



An SR-71 flight in the 1973 Yom Kippur War

**by Col. Jim Wilson, USAF
(ret.)**

On Oct 6th 1973, the armies of Egypt and Syria opened an offensive against Israel on two fronts, launching a coordinated series of air, armored and artillery attacks across the Suez Canal into the Sinai and on the Golan Heights. The preemptive strike came as a result of a failure to resolve territorial disputes arising from the Arab-Israeli War of 1967.

These disputes involved the return of the Sinai to Egypt and the return of the Golan Heights to Syria. UN Resolution 242 and Egyptian President Sadat's peace initiative failed to bring peace. Sadat wanted to sign an agreement with Israel provided the Israelis returned all the occupied territories, but Israel refused to withdraw to the pre-1967 armistice lines. Since no diplomatic progress was being made toward peace, Sadat was convinced that to change things and gain legitimacy at home, he must initiate a war with limited objectives.

Along the Suez Canal, 80,000 well-equipped members of the Egyptian army who had crossed the Suez on rapidly constructed pontoon bridges attacked fewer than 500 Israeli defenders. In the Golan Heights approximately 180 Israeli tanks faced an onslaught of 1,400 Syrian tanks. Initial Israeli military losses were significant and assistance was requested from the USA.

National reconnaissance satellites did not have the capability at the time to provide the intelligence that was needed to sufficiently assess the situation. The 9th SRW at Beale AFB, CA was alerted to prepare to fly SR-71 missions from Beale AFB, over the area of conflict and recover at Royal Air Force Base Mildenhall, England, a mission within the design capability of the aircraft, although a long and logistically difficult mission never accomplished before in an operational environment.

Within the first few days of the conflict the supporting Arab nations initiated an oil embargo, making oil a weapon of war and contributing to a decision by the British government to deny approval to use Mildenhall as a recovery base.

Plan B was rapidly drawn up to fly the SR-71 out of Griffiss AFB New York, through the area of conflict and recover back at Griffiss. These never before accomplished 12,000 mile missions would require five air to air refuelings, the deployment of sixteen KC-135Q supporting tankers with special JP-7 fuel to Spain and a specialized maintenance, intelligence and operational support planning staff to Griffiss. The 9th SRW was well prepared and in utmost secrecy the forces were mobilized and deployed. The first mission was successfully completed on Oct 13th.

I was a fairly young pilot in the squadron at the time, with only one operational tour and about 120 hours of SR-71 time under my belt. On Oct 20th I was assigned to fly a backup SR-71 from Beale to Griffiss and to stay at Griffiss in an alert posture, prepared to fly follow-on missions. We flew successful missions on Oct 25th and Nov 2 where I served as backup pilot. My turn as primary came up on Nov 11th. The excitement level was high, as I certainly wanted to be part of the Air Force and the Wing success in completing the mission as tasked.

Takeoff was at 2AM on a brisk and clear autumn night with about fifteen inches of snow already on the ground. It was peacefully calm---until I lit each of the 34,000 lb thrust afterburners. The first 450 miles had to be flown subsonic at .9 Mach, since we had to clear the commercial aircraft flight tracks out of Boston and New York to Europe before we could safely conduct air-refueling operations. Radio silent electronic rendezvous with three tankers, 250 miles out over the North Atlantic at 3AM went well, as did the 70,000 lb (10,600 gallons) fuel offload.

You don't know the true meaning of dark until you've been in a situation like this. We likened it to refueling in an inkwell. After completing a few post refueling checks, I lit the afterburners and started my acceleration to a leisurely Mach 3 cruise across the Atlantic. The airplane performed flawlessly, thanks to the extra special effort by the maintenance guys. About 2000 miles across the Atlantic on an easterly heading I watched with excitement as the sun peeked over the horizon and came up right in my face, in about a minute and a half, a nice vantage point for viewing this daily event.

The second refueling was conducted in daylight, a couple hundred miles north of the Azores. This was another 70,000 lb offload, 35,000 lbs from each of two tankers while the airborne spare tanker was not needed. I started my second acceleration and headed for the straits of Gibraltar. Cruising through the center of the narrow straits at 80,000 feet with clear weather 100 miles on both sides providing quite a spectacular view.

