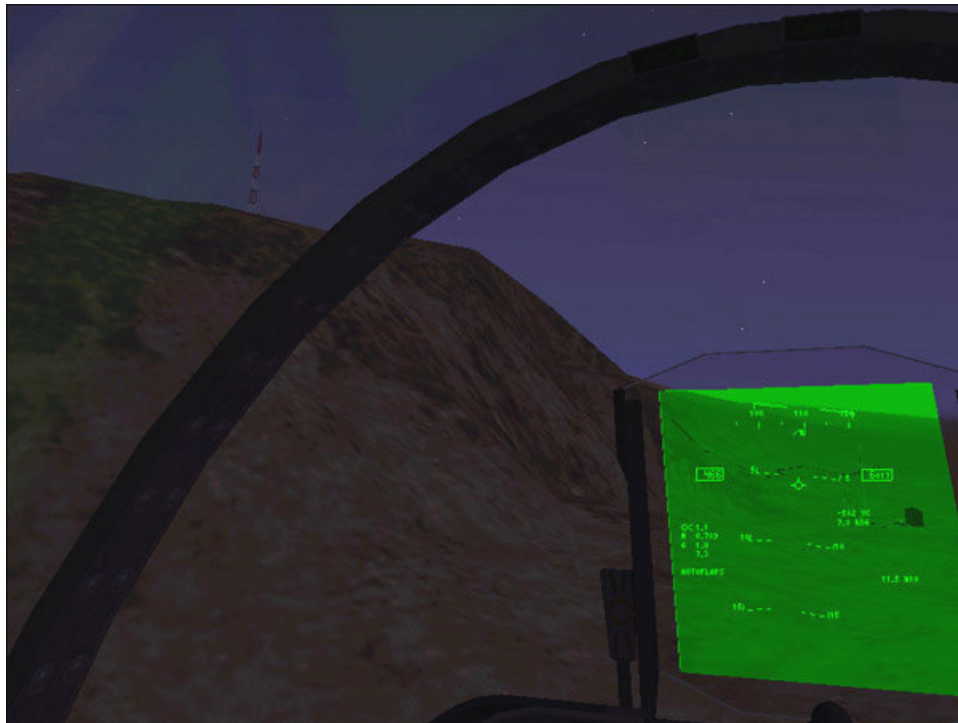
*I sat down in my chair and answered. "Ok, Dan. I guess tonight is the night."*

*Dan nodded and we began making plans as to the best way to do this. After a few ideas that we decided were completely crazy, we couldn't believe that the final plan we arrived at was what we decided to do. It seemed just as crazy, but feasible. After we finalized it, Dan snapped to, then left to begin the mission.*

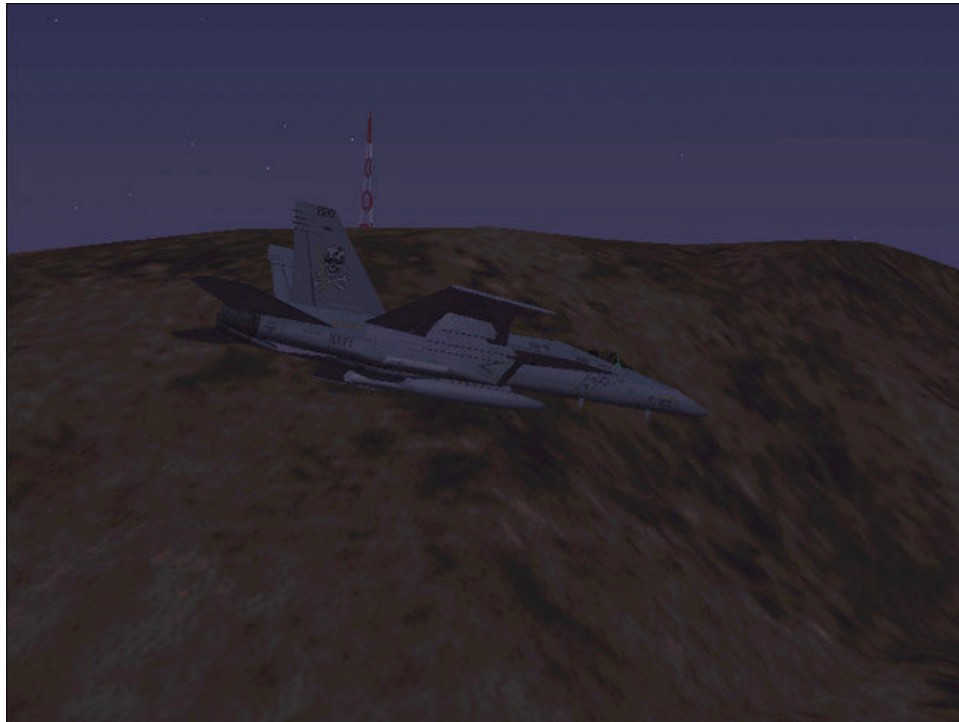
*I took a deep breath, seated in silence, and leaned back into my...*

