

Viewpoints

Reality of War

Tornado GR1 1,000lb GPB Low-Level Loft Delivery (17 Jan 1991)

'I Love Him and I Want His Babies'

An Airman's Perspective on the Reality of War

By Wing Commander Mike Toft

Introduction

Just before dawn on the 17th January 1991 the bombs were to rain across the Hardened Aircraft Shelter sites at both ends of the Iraqi airfield. Precision Bombing was not an option. Instead the four Tornado bombers were to attack the airfield at low level and when close enough, each aircraft would climb steeply to each throw eight 1,000 lb bombs at the target. After bomb release a 135-degree wingover would allow the aircrew to egress from the target toward friendly territory. Under the cover of darkness the risk to the aircrew would be minimised. That was the plan.

Tension amongst the aircrew had been rising steadily with the approach of the UN deadline for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait. The deadline had passed. On the way to the Ops building the bus was filled with the usual banter amongst the formation. It was expected that we were to fly yet another training mission around the Saudi Arabian desert. But on entering the flying clothing section we met Nick, from another formation, who said, 'We're going, we're bloody going!' Stunned silence. My pilot, Mark (Mr Pastry), and I just looked at each other. He had joined us from another squadron after my original pilot had stayed in Germany on compassionate grounds. I had been concerned to learn that Mark had not been allowed to fly on Exercise RED FLAG because he had too few hours on the Tornado. RED FLAG was the closest thing to war without getting shot at. By 17th January, we had flown together for about 10 weeks and over time had discussed all our options if we should ever go to war; what we would do if we were shot down etc. Our time had come.

The banter had ceased and we changed in to our flying clothing in silence, alone with our thoughts. My thoughts were with my wife and 2-year old daughter back home. She would

soon discover that war had broken out and her worrying would intensify. She was to have her own battles at home - this was no time to be 8 months pregnant! At least my daughter was too young to realise what was going on. Would I ever see our second child? And what about my parents? And what about...? And what about...? And then there was the fear of the unknown.

Soon we received an intelligence brief and received our 'target for the day'. The mission had been already been planned which was not helpful because I always wanted to be involved with the intricacies of the plan so that I knew every little detail. Instead we had to unravel the thoughts of those who had planned it. The plan included a long haul to the west twice using air-to-air refuelling before dropping into low level before the Iraq border. Once over enemy territory ('Sausage Side') the route zigzagged across the desert in order to keep the Iraqis guessing our intentions. The route home was effectively a straight line to the Saudi border before air-to-air refuelling once again. Due to the serviceability problems of the Tornado in Germany, we had always joked that the typical Tornado mission was planned as a four-ship, flown as a three-ship and come back as a two-ship. Hopefully that was not to be the case.

After a meticulous but nervous brief the time had come to walk to the jets. Booted and spurred and armed with a Walther PP and other accoutrements we 'stepped' at just the wrong time because returning to Ops were the crews who had just come back from the first wave of attacks on Iraq. The look on their faces said it all. But there was no turning back now. Surely the cover of darkness would keep us safe. However in a headquarters somewhere in the desert a shiny-panted-rubber-desk-blotter-jotter had got it wrong. There had been an error over Greenwich Mean Time and Local times because outside the sun peeked over the horizon. In an instant Operation Desert Storm had become Operation Certain Death. Bugger.

Out on the line the ground crew were as keen as mustard to know where we were going and how long we would be. These men were outstanding. They toiled for hours in the blazing heat to ensure that the jets were as ready for war as they could be. Notwithstanding that, almost immediately No. 2 had problems with their jet and had to run for the only spare aircraft. Next to us, No. 3 had also developed problems and their ground crew frantically tried to fix it. Jack was OK! Our jet (No. 4) was fine... until the last few minutes when it also developed fly-by-wire problems. The crew chief announced that No. 2's original jet was now fixed and so Mark and I made a run for it. We were not having a good time! Eventually the crew chief waved us off and it seemed like most of the detachment were out there wishing us well and waving us off. When take-off time came, No.3 was still unserviceable and was to miss out on 'the big push'. The proverbial four-ship had become three.

