

VA 115 in MIDLINK EXERCISE – NOVEMBER 1977

USS MIDWAY made an Indian Ocean deployment in the Fall of 1977. We departed Yokosuka in September, hit Cubi on the way, and went straight down to Perth, Australia. After a wonderful port visit of about five days in late October, we headed straight for Diego Garcia, the first look for many of us at that “interesting” base in the middle of the IO.

We proceeded via a port visit in Karachi (‘nuff said) and on into the Gulf of Oman. Exercise MIDLINK was in the middle of November. It involved our battle group, US Air Force units stationed throughout Iran, and Iranian forces. Remember the Shah was still in power, and they bought a pretty good array of US defense weapons, including the F-14.

One very early morning of the exercise XO, CDR Tim Thomassy, his B/N, LT Rookie Word, and LTJG Bob Taylor and I (then a B/N) flew a night low level into Iran. We launched at about 0500. When we got to the flight deck it was very dark, as always, and raining sideways. As we pre-flighted the aircraft, it turned to hail. It was the only time I can remember unpinning my ejection seat with the canopy closed, because the hail was whipping so hard. Tails had a hail stone that looked like a quarter in his hand when I got in.

The Air Boss was then CDR Daryl Kerr, who had commanded VA 52, and would go on to command the RAG, VA 128. I distinctly remember his call to the troops on the flight deck over the 5MC in the middle of the storm, “That’s right folks, these two A-6’s ARE going to launch.”

We launched from about the middle of the Gulf of Oman and proceeded to our coast-in point, near Jask, on the southern coast near the entrance to the Straits of Hormuz. We were individuals by that point, per normal, and proceeded on the low level route that took us north of Bandar Abbas and out to the northwest. The valleys all point WNW to NW, in other words just right for hiding in the valleys enroute to the target.

We ingressed to a constructive target in one of those valleys. We prosecuted it and turned for home. XO and Rookie had another mission, however. Rookie and a henchman (who shall remain nameless, but Rookie roomed with Russ “Grover” Palsgrove) had spent the previous afternoon making up hundreds of half page leaflets that were jammed into a large burn bag. XO and Rookie flew on to SHIRAZ AFB, where the USAF was based. In Tim Thomassy’s words: “We turned the radio to approach control frequency and listened to the chatter, which, being an Air Force operation, was quite extensive. After hearing some call signs and side number, Rookie went into one of his world-class dialect impersonations (he loved to imitate voices and foreign dialects). This time it was as the reddest of southern rednecks. He called approach control with a superb Jeff Foxworthy imitation, got us picked up and controlled all the way to low pass and wave off. As we approached the threshold I opened the canopy as he opened the bag ... then so to speak, the paper hit the fan. It was like flying in a blizzard - paper flying everywhere! Fortunately most of the leaflets (but not all) left the airplane. We immediately stopped communications and started a max range climb, because fuel was a mission concern from the beginning.” The leaflets they carried, which ended up “snowing” on the runway, read something to the effect, “You have just been struck by the World Famous Eagles of Attack Squadron ONE ONE FIVE.”

I don’t know how they had enough fuel to do it, as we were pretty much bingo ourselves, and they had gone on a good deal farther than we. At any rate, we both recovered in time for breakfast.

Later that day the XO got an "invitation to visit" with the Flag and a couple members of his staff. Tim Thomassy again, "The Admiral (Paul Peck I believe) showed no emotion through most of our discussion, but I could tell he was not entirely happy, especially when I confirmed with him that no one but I had authorized our extracurricular visit to Shiraz AFB. As I was about to leave, the Admiral informed me that the Air Force was really angry and had shutdown the exercise because their runway and flight line were badly FOD'd. As I was being dismissed the Admiral, with a smile, made comment that we had "won the war." He rolled his eyes, shook his head, and pointed at the door. I never heard another word about it that I can remember except for a quick "dumb ass" comment from CAG.

"I heard years later that the Admiral took a lot of flack from his bosses for our simulated and unauthorized rock-eye attack and what we did to the Air Force. Admiral Peck was a well recognized operator and gentleman, who in retrospect I realize could have had my butt ... but he took the heat and protected me."

In my observation of my favorite Skipper, Tim Thomassy, he was THE BEST at getting forgiveness, having not asked for permission.

I was the squadron, and air wing mining officer. I think it was the last day of the exercise when we executed a mining mission just off Bandar Abbas, simulating (with MK76's in the water) shutting down the port. MIDWAY then anchored off Bandar Abbas so our guys could go ashore for the after action conference. (LT Roger Burbrink came back from the conference – and lunch – and was sick for a few days.)

As an epilogue, MIDWAY was again on a normal rotation in to the Indian Ocean in 1979. We sped to the Gulf of Oman in November, two years later, almost to the day, than that MIDLINK Exercise, when the American hostages were taken in Tehran. We stayed until January 1980, beginning over a decade of almost constant American carrier presence on GONZO Station off Oman.