



Fightin' Tired

By Capt Daniel Diehl, Ellsworth AFB, S.D.

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Being deployed to a beautiful tropical island in support of Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM might not seem like a hardship TDY, but when you are flying every third day with an average sortie duration of 15-17 hours, you don't get much time to hang out on the beach. In fact, US Air Forces, US Central Command (CENTAF) had lengthened the maximum amount of flying hours a crew could fly, and many deployed crewmembers were rapidly approaching the expanded limit. The lengthy missions also changed crewmembers' sleep schedules by about 12 hours for each flight, and fatigue was becoming a huge factor. Here is my story of one such fatiguing mission.

I had recently returned from a month at the Combined Air Op-

erations Center (CAOC) as the B-1 Liaison Officer (LNO) and was entering the flying schedule well rested. The other three members of my crew had not had that luxury. Sitting in the mission brief that evening, we were all expecting the standard 15-17 hour mission: fly to Afghanistan, orbit for a couple hours (maybe do a show of force or act as a communication relay), and fly back to the deployed location.

Because of the strenuous mission requirements, the Air Force has provided for our safety thru AFIs, regulations, and flight restrictions to include "go-pills." These amphetamines, issued through flight medicine, help crewmembers remain alert when there is no opportunity for sleep. Earlier in the year I had flown several 12-

hour combat missions in the skies over Iraq and found that I didn't need the "go pills." This was reinforced during the first couple sorties on this particular deployment; therefore, I never went to the flight doc for my issue of pills. This night proved me wrong.

After takeoff and the first air refueling, the crew settled in for the standard long flight into country. Things went "normal" for the first 4.5 hours and then it began to get interesting. There was a Troops in Contact (TIC) situation developing and the CAOC wanted us to respond to the area as soon as possible. The CAOC asked how quickly we could make it into country and if fuel was an issue. Fuel wasn't a problem, so like any self-respecting pilot in this situation, I pushed the throttles up and sat back to

see what the engines would give us.

We arrived over the TIC almost an hour earlier than our tasked vulnerability period and acquired the ground troops visually. After being on station for approximately 30 minutes,

Be prepared, check out the "go pills" from the flight surgeon ...

other Air Force assets arrived on scene and we climbed to a higher altitude for better fuel consumption. Pushing up the throttles to get into country early burned all the extra fuel we needed to make our second scheduled air refueling, so the CAOC diverted us south toward a different tanker. After turning south, the CAOC informed us that if we could turn towards the northern part of the country, a tanker would be available sooner. If we were unable to refuel for any reason with the northern tanker, we would be forced to divert into Afghanistan. Diverting was not a good option for the B-1, but the CAOC assumed the risk and turned us towards the northern tanker.

The fuel we received from the northern tanker allowed us to make our second (now third) tanker refueling scheduled midway through our vulnerability window. The third tanker topped off our tanks, and during the refueling, we were directed to proceed to eastern Afghanistan and report to an Other Governmental Agency (OGA) asset. After

contact, we received seven targets and coordinated for a combined attack with a number of other airframes including A-10s and AC-130s.

As the first striker over target, we became the de-facto package commander and assumed package commander responsibilities including timing and fire deconfliction between the CAOC, OGA, and the members of the strike package. During this process, we added two more refueling missions to extend our aircraft's loiter time over the target. When the mission was completed, we had provided nearly 11 hours of coverage over Afghanistan and logged a flight time of 21.7 hours, the longest B-1 combat mission ever, utilizing six tankers and logging 2 hours of total time on the refueling boom.

As we stepped to the jet that day, we had no idea that the sortie would last 5 hours longer than the normal mission. My biggest lesson learned during this marathon flight was the need to be prepared for anything. I was the only member of the flight who did not sign out "go-pills" and approximately three quarters of the way through the vulnerability period was so sleep deprived that I turned to the aircraft com-

mander and asked him to fly for the next 30 minutes. I awoke 45 minutes later and was brought up to speed by the crew on what was going on. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that losing one person on a four-man crew detracts substantially from mission effectiveness.

B-1s have flown many longer flights, including ferry flights and global power missions. Those flights and combat missions have one major difference: there is no time to plan naps during a vulnerability period when the crew is receiving and prosecuting targets.

The other lesson I learned is that "go-pills" take about an hour to kick in. If you wait to take them until you actually need them, it's too late. It's better to have the "go-pills" and not need them than to have your combat mission extended by 5 hours and need them over Afghanistan.

Fatigue is a potential killer. In my case, there was another pilot who had taken the proper precautions, allowing me to "check out of the crew" for a few minutes. For many out there, this is not an option. So to be prepared, my recommendation is check out the "go-pills" from the flight surgeon. It doesn't hurt to have them, and you may even need them. 🐦

