

THE MIGHTY WAR WAGON

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An F-16 Fighting Falcon is refueled by a KC-135 Stratotanker during a cross-country flight. The KC-135 also provides aerial refueling support to Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps and allied nation aircraft.

About 20,000 feet above Valdosta, Ga., Capt. Matthew Swee and Master Sgt. Nancy Primm complete their checklists to prepare their tanker to link up with six A-10 Thunderbolt IIs for a training refueling mission.

KC-135 Stratotankers like the one flown by the 6th Mobility Wing crew from MacDill Air Force Base, Fla., will eventually be replaced by the KC-46A Pegasus. But the 50-year-old airplane the old Strategic Airlift Command alert crews nicknamed "The Mighty War Wagon" still has some years ahead of it and planes to fuel.

"I think the latest generation of tanker crews have kind of lost that concept of 'The War Wagon,' because the majority of crew members never sat on alert for SAC. The majority of those boom operators have retired, so the concept of 'The War Wagon' and what it was designed to do has been kind of lost over the years," said Master Sgt. Ernest Burns, the superintendent of a 418th Flight Test Squadron detachment that is testing the KC-46 in Seattle.

Early in his career, Burns was a boom operator with many of the SAC alert crewmembers who came up with the nickname because of the KC-135's original mission.

“The nickname stems from what the KC-135 was designed to do. It was designed to re-fuel a SAC bomber, specifically the B-52 (Stratofortress), to go to war. So that was where ‘The War Wagon’ came from, it was designed to go to war, to re-fuel the B-52.”



Tech. Sgt. Stephen Shin inspects KC-135 Stratotanker nose gear doors before taking off a training mission. Shin is a crew chief with the 927th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron at MacDill Air Force Base, Fla.

The KC-135 has been at the core of the Air Force’s aerial refueling mission for more than five decades. The first one flew in 1956, and the Air Force received the latest models nine years later. In the past 13 years, the tankers flew 33,500 sorties and refueled more than 135,000 aircraft with more than 12 billion gallons of fuel, according to Air Force statistics. In addition to refueling, KC-135s have also been used in command post and reconnaissance missions. Life-cycle upgrades, including communications, auto-pilot and surveillance equipment, to the KC-135R/T models expanded their capabilities and made them more reliable.

In 1993, MacDill AFB lost its flying mission when the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission moved the F-16 Fighting Falcon mission to Luke Air Force Base, Ariz. But it began to change with the arrival of the 6th Air Base Wing a year later, followed by the refueling mission in 1996, said 6th Air Mobility Wing historian William R. Polson.

“MacDill was chosen as the site for the KC-135 air refueling mission, in part, because tankers flew fewer flights than the fighters and were less noisy, the tankers were more compatible with the aircraft of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the

tankers were compatible with the predominant types of aircraft using the nearby busy airports in Tampa and St. Petersburg," Polson said.

The 1995 BRAC sent the Malmstrom Air Force Base, Mont., refueling mission with 12 KC-135s to MacDill AFB, and the 6th ABW became the 6th Air Refueling Wing, Polson said. In 2005, the Defense Department's streamlining effort moved four more KC-135s from Grand Forks Air Force Base, N.D., to MacDill AFB. The base's active-duty and Reserve KC-135 crews continue to support aircraft in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility with about 1 million pounds of fuel daily, Polson said.



Senior Airman Rowdy Moore washes a KC-135 Stratotanker. Moore is assigned to 6th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron at MacDill Air Force Base, Fla.

Before Swee, Primm and the rest of their crew took off to meet the A-10s from Moody Air Force Base, Ga., Staff Sgt. Estefano Estrada, Airman 1st Class James Wild-Garcia and other 6th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron members prepared the KC-135 for the mission. As they drew near to the area where they would link, Primm began talking to the pilots and observing how they were flying their aircraft. Handling multiple planes requires the boom operator to become somewhat of a conductor, said Primm, a 91st Air Refueling Squadron boom operator and 6th Operations Support Squadron combat support flight superintendent.

"Aerial refueling is an aerial ballet," said Primm. "It also takes on the aspect of the boom operator becoming something of a conductor, in that I'm telling this musician that his piece is coming up, and this is how I want you to play it. Once this person has played his piece of

music, I'm going to direct him over here, and I'm going to direct you. So I become somewhat of a musical conductor."

Even as the two planes draw near at 232 mph, Primm keeps her conversation to her pilot at a minimum, maybe telling him over her radio, "He is flying a little low," or "He is flying a little to the right." She learned the lesson of both minimal words and a moderate tone from an experienced pilot during boom operator training at Altus Air Force Base, Okla. "I try not to be a chatty Cathy because after a certain point, they're going to start to tune me out, not because they want to, but because their brains can only handle so much," she said. "So if I keep my updates to a minimum, then when I do start talking, they're going to be listening to what I have to say."

When the planes are linked for refueling, Primm is sometimes close enough to read the pilot's name tag, she said.



The boom of KC-135 Stratotanker is connected to an A-10 Thunderbolt II during an aerial refueling mission. Once connected, fuel is transferred from the KC-135 to the A-10.

Once the KC-135 disconnects from aircraft it refueled, there isn't a lot of emotion, whether they just completed a training mission or have given gas to a fighter aircraft in a war zone. All attention is still on the plane, and on the checklists that help make each mission successful and safe.

"Traditionally, we do this a lot, so it's pretty routine for us because we train every day," said Swee, a 6th OSS instructor pilot. "In terms of thoughts, what you're doing is making sure all your safety checklists are complete, that you're thinking ahead of the airplane, what the

weather is down-track and trying to anticipate any issues that might come up while you have airplanes roughly 10 to 12 feet apart like we do.

“As you’re flying through the air, a lot of times you have to overcome turbulence that’s associated with flight, and you have additional air dynamics created from two airplanes interacting with each other,” he said. So, emotions don’t really come into play. There are plenty of things in terms of checklists and safety checks, and basic air traffic control that keep you busy.”

Burns is working on the developmental test for the KC-46A with Boeing and the 418th FTS detachment in Seattle. The new tanker’s first flight is scheduled for this summer in Washington, but Burns believes the KC-135 will be around for a few more decades.

“If you think about it, that airplane first flew 50 years after the Wright Brothers,” Burns said. “It’s really amazing how technology kind of went from the Wright Brothers to the KC-135 in just those 50 years. The first KC-135s rolled off the assembly line in 1955, and the last one was made in 1964, and they’re still around, very capable and reliable.”



From a pod in the rear of a KC-135 Stratotanker, Master Sgt. Nancy Primm connects a refueling boom and transfers fuel to an A-10 thunderbolt II during a training mission over Valdosta, Ga. Primm is a boom operator with the 6th Mobility Wing at MacDill Air Force Base, Fla.