

Chapter 15

1979: THREE LOSSES IN A YEAR

It was a new year with a new CO, Lieutenant Commander Errol Kavanagh, and an almost completely new line up of pilots. January 1979 saw the team complete a back-in-the-saddle (BITS) refresher before starting a squadron workup. The new guys had carrier qualified the previous year and all that was required was a renewal of skills. While January was a busy start to a busy year, within nine months the Skyhawk fleet was short three A-4Gs.

Oops!

In January, we began another BITS with two general flying practice sorties followed by a formation sortie over the first three days. The Senior Pilot (SP) must have been keen to get us back in the instrument flying practice (IFP) groove because we flew four IFP sorties over the next four days. We then moved to an air combat manoeuvre (ACM) phase which began with a tanker to practice the art of aerial refuelling. So, when the CO briefed our afternoon sortie, he swapped me into the tanker and the tanker pilot became his No 2. I was given a TACAN [tactical air navigation system] fix and he briefed a 'No Radio' rendezvous. This was quite prescient of him.

The weather was deteriorating as I started and taxied first. By the time I got to the end of the runway, it was raining quite hard and, as I pushed the throttle up, a fountain of water gushed out of the air conditioning vent.

My radio failed as the gear came up and I went on instruments at 400 feet. I changed frequencies and transmitted normally and just flew out to the TACAN fix. As I orbited there, I saw the two aircraft emerge from the clouds and close on me. As the Boss stabilised on me, I signalled 'no radio' and he responded with the signal to start the package, and then stream the drogue.



*Two VC724 A-4s practice air-to-air refuelling with a VF805 Skyhawk alongside.
(Peter Greenfield)*

The Boss slid behind me and I saw him take 500 pounds and then cross to my left wing. No 2 slid behind me and also took 500 lbs before he slid out and stabilised outside the Boss. I then descended towards the cloud tops and, when level, the two refuelling aircraft repeated the sequence. The Boss signalled to stow the drogue