

Behind the Scenes: The Making of an A-10C Pilot "First Refueling"

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5/12/2010 - **DAVIS-MONTHAN AIR FORCE BASE, Ariz.** -- *(Editor's note: Curious about what it takes to become an A-10 pilot? Follow along as this series showcases 1st Lt. Daniel Griffin's journey to becoming a fully qualified A-10C attack pilot.)*

In the days leading up to his first airborne refueling mission, 1st Lt. Dan Griffin said he felt excited ... yet a little nervous.

A month after flying the A-10C for his first time, the lieutenant, a student in the 358th Fighter Squadron's A-10C Pilot Initial Qualification Course, was about to accomplish an aviation feat.

During the afternoon of April 27, at 18,000 feet above Southern Arizona's desert landscape, he needed to connect the topside of his A-10C's nose to a KC-135 via a boom and receptacle system and take on 2,000 pounds of gas in a matter of moments.

Sound like a challenge?

From talking more with Capt. Jason Bartels, 358th Fighter Squadron instructor pilot and Lieutenant Griffin's assigned IP, I learned just how intense this task can be.

He explained that refueling is equivalent to driving down the road, next to another car, with both windows rolled down. The person in the passing lane is staring at that (other) car without looking down the highway and maintaining his lane -- and then passing objects between the two cars while traveling down the road at 70 mph.

Refueling is essential to the A-10's wartime mission. It is a force enabler, which allows the "mighty Hog" to stay aloft in an over-watch position almost indefinitely, protecting U.S. and Coalition servicemembers.

Upon graduation, the pilots will be ready to support the wartime mission, which can require multiple refuelings over the course of an eight-hour mission.

Prior to this flight, Lieutenant Griffin practiced in a simulator, attended academic sessions, studied pictures showing what refueling should look like and learned all he could from the experienced pilots in his squadron.



1st Lt. Dan Griffin, a pilot assigned to the 358th Fighter Squadron, readies his A-10C beneath the boom of a KC-135 to receive 2,000 pounds of fuel during an aerial refueling mission in the Tombstone Military Operating Area in Southern Arizona April 27. Lieutenant Griffin is a student in the A-10C Pilot Initial Qualification course and was one of six pilots from his squadron to refuel for the first time. Upon completion of the course in August he will become a fully qualified A-10C attack pilot. (U.S. Air Force photo/Airman Jerilyn Quintanilla)



1st Lt. Dan Griffin is a student in the A-10C Pilot Initial Qualification course, upon completion of this course he will be a fully qualified A-10C pilot. (U.S. Air Force photo/Airman Jerilyn Quintanilla)

He mentioned to me that he was most nervous about not being able to connect with the tanker and encountering trouble flying smoothly up to the connection point from the astern position.

Given what he was about to go do for the first time, I thought it seemed like a reasonable concern.

It also seemed like a great story to cover for this series. Curious to see how he'd perform and eager to learn more about the Air Force's refueling mission, Airman First Class Kristiana McDonough, a broadcaster, Airman Jerilyn Quintanilla, a photographer, and I flew aboard the KC-135 that day.

For several hours, we positioned ourselves in the rear of the tanker next to the boom operator, Staff Sgt. Ben Tressler, and peered outside the small window as students and instructor pilots flew up to the boom.

While approaching the boom, the students used visual references to position their aircraft and they also received guidance from both Sergeant Tressler and their instructor pilot via radio.

It certainly looked intimidating, but also thrilling at the same time.

When it was Lieutenant Griffin's turn, I put the headset on so I could listen to the whole process.

He checked in with Sergeant Tressler when he was 50 feet away from the boom and again when he was under the boom.

Up until this point, all of our interviews occurred in his squadron. For a brief moment, as I watched him, I felt like I had a better understanding and appreciation of his "office " and mission.

I've picked up enough about his body language to know when he's focused on something. I saw it April 16 as he prepared to take off for his first graded instrument check ride.

As I watched him fly, several feet away from me, his focus was evident. I could also hear it. His breaths were quick and heavy, so to speak, - a contrast to how relaxed the more seasoned pilots sounded on the radio.

Again, given what he was doing, who could blame him for being a little nervous?

Then, with sudden confidence, he connected to the boom, held on for two minutes, took on the fuel and repeated it once more.

I heard Sergeant Tressler comment, "Perfect." I was a bit awestruck -- and very proud.

Lieutenant Griffin told me that when he was under the boom it was really exciting and that, when he finally connected, it was easier than he thought it would be; once the boom connects, it kind of holds on to the A-10 a little bit.

At the end of the flight, I asked Sergeant Tressler if he could tell that he'd been refueling pilots who had never done this before. A bit surprised to learn this, he said they did well and that the opportunity to work with the new guys doesn't happen that often. He also said he could relate to how the pilots must have felt - he was scared the first time he refueled another aircraft.

From my perspective at least, all parties involved definitely demonstrated precision and skill that afternoon.

Next up for Lieutenant Griffin? In a few days, he'll fly north to the Barry M. Goldwater Range to fire the A-10's 30 mm Gatling gun for the first time.

Most of us will only see the jets fly overhead, taxi down the runway or take off. This series, through stories, photographs and videos, will go behind-the-scenes into Lieutenant Griffin's life as he becomes one of the Air Force's next A-10C pilots. The photos and video from this mission, along with the rest of the series, can be found on www.dm.af.mil.