



Yom Kippur Missions *Jim Shelton*



LTC Gary Coleman (my RSO) and I (LTC James Shelton) were in the Standardization Office at Beale AFB, CA (we were the senior crew) and received a phone call from Col. Pat Halloran (the wing commander) to come to his office. When we arrived there, he said we were selected for a very important mission. It was to take off from Beale AFB and fly through the Middle East and recover at Mildenhall AB, England for an 8 ½ hour mission. Our State Department needed to know how the Yom Kippur War was going. We could not move a Spy Satellite out of the Russian orbit to cover the War area, so the SR-71 got the call. The mission was to Aerial Refuel (A/R) locally, proceed to Nova Scotia for the second A/R, then proceed west of Portugal for the third A/R, then proceed through the Mediterranean abeam the island of Crete for the fourth A/R. We were to then turn right going south and follow the Nile River south of Cairo and make a 270 degree turn to the right around Cairo, crossing the Nile River again, creating a large X over the battle area and return to the Crete A/R

area, and finally land at Mildenhall. Gary and I then went to mission planning and studied the route of flight and emergency landing fields. I even went to the flight simulator to practice landing approaches into Mildenhall. We were told to go into crew rest and return for an 11:00 PM Mission Briefing. We returned for our briefing and received a weather and intelligence report. I remember the intel briefer advising us to not be surprised if the Egyptians or the Israelis shoot at us because our government had not told either country that we would be flying over their areas. At about the time to go get into our pressure suits for flight, the mission was cancelled, and we were told to go home and get back into crew rest.

The next day, I went into operations and found out the reason the mission was cancelled. It was that when Col. Halloran and the maintenance recovery team landed at Mildenhall AB, the British said “the SR-71 could not land there because they relied on Middle East Oil and that they wanted no part in helping us with the mission”. I was told that we would fly to Griffiss AFB, NY that evening and would fly our mission out of Griffiss and return to Griffiss. Now instead of an 8 ½ hour mission, it just increased to 11 hours and 20 minutes with 6 A/Rs. The reason Griffiss was selected as the base to fly from, was that the Test Force’s SR-71 was scheduled to fly out of Griffiss the next week to conduct low altitude electronic evaluation missions on some new equipment, so there was a tank car with our special JP-7 fuel on a siding on base and a Lockheed maintenance team from the Palmdale plant on the ground to support the test force mission.

Now the easiest changes for the mission planner to make were to have us fly subsonic from Griffiss to the Nova Scotia A/R and pick-up the original route. Then once we left the Crete A/R the second time, we would reverse our route back to the Portugal A/R, then to the Nova Scotia A/R and return to Griffiss subsonic.

Gary and I took off at 6:30 PM to fly to Griffiss from Beale AFB. Little did Gary and I know that the mission planner drew a straight line from the end of the local A/R area to the holding fix for Griffiss. Normally, the mission planners will avoid heavily populated towns and cities but not tonight. On route to the holding

fix, we flew south of Chicago and north of Indianapolis and I could see both cities as it was so clear. I told Gary that we must be creating a major sonic boom because the sky was so clear. Little known to us, the second aircraft that was to follow us by one hour, was stopped on the runway and given another route avoiding populated areas to fly to the Griffiss holding fix, because there had been so many phone calls complaining about sonic booms and broken windows. The Air Force said they would investigate, but the next morning a professor in one of the northern states said a meteor must have created the sonic booms because it covered such a large area. When this article came out in the local paper, the Air Force stopped investigating.

As I approached the runway at Griffiss, I turned on my landing light which shines down as we are landing with about 7 degrees nose up, and unless I have clouds or the runway just below me I cannot see if the landing light is on. Just as I started my flare for landing, I saw that the landing light was out, so I moved the switch to taxi light, which is not pointing down but straight ahead as the nose of the aircraft is on the pavement when taxiing. The Lockheed maintenance personnel parked us and helped us get out of the cockpit. Well, the Base Commander was there to meet us and he said, "SAC headquarters said there was a Highly Classified Mission coming and supply whatever they needed. He said the mission must be very secret because I did not turn my landing light on until I was over the runway". I did not want to burst his bubble, so I didn't tell him that the landing light was out. I told him that Col. Halloran and the maintenance team would arrive from England soon and that we need quarters and food for our team. Gary and I went into crew rest and prepared to fly in a day or two.

In the morning after landing, I went to the Flight Surgeon's office to get one sleeping tablet so I could make sure I got plenty of rest before the long flight. He was not going to give me the one sleep tablet I requested, so I told him to call the Flight Surgeon's office at Beale AFB as they will approve me getting a pill. He finally gave me the pill without calling. In our crew rest window, I took the pill and it must have worked well, as Gary said, "I knew my pilot was resting because the snoring woke me up!".