The route along 'the Olive Trail' with the Victor Tanker was uneventful. For a second time the Tornados topped up with fuel for the 80-minute flight over enemy territory. The jets were now very heavy; full of fuel and with eight 1,000 lb bombs slung underneath. After leaving the tanker it seemed that Mark asked me for the range to the border every 30 seconds. I shared

his concern. The brown line on the map marched down the display at 450 knots and we soon found ourselves 'Sausage Side'. Heartbeats became closer together, the adrenalin pumped, and the fear of the unknown was soon to become the fear of the known. Bugger. The further we flew the faster we could fly and eventually we sat at a comfortable 480 knots. Since crossing the border we had not been above 100 feet. Twice I looked at the Radar Altimeter and both times it read around 50 feet. The desert was as flat as a pancake but we still felt exposed and very vulnerable even at 50 feet. We pressed on.

On the way to the target we only saw two things of significance. First we passed an Early Warning radar site but that was a smoking hole thanks to a C-130 Gunship earlier on that day. Secondly, Mark asked me 'what the Hell is that on the nose?' 'I don't know but it's not military' was my reply. Ahead of us on the desert floor was a large black patch that looked like an oil slick. There was no time to go around it whatever it was. At 50 feet and eight miles a minute there was no time to make out that it was a large herd of goats. I'm sure it took the Bedouin hours to gather them together again.

Approaching the target the aircraft was still heavy and we needed more speed, at least another 70 knots, to be able to perform the dreaded daytime loft manoeuvre. To do so we needed to use afterburner which was a worry to both of us as it would provide an ideal target for any infra-red missiles out there. We made a wild-assed guess when it would be most appropriate, the reheat kicked in and we were soon at 550 knots for the pull-up. I took a quick squint on the radar and identified the aiming point. Now less than two minutes to the target all the switches were double and triple checked. This was definitely not the time to screw up. The seconds approaching the pull up point seemed to pass in double time and it was time to expose ourselves to the airfield defences. During the loft manoeuvre the seconds felt like minutes but eventually the bombs came off. Throughout the manoeuvre Mark and I were 'heads in', or on instruments, which may be just as well because I remember seeing black puffs of smoke in my peripheral vision. Perhaps it was best to pretend to be in the simulator! Chaff, Flare, Chaff, Chaff, Flare, Chaff, Flare. My life had become immersed in the small lights on the Electronic Warfare suite as they illuminated and distinguished. Eventually the nose came to the horizon and we could ease off the bank and start our descent to low level again. It may have been seconds or minutes when No. 2 piped up on the radio and the reality of war struck the whole formation - 'We've f**ked up and have still got our bombs'. 'Get rid of the bombs and let's get out of here', called the leader. Soon No. 2 called back, 'We're on fire, 'may have to get out'. Then silence. The leader tried to raise them a couple of times but to no avail.

With our payload gone we ran away bravely at 600 knots. The leader contacted the ever watchful AWACS to report the downed aircrew in a hope that the search and rescue boys may be able to pick them up. But that was unlikely as it was so early in the morning. They too preferred to operate in the relative safety of darkness. The Saudi border marched down the moving map display at ten miles per minute. Too slowly for our liking! Once over the border we could relax but not before climbing to height for another plug into the tanker which

had waited for us. The journey home was quiet. Apart from the routine system checks Mark and I hardly spoke as our thoughts were with the buddies that we had left in Iraq. Had they managed to eject, or had they gone down with the aircraft? There was no way of knowing. The relief to be safely on the ground again was overwhelming and we were so glad to get out of the cockpit in which we had spent 5 hours strapped to our 'bang-seats'. The ground crews had already been informed that No. 2 was not returning and they were in a sombre mood too. The four-ship had been flown as three-ship and had indeed returned as a pair. After time for contemplation at the aircraft we wandered over to the line hut to sign the jets back to the engineers. The engineers felt the mood we were in and quietly and sombrely went about their business. It was the Squadron Warrant Officer, Pip Curzon, who made all the difference that morning. 'Corporal,' he called out, 'chairs and tea for the Officers!' The reality of war had struck right at the heart of the Squadron.



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