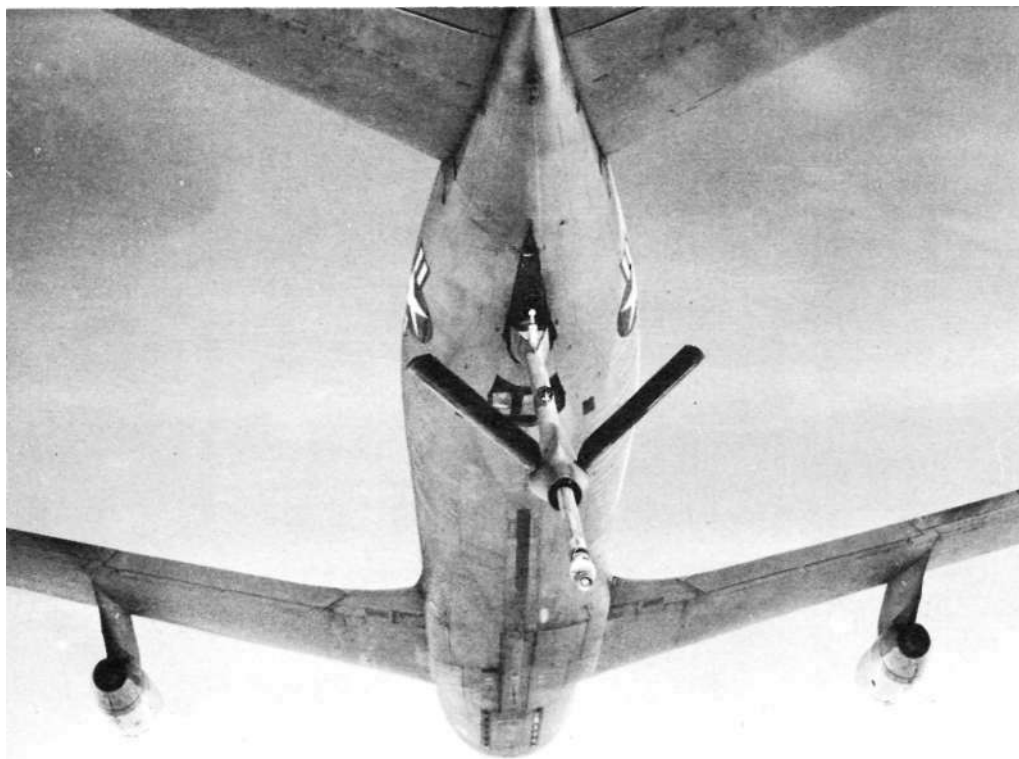




SOUTHEAST ASIA AIR OPERATIONS

By ALBERT C. PICCIRILLO

PART THREE - COMBAT AIR REFUELING



An F-4D, 65-0724, of the 435th TFS, then based at Ubon, Thailand (Summer 1968), in ideal contact position for the refueling boom in the photograph above. At left, the receiving pilot's view of the boom. The receiver airplane was guided into position by the director lights shown at the forward under-fuselage of the tanker. The lights in the KC-135 were controlled by the boom operator until contact and hook-on was made, after which they became automatic. The left row told the receiver pilot to go up or down, the right to go forward or aft. In this case, the rear right light indicated to go forward.



F-4D, 66-8790 of 25th TFS, on the refueling boom. The 25th was then (Summer 1968) based at Ubon.

The application of aerial refueling of modern procedure greatly improved the offensive capabilities of fighter aircraft. Not only were range and endurance increased, but also the quantity of ordnance that could be delivered on a target. The latter resulted from some of the external stores stations previously required for dropable fuel tanks being made available for added weapons.

Virtually all of the strike fighters employed in the USAF air offensive over North Vietnam used aerial refueling, often on both pre- and post-strike basis. Missions of four to six hours, and occasionally even longer, were not uncommon, especially for the F-4 Combat Air Patrols and the high speed Forward Air Controllers (FACs). Without aerial refueling these missions would have been greatly restricted since the normal fuel capacity provides only about an hour and a half time in air when carrying external ordnance.

The USAF aerial refueling was provided by Strategic Air Command KC-135A tankers. It was designed to use the fuel boom method but could be modified, prior to takeoff, for probe and drogue refueling by adapting a hose to the existing boom. The F- and RF-4 (USAF versions), RF-101, F-105, and the F-111 normally used boom refueling while

the F-5, F-100 and F-104 required probe and drogue technique.

Tanker air refueling routes were established over Northern Thailand and the Gulf of Tonkin in order to place fully refueled fighters as close to their target areas as possible. The refueling generally occurred at altitudes between fifteen and twenty-five thousand feet, somewhat lower than the usual twenty-five to thirty thousand feet altitudes assumed during low overwater deployments. The lower altitudes were dictated by the reduced maneuvering capability of heavily loaded strike fighters at the relatively slow refueling speeds.

SAC tanker crews, on temporary rotational duty from units throughout the USA, were assigned initially to the 4258th Strategic Wing at Takhli Air Base, Thailand. Later the 307th Strategic Wing was established at a new base at Utapao, near Bangkok. These units earned a superb reputation with fighter pilots, and their aircrews refueled hundreds of fighters a day during the height of the Asian conflict. The success of the "Thuds," Phantoms and Supersabres could not have been possible but for the sustained performance of the tanker forces.

KC-135A, 52-3572, RAMROD, a SAC tanker over Thailand. The name "RAMROD" appears on the fuselage nose with lightning flashes above and below it in white with black borders. Another tanker, 3630, is shown with F-4D of the Nite Owls, 479th TFS from Ubon in March 1969.

