

## NEAR MISS

My Crew 32 was flying a nighttime mission, and our new wing commander, Colonel Henry Timmermans, who had arrived around the same time as I, was the aircraft commander (AC).

There was a great deal of turbulence that night, and visibility, looking out the over-wing windows, was about as far as the tiptanks. It probably wasn't much better from the cockpit either. At one point, I was sitting at the forward galley table eating part of my in-flight lunch and drinking a cup of coffee, trying to keep the coffee from spilling as the aircraft continued to encounter turbulence.

Suddenly, the aircraft went into rapid descent—a nosedive. It was one of those moments when you just freeze for a few seconds and feel the pucker factor increase. Shortly, we leveled off, and crew members were scrambling from their positions and bunks to find out what had happened. As it turned out, we nearly hit a fighter aircraft head on. Fortunately for everyone, the fighter pilot's and Colonel Timmermans' quick-thinking prevented a mid-air collision. The fighter climbed, and we dove.

To this day, I am not sure why both aircraft were flying at the same altitude. Normally, aircraft flying in opposite directions were to have flown with 1,000 feet of air space to separate them to prevent this. However, our flying in an orbital pattern, changing directions every few minutes, may have accounted for this problem.

When we landed back at Korat, it was morning and the sun was up. As we deplaned, Colonel Timmermans walked over to the nose of the aircraft, so I went over to have a look myself. The black paint on the nose was peeled, and although I doubt that it was caused by the fighter aircraft's exhaust, I didn't ask. All that mattered was that all of us were safely on the ground. I prayed that this was not to be a preview of coming attractions.