

Disclaimer: This is a widely circulated and copied "sea story" from unknown and unsubstantiated sources. The author is unknown. Therefore we do not pretend that it is a true event. Although the pilot's name is real, we have had no contact with him. So, given that, it is an interesting story and well written. Enjoy it as that, a good sea story.

Following the story are some comments by Ret. CDR Gary Albert, a former A-3 Skywarrior pilot.

The Russian "Trawlers" (Russian AGI) with what looked like one thousand "fishing" antennas plied the Gulf of Tonkin on a daily basis...needless to say, it was a cat and mouse game to see what havoc they could expend towards our two carriers operating there twenty-four hours a day.



Since the U.S. government had proclaimed the waters of the Gulf of Tonkin three miles off the coast of North Vietnam and Hinan Island, People's Republic of China, to be international waters, American ships in the Gulf were bound to obey the international rules of the road for ocean navigation. This meant that if the Russian ship maneuvered herself into the path of an aircraft carrier where she had the right of way, the carrier had to give way even if she was engaged in launching or recovering aircraft. The navigation officer was constantly trying to maneuver the ship so that the trawler wouldn't be able to get in position to abuse the rules of the road and gain the right of way. Sometimes he was successful in sucking the trawler out of position but the room available for the ship to maneuver was limited by our on-station requirements and sometimes the trawler was successful interrupting our flight operations. The pilots of the air wing were strictly forbidden to take any action against the Russian ship but on this day Commander John Wunche, the commanding officer of the heavy tanker KA-3B detachment, had finally had enough of the Russians' antics.

John Wunche was a big man with bright red hair and a flaming red handlebar mustache. He was a frustrated fighter pilot whom fate and the Bureau of Naval Personnel had put into the cockpit of a former heavy bomber now employed as a carrier-based tanker. Commander Wunche flew the tanker like a fighter and frequently delighted the tactical pilots by rolling the "Whale," as we all called the KA-3B tanker, on completion of a tanker mission. Consequently, John's nickname was "the Red Baron." On 21 July 1967 he proved just how appropriate that name was.

The "Bonnie Dick" had nearly completed a recovery. The Russian trawler had been steaming at full speed to try to cut across our bow and the bridge watch had been keeping a wary eye on the intruder. For a while it looked as if the Russian would be too late and we would finish the recovery before

having to give way to the trawler. But a couple of untimely bolters extended the recovery and the Bon Homme Richard had to back down and change course to comply with the rules. The LSO hit the wave-off lights when the "Whale" was just a few yards from the ramp.



John crammed on full power and sucked up the speed brakes for the go-around. The "Bonnie Dick" began a sharp right turn to pass behind the Russian, causing the ship to list steeply, and there, dead ahead of John, was the Russian trawler. He couldn't resist. He leveled the "Whale" about a hundred feet off the water and roared across the mast of the Trawler with all fuel dumps open like a crop duster spraying a field of boll weevils. The Russian disappeared in a heavy white cloud of jet fuel spray, then reemerged with JP-4 jet fuel glistening from her superstructure and running lip-full in the scuppers. The Russian trawler immediately lost power as the ship's crew frantically tried to shut down anything that might generate a spark and ignite the fuel.

She was rolling dead in the water in the Bon Homme Richards wake, the crew breaking out fire hoses to wash down the fuel, as we steamed out of sight completing the recovery of the Whale. The Red Baron was an instant hero to the entire ship's company.

Comments from Gary Albert, CDR Ret. USN

This is a good sea story but lacks anything close to being factual and has several fatal flawsexcept for the fact there may have been a Cdr Wunche as a det CO. I can't verify that fact.

Two main issues I have with this are as follows:

The KA-3B version was in the 43-44,000+ lb empty range with the aux tank and refueling package installed. That gave us a little over 6-6500 lb of fuel on our first pass for max trap weight of 50,000 lbs; and we didn't trap with fuel in the wings or aux tanks.

Beginning with John Dillon in 1970, SOP was to transfer excess wing and aux fuel to the on coming tanker. Before then, when Ralph Poore was skipper, we did it the old way and dumped all the surplus fuel from wings and aux before landing. That being the standard in 1967, there would have basically nothing to dump from the wings and and aux tankmaybe just a tiny bit of mist if anything but not anything nearly heavy enough to fill the scuppers of the Russian trawler. Also, as you know you can't dump fuel from the fwd or aft tanks so they are out. (The forward tank could be transferred to the aux and dumped but there would not have been time to make that happen.)

Another issue with this story is the right of way. An aircraft carrier underway while launching or recovering aircraft has the right of way over other ships except one that is dead in the water. A trawler racing to cut in front of an aircraft carrier doesn't qualify and would be putting itself in harm's way at their peril.

See: International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea

(g) The term "vessel restricted in her ability to manoeuvre" means a vessel which from the nature of her work is restricted in her ability to manoeuvre as required by these Rules and is therefore unable to keep out of the way of another vessel. The term "vessels restricted in their ability to manoeuvre" shall include but not be limited to:

(iv) a vessel engaged in the launching or recovery of aircraft;

Another small point, we didn't put our speed brakes "up" we put them "in." This looks like something penned by an over active imagination of an enlisted sailor with a little knowledge of flight operations.