As we proceeded down the Mediterranean toward the mid-east the weather grew gradually worse, as forecast. The third air refueling south of Crete, although in poor weather, went as

scheduled. After packing in a full load of 80,000 lbs of JP-7 fuel, I lit the afterburners and started the acceleration toward the target area.

At .98 Mach, just prior to going supersonic... maximum fuel flow in full afterburner, a red engine oil quantity low light illuminated steady on my emergency warning annunciator panel. I stared at it in almost disbelief, while scanning engine instruments, oil pressure, rpm, exhaust gas temperature, nozzle position for other indications of trouble. Although there were no confirming indications of problems, I couldn't just ignore the situation and continue on into the target area with the possibility of an engine failure at supersonic speed over the Sinai. We had no viable emergency airfields and I did not want to be a no-notice, no-flight plan, single engine emergency arrival at David Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv, especially since the Israeli government had not been informed in advance about the missions and they were in a battle for their own survival. I took the engines out of afterburner to assess the situation and think about the best course of action.

To my pleasant surprise, a few seconds after coming out of afterburner the red emergency warning light went out. I was by now fairly well convinced that it was a false momentary indication, but it had cost me 2500 lbs of critically needed fuel. My tankers were now 80 miles behind me heading further away. Getting rejoined to top off with fuel would present a new set of problems. I decided to light the burners and press on. Except for a 5 second flash during acceleration I never saw the light again.

My flight track went down the Suez canal past Cairo before making a left turn at Mach 3.15 to the north across the battle lines in the Sinai. I continued on a northerly course across the Dead Sea and over the center of the Golan Heights with the panoramic and point cameras providing imagery of hundreds of targets on both sides of the aircraft. Approaching the Lebanon border I made a sweeping right turn out over Syria and then back into the Sinai on a parallel flight path for maximum coverage. The airplane was running well and I pushed it up a bit to Mach 3.2 before exiting the area near Port Said.

Once out over the Mediterranean I started a descent to 25,000 feet for my fourth refueling. As fate would have it, not only was I low on fuel because of my previous oil low warning problem, but also a thunderstorm had moved in over the scheduled air refueling contact point. My Reconnaissance Systems Officer (RSO) using electronic azimuth and distance measuring equipment got me to within less than a mile behind my tanker, but the visibility was so poor that I couldn't see the tanker. We continued 20 miles down track in lousy weather with only one half-mile and 1000 feet separation before a small break in the clouds permitted hookup. When we made contact and started transferring fuel I had less than 15 minutes of fuel remaining and was 75 miles from the closest straight in emergency-landing runway on Crete.

Needless to say I was very thankful to my tanker buddies, RSO, and good equipment for that rendezvous. It gives new meaning to finding a "gas station" when you really need one.

We completed a fifth 70,000lb air refueling near the Azores before the leisurely Mach 3 flight across the mid Atlantic with a landing at Seymour Johnson AFB North Carolina. We were met by 9th SRW download crews who had the photo and electronic intelligence equipment downloaded and on a dedicated AF courier flight to Washington DC and the National Photo Interpretation Center within twenty minutes. The flight covered 12,181 miles in 10 hours 49 minutes and included 6 hours 41 minutes of supersonic time and 5 air refuelings. After landing, I remember wondering what Charles Lindberg would have thought about the advancement of aviation technology in less than 50 years. The 9th SRW was tasked to fly nine missions of this type and completed them all successfully.

The missions were not declassified until the early 1990's when the SR-71 program was closed as a result of the end of the Cold War. The airplanes are all in museums now, with tail number 964, the one I flew that day, as the centerpiece at the Strategic Air and Space museum near Omaha, Nebraska.

(This article originally appeared in the McClellan Aviation Museum Foundations newsletter 'CONTACT' and appears again here with permission of Colonel Jim Wilson, USAF (retired), former Blackbird pilot and now a member of the Board of Directors of that Museum. The photograph of his aircraft appears courtesy of Lockheed-Martin Aircraft).