At the mission briefing, the weather man said "We would have weather in the Nova Scotia area, but after that the weather was good for the rest of the flight". We took off about 11:00 PM. This would put us over the target area between 11:00 and 12:00 so the photo interpreters could determine heights of objects by their shadows. The weatherman was correct about the weather in the A/R area. The visibility was very close to our limit of one mile to conduct A/R's (I don't know anyone that did not press ahead to the tanker). Once on the tanker boom, it was so turbulent that the Stick Shaker started activating and at that point I strangled the control stick to make sure I would not be bounced off the boom. The weather improved as I finished refueling and climbed through 45,000 feet on my way to the Portugal A/R. The mission was planned to cruise at Mach 3.00 to make sure we have fuel enough for the mission. I had already flown a 10 ½ hour training sortie at Mach 3.00 and I was beat when I got out of the aircraft because every time the Mach varied plus or minus by .02 Mach I would make a power adjustment. So on this flight I let the Mach vary by .05 Mach before I would make a power adjustment. I knew I had to pace myself.



Once I made contact with the tanker at the Portugal A/R, the tanker pilot said that the Air Controller for Portugal kept advising him that there was an aircraft in his vicinity and did he see it. Of course he said, "no contact". Once we completed our A/R, we headed for the Mediterranean, I got a little hungry - I had 2 tubes of apricot paste so I opened one. I forgot my science about pressure. The tube looks like a tube of tooth paste with a seal on the end. We are given a plastic tube (fits into the feed port in our helmet) that screws on to the tube and as you make the final turn connecting the tube, it breaks the seal and apricot begins to flow. As I said, "I forgot my science about pressures and altitudes". The tubes are manufactured at Sea Level, but

when we are flying at altitude, our cabin altitude is 26,000 feet, a considerable difference in pressure. Well, when I broke the seal on the food tube, I had apricot spraying out like crazy, so I stuck the plastic tube into a pocket in my pressure suit to catch it. I only lost about a quarter of the tube's contents.

When I made contact with the tanker at the Crete A/R, the tanker pilot said that "Air Traffic control at the base in Spain delayed his take-off 30 minutes, so when he arrived at the A/R point he only had time to make one orbit before I made contact". Had I been about 2 minutes early, I may have missed the refueling and would have had to land in Crete. The tankers are normally at the A/R point 30 minutes before the scheduled A/R time. We got our fuel and headed to the Nile River. Once we reached the river, we were at Mach 3.15, the Egyptian SAM sites started tracking us for a short distance. I also saw some aircraft condensation trails far below but lost them and the tracking just before it was time to make my 270 degree right turn around Cairo. When I straightened out the SAM site started tracking us again and as I headed N.E. I saw more contrails below me. I don't know if they were Egyptian or Israeli. Once I was out of the Israel area, we started down toward the Crete A/R. Our tankers had to go to an air base in Turkey to fill up with our JP-7 fuel, but they could not fly an operational mission there, they had to go to the base in Spain, refuel and then fly the operational mission from there.

From this Crete A/R, we flew back down the Mediterranean to the Portugal A/R and then on to the Nova Scotia A/R. From the first Nova Scotia A/R to this one our filed flight plan stated we were Visual Flight Rules on Top for almost 6 hours so no Air Traffic Control had any idea where we were going. At the 6th and final A/R at Nova Scotia, we went subsonic back to Griffiss AFB. The weather was clear at Griffiss so, I pushed the throttles up to military power (just before the After Burner range) to have the aircraft go Mach .98 to .99. This way, I would use more fuel as I did not need the fuel to proceed to an alternate base because of the clear weather. As I went from each Canadian Air Traffic center, the center would ask me what type aircraft we were. This call threw me, so I responded "As filed". Again, at the next control center they asked the same question and again I responded, "As filed". When I got back on the ground, during the mission debriefing, I asked the mission planner "what type aircraft did you file our flight as?" He said, "a KC-135". Now it was clear why the Canadian Air Controller wanted to know what type of aircraft we were, because a KC-135 is about a Mach .7 (7 or 8 miles a minute) aircraft and we were going Mach .98 (10 or 11 miles a minute).

Needless to say, Gary and I were tired when we landed but adrenalin kept us going during the mission and it took me a while to unwind before I could take a nap. Within four days, Admiral Moore (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) invited Gary and myself to the Pentagon to say, "Thank you for a job well done". We saw staffers carrying enlarged photos from our mission briefing to other staff agencies. They showed destroyed or damaged tanks, guns and other armament. The State Department wanted to see the destroyed equipment as the U.S. promised to replace all the destroyed equipment.

Gary and I received a Distinguish Flying Cross for this mission due to the importance of the photo intelligence received and we were named the 15th Air Force Reconnaissance Crew for 1973.

Photos, from top:

- LTC James Shelton in SR-71 pressure suit (Author's collection)
- Blackbird SR-71 Family (Lockheed-Martin)

This article originally appeared in the December 2020 edition of the E-Supercruiser (Vol. 20.8).

The Western Museum of Flight honors and champions the Aerospace Industry Heritage of Southern California and inspires, motivates, and educates the dreamers and creators of today and tomorrow.

Connect with us:



Donate

www.wmof.com

[YouTube](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Donate](#)