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...ejection seat as I saw the SAM site loom in my HUD. They had already seen me, and all sorts of electronic warnings were going off, overloading the cockpit with warning information:



I aimed my nose toward the site as if I was about to launch ordnance at it, wondering if they could see that the idiot in the air was carrying no weapons whatsoever:



I looked behind me to make sure no one else was a threat, as I wanted to make this as clean a defeat as possible:



I rolled with intent toward the SAM site, but with the intent of giving them an easy shot rather than to destroy them:



Moment of truth.

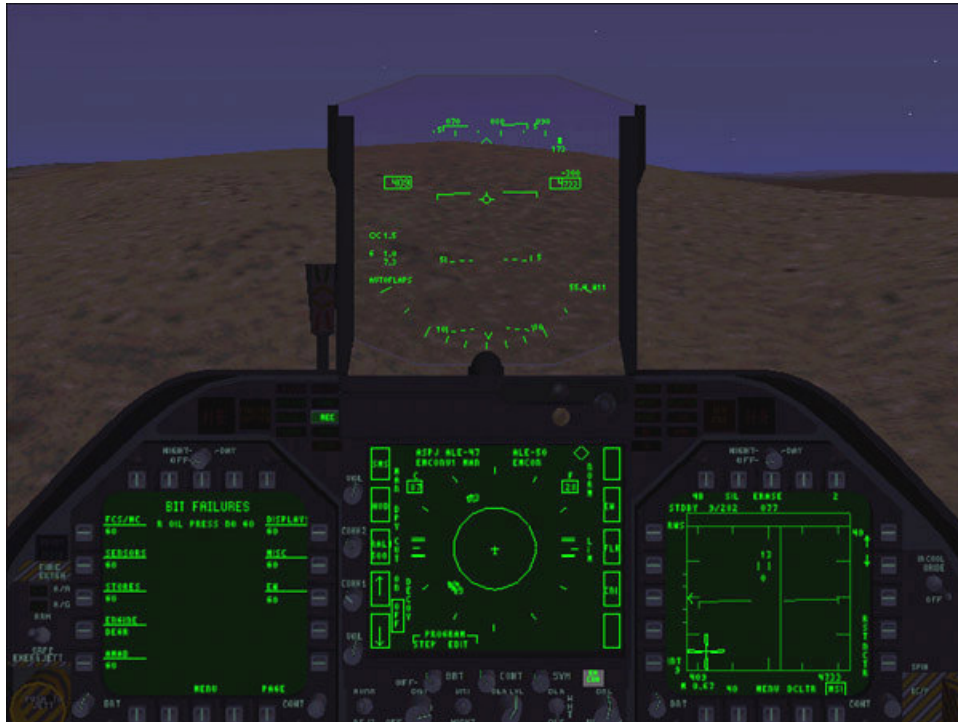
The EW went crazy as the Iranians saw their opportunity and locked a missile on, launching it. I could see the plume turn hard toward me as I flew past their site at breakneck speed, my heart pumping faster than my aircraft was flying:



*"I can't believe I'm doing this! I can't believe I'm doing this!"* I muttered over and over as I pulled hard to make the missile work to track me. At the precise moment, I released chaff, and hoped for the best:



The missile didn't get completely fooled by the chaff, but instead in a "just to be safe" decision of sorts, it proximity-detonated between me and the decoy. The heat and the shock rushed ahead of me through the cockpit and I could almost see the shockwave fly past me as the Super Hornet complained about the damage that it had caused:



"*Hmm, not as bad as I thought,*" I said to myself as the right oil pressure system reported a failure. "Maybe I can fake this crash easily after all." It still sickened me that I was sacrificing a perfectly good aircraft, especially since until now I was not even hit, and this hit was intentional. But it was a sacrifice for Pokey and Coyote. I said to myself aloud, "*It's crazy, but I wish the aircraft was hit harder so I wouldn't feel so bad about ditching it—OH, NOW WHY DID I HAVE TO GO AND SAY THAT?!?!?*" I yelled at myself as suddenly all sorts of systems screamed out and the aircraft lurched to the right:



"*Oh, man, oh, this friggin' sucks! Oh sh--!*" The Fighter Pilot prayer was cut off as it left my lips as I gasped seeing that I was about to careen into a mountain because I was too busy looking down at my cockpit controls. I managed to pull up and out:





As per me and Phinin's plan, I was to make it look like I was going down and call for help as soon as I was clear of radar contacts to give the extraction team an easier time to pick me up after I give the code phrase. They'd better be there, and that satellite and Predator better be watching, I thought. I'd been shot down and captured once before, it was not something I was willing to repeat. Nor was the ejection.

