

## Maybe I Will Pass on That Coffee

Stuck in an F-16 with no bathroom in sight

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“Never pass up a cup of coffee or a bathroom” is an old adage among military aviators. I learned the second part the hard way one day when a dead battery on an F-16 and too much fuel on a KC-135 conspired against me.

In 1986, as a U.S. Air Force captain, I transferred to the F-16 Combined Test Force at Edwards Air Force Base, California, to serve as a backseat flight test engineer. Although flying in an F-16 was exhilarating, the available modes of relief, affectionately called “piddle packs,” were not designed for women’s plumbing. Our F-16 flights usually lasted only a little more than an hour, however, so inflight relief usually wasn’t an issue.

One spring day I was scheduled to fly a late-afternoon test mission. It was a typical day for flying at Edwards—unlimited ceilings and visibilities—and the mission looked like fun, with a flight that included low-altitude maneuvering and simulated bombing runs. Just as we were ready to start the engine, my perfect flight began to unravel: The crew chief informed us that the airplane’s battery was dead. We could have used a ground cart to start the engine, but the

crew chief begged us to let him change the battery so he wouldn't have to do it after we returned. Sympathetic, we relaxed in our seats while the crew fiddled.

About 15 minutes into the battery change, some light pangs told me that perhaps I should start thinking about finding a restroom. The closest facility was 200 yards away, and to get to it I would have to unstrap from the jet, have the crew chief push the ladder back to the cockpit, take off my G-suit and harness, relieve myself, and then perform all the steps in reverse. As I debated what to do, the crew chief declared that the new battery was ready to go.

We took off, and as I concentrated on the test, I largely forgot my predicament. Finally, a little more than an hour after takeoff, we had nearly reached our "bingo" fuel—the amount that reminded us to return to the traffic pattern. I began to relax, figuring we would land within 15 or 20 minutes.

Our radio suddenly crackled and a KC-135 pilot broadcast, "Hey, we're sitting up here in the refueling track and we had a mission cancel, so we've got an extra 10,000 pounds of gas. Anyone want it?"

Before I could say anything, the pilot, obviously forgetting that our crew chief longed to go home, jumped on the radio: "Yes, we'll take some!"

"Nooooo...," I wanted to shout as we zoomed up to rendezvous with the tanker. My overactive imagination held me back. "I had a chance to get some gas," I could hear the pilot saying as he jerked his thumb toward me, "but the chick had to pee!"

Soon we had enough fuel to fly for at least another hour. Since we had completed our exercise, I encouraged the pilot to perform maneuvers that burned fuel more quickly. After several loops and other aerobatics, I suggested we fly low-level, another fuel-slurping tactic.

My strategy worked, and about 45 minutes after refueling we retreated to the base. As soon as the pilot shut down the engine and popped open the canopy, I told him, in what I hoped was a perfectly calm voice, that I would meet him in the debriefing. The crew chief, obviously eager to get rid of us, was already moving the ladder to the airplane. After leaping from the cockpit, I strode across the ramp as fast as I could, shedding gear en route, so by the time I arrived at the restroom all I had to do was stumble inside and finally...relief.

Eight years later, I had my commercial pilot's license and instructor rating, and was helping a friend fly a Cessna 172 from Florida to Maryland when I realized I had had a little too much coffee at breakfast. A few minutes later, without a trace of embarrassment, I called air traffic control and told them I was diverting to the nearest airport.