A single SA-13 was on the display as I struggled to remain airborne. I couldn't ditch just yet with that contact on my EW. "Disappear!" I yelled at the contact, trying to will it away. "C'MON! GO!" I couldn't risk ditching my plane with hostiles nearby...I was supposed to be getting a dustoff, not getting captured. If I could shoo it away with my hand, I would, but it would require me to let go of the stick and I was having a hard enough time staying in the air. I tried to fly further and further away from the SA-13 but it was becoming horribly hard to keep the Super Hornet in the sky. What if I dove behind a mountain? I thought. I tried to lift my nose above a peak—man, it was hard...



...and then the nose dropped with the peak filling my view. “Ohhhhhh, crud.....!” I murmured, hoping that I had gained enough altitude to slide down the other side of the mountain, watching the rocks grow greater in detail as they got closer to my plane.

The Super Hornet limped over the peak and rode down the slope as I breathed yet another sigh of relief. The mountain behind me blocked the SA-13's view of me, and...

<plink>

The sound was probably made up in my head, but the SA-13 contact disappeared from the EW display, appearing to make that imaginary plinking sound as it did. I sighed deep and straightened out, switching my left MFD to the SMS display---it was becoming too painful to see how many systems were wrecked. To my surprise, the autopilot was still working. There were so many systems down I didn't notice that the autopilot was not included in the list until I flipped it on and the aircraft flew as straight and level as possible:



I tried to calm my head down enough to remember the proper code phrase I would speak on guard to let the spooks know I was ready to ditch and be picked up. It should be simpler than I thought now...there were no hostile contacts, there were Coalition aircraft nearby, including that tanker driver who should still be within radio earshot, and as an added bonus, my autopilot works!

As if to slap me upside the head for being too aloof, Betty ruined my day: “Engine fire...left,” she calmly and monotonously reported. If she were a real person I probably would have strangled her for making such calm light of the situation and adding insult to injury. An engine fire was \*NOT\* good, and especially in the situation I was in. I popped open the fire panel cover...



...hit the button, and discharged the extinguisher, putting out the fire:



Now I just had to hope the other engine didn't catch fire too because my extinguisher was now empty. The aircraft lurched at the loss of power and I struggled for control. I checked my map to be sure I was far enough into relative safety from the battle zone before punching out:



I switched my radar on and scanned the pre-determined area that Phinin and I discussed—there it was! I caught a blip on the screen that registered as friendly on the IFF. I dialed in the frequency and called in:

*“Panhead 11, Pluto 11 declaring an emergency. Am winchester with fuel state one point niner niner niner.”* Earlier on Phinin and I decided that this somewhat subtle yet way-too-accurate fuel state call would signal I was ready to ditch and be picked up. It wasn’t even my actual fuel state, and it didn’t matter. What mattered is that the spooks knew what they were listening for and heard and understood it. Anyone else listening in would probably think I was just being anal retentive.

High above in the E-3 Sentry, LCDR Phinin sat with the radio operators when he heard the call come in. *“That’s it,”* he called to the Covert Ops officers who were also tagging along on this flight. *“Code is received. Get a fix on that position.”* Phinin pointed at the blip on the screen.

One of the Covert Operators got on the horn and made a simple yet straightforward radio call on a separate band: *“Ruth 11, Mercy. I say again, Mercy, Mercy, Mercy!”*

*“Pluto 11, Panhead 11. Transmission received and understood.”*

*Phew.* Now all I had to do was prepare myself for the ejection, which under these *“controlled circumstances,”* should be relatively easy.

*“Roger, Panhead 11. I have a visual on you. My 12:00 high. Pluto 11 is awaiting vectors for—”*

BOOM!

The noise wasn’t deafening, but it was loud enough to startle me, and the aircraft lurched about, slamming my helmet into the side of the canopy. *“What the...?”*

I felt the heat rise in the cockpit and looked behind me. The right engine had burst into flames:



*"There's ALWAYS gotta be something!"* I spat out at myself.

*"Ruth 11, I'm on fire, I'm on fire!"* As the aircraft rocked back and forth, I could see the E-3 and her contrails ahead and above me. I couldn't believe this was happening so close to them!

-----

*"He's on fire, sir!"*

*"He's what?"* exclaimed Phinin, looking first at the screen, then rushing to the window and looking out as the Sentry circled around. In the distance he could see a speck in the air, flickering like a tiny star. *Geez, Bones,* thought Phinin. Either you're really on fire, or you're putting way too much into making this look real in which case you're friggin' nuts...

-----

*"Pluto 11 is on fire, I've got no extinguisher, I'm punching out!"* I yelled into the keyed mic, then yelled at myself, *"I can NOT believe this! I can NOT believe this!!!"*

I hastily secured as many loose articles as possible in the shortest amount of time possible, lowered my visor, assumed the proper ejection stance, and affording myself a last split second of terror, pulled the ejection handle.

The canopy blew off with a deafening noise as the wind rushed in at over 300 knots, pummeling me back into the seat. An instant later, the ejection seat rocket ignited and I felt the same sensation I tried to forget of the 12g jolt crushing my spine into the size and shape of a soda can, my diaphragm forced by the physics of the ejection upwards, involuntarily resulting in squeezing a scream out of my mouth and into my oxygen mask. The last thing I saw was the pyrotechnics in the cockpit begin to ignite as it fried the classified and critical systems in the cockpit which was getting smaller and smaller as the plane fell away—or I shot away above it—before my vision began to go dark:



A trail of flames, stretching back from the stricken aircraft like a comet's tail, snaked out underneath me as my ascent slowed and I began my plummet toward Earth:



The seat lurched back as the drogue chute deployed, and began to separate:





The lines on my parachute pulled taut as the seat left me, free falling to the desert below:



Exhausted, I hung limp in my lines, trying to stay conscious to prepare for a proper landing with minimal injury:





The ground loomed below me, and thankfully I could see I was landing in the sand rather than on the rocks. I started to get my knees bent to cushion the impact of landing...



...and touched down in a huff, immediately securing my lines and parachute canopy to keep from giving my position away. Luckily, the wind was calm so it was not too hard, and afterwards I drew my sidearm and stood still, listening for any movement:



There was nothing but silence.

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Later, aboard the USS Ronald Reagan, an exhausted pilot arrived at debriefing. She had just flown a nerve-wracking night strike mission and had sustained minor damage to her aircraft, but enough to make her return to the boat dicey and stressful trying to land on the carrier. Night traps under normal circumstances were one thing. Landing after hours of combat flying, battle damage, and fatigue on top of that made it exponentially worse. Plus, she was ordered to leave her Skipper behind and flew home solo in relative silence.

Creeper was in the debriefing room and met her on her way in. *"Welcome back, Spoon,"* he said.

*"Thanks, sir."*

*"You did good on your mission. You and Bones hit all of the targets, this is going to really help to bring the war to an end."*

*"Thanks. And Bones? Have you heard from him?"*

Creeper shook his head in disappointment as Spoon's eyes welled up in tears.

*"He was hit by a SAM on the egress, and was making his way out to sea when he caught fire. An AWACS had been monitoring him the whole time, and saw him eject. They sent helos to look for him, but so far, he hasn't been found."*

Spoon could hear the words Creeper was saying, but they sounded like a background echo to her as they slowly sunk into her head.

*"I'm sorry, but he's been listed as missing in action."*

### MISSION DEBRIEF

Mission Complete.

Satellite imagery shows the Snow Drift air tracking radar and the SA-11 command vehicle were destroyed, along with 3 of the 4 SA-11 launchers. Thanks in part to your efforts, those British Tornado fliers went in there and did serious damage. No bandits will be operating out of here again anytime soon. The RAF squadron CO sends his best and a bottle of 15 year old Scotch. Well done.

### FLIGHT SUMMARY

 boNes (Online)	 Reece 'Spoon' Thomton						
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### KILL SUMMARY

	3		0		0		5		0		0		0		0
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DEBRIEF

### A

 BONES (ONLINE)				
REECE 'SPOON'				

### KILLS

-  Aircraft
  -  3 x MIG-23 (Desert)
-  Ground Object
  -  1 x Snow Drift Radar
  -  2 x SA-11 TELAR
-  Moving Vehicle
-  Ships



FLIGHT KILLS



Published April 3, 2007

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