

THE VIETNAM AIR WAR: FIRST PERSON

Col. Dennis M. (Mike) Ridnour





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ISBN: 153724339X
ISBN 13: 9781537243399
Library of Congress Control Number: 2016914092
CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform
North Charleston, South Carolina



FOREWORD

Over five million missions were flown in support of the war in Vietnam. More than 2,200 aircraft were lost, with many crewmembers captured and held as POWs and even more killed or missing in action. As this generation matures, it seems important to record first-person accounts of courage and caution, careful planning and accidental outcomes, hard and soft targets, flak and missiles, fighter days and SAM days—what it was like to fly and fight in that kind of war, both to keep the historians straight and to some degree to help the children and grandchildren of these veterans understand what Dad and Grandpa did during his tour in combat.

Mike gathered over a hundred of these accounts and published them to preserve a small amount of the Vietnam Air War history from an Air Force fighter pilot, WSO, and EWO perspectives. You will read firsthand accounts of fighters engaged by SAMs and AAA, air-to-air engagements, some near personal, with successes and failures and the always-present fighter pilot critique of headquarter's interference.

Nearing the Golden Anniversary of the first shots fired of this long and unpopular war, now is the time for these stories to be collected. The generation is rapidly aging, and many have already "Flown West." I hope you enjoy these accounts from those who were there and can excuse some of the language used by real fighters during real combat.

Mike Dugan
A-1 Pilot, Pleiku AB, RVN



THE VIETNAM AIR WAR—FIRST PERSON AN INTRODUCTION

A decade of air combat stirs different emotions depending on the personal views of the individual. Generally, fighter pilots, recce pilots, wrench benders, WSOs, and EWOs didn't concern themselves with the politics or the right or the wrong of the conflict. They concentrated on accomplishing the mission, using their training and experience the best way they knew how. Millions of sorties generated a lot of combat experience in the fighter community. Most fighter pilots had at least one tour; two and three tours were not unusual.

This book is not an effort to justify or even address the nation's involvement in Vietnam. Political and policy detail is presented only as it applies to the individual's experience. The book is an effort to capture and tell in the first person a few of those experiences, complete with their sometimes colorful language.

Forty years is a long time to remember details of an individual sortie. The contributors have done an amazing job remembering dates and names. Thank you to each contributor for taking the time to share your experiences

and tell it as it really was. A special thanks to Norm Powell for turning me on to a treasure trove of Thud experiences.

The mission experiences are broken into three general periods, Rolling Thunder, The Bombing Halt, and Linebacker. I have taken liberty with the dates, and some missions are outside the period title.

Rolling Thunder—First strikes in 1964 to November 1968

The Bombing Halt—A president-ordered cessation of all air, naval, and artillery bombardment of North Vietnam, November 1968 to May 1972

Linebacker—May 9, 1972, through the end of the war

I hope the readers enjoy this collection of Vietnam Air War experiences written by those who were there as much as I have.



DEFINITIONS AND ACRONYMS

20mm—Twenty millimeter. Pronounced “Twenty Mike Mike.” The size of the bullet fired from an F-4 and F-105 fighter equipped with an externally mounted or internal cannon.

O-6—Colonel.

AAA—Anti-Aircraft Artillery.

AB—Jet engine afterburner.

ABCCC—Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center. The airborne command and control aircraft, usually a specially equipped C-130.

AC—Aircraft Commander. A common descriptor for the occupant of the F-4’s front chair.

AGL—Above Ground Level.

AOR—Area of Responsibility.

Aardvark—Nickname affectionately given to the F-111.

AUTOVON—Automatic Voice Network. A DoD phone system regularly used for official business.

Backseaters

GIB—Guy In Back (either a pilot or navigator)

EWO—Electronic Warfare Officer. An F-105 or F-4 backseater responsible for operating the electronic magic. EWOs were affectionately known as Bears.

PSO—Pilot System Operator (a pilot), in the backseat of the F-4

PWSO—F-111 right seater

WSO—Weapon System Operator (navigator) in the back seat of the F-4. In the F-4, backseaters were also affectionately referred to as the audible altimeter, dumb shit, or an object occupying space that could better hold baggage, golf clubs or be better used for more fuel.

Barrel Roll—The northern part of Laos.

BD—Battle damage.

BDA—Battle Damage Assessment. A review of a strike with film or eye witness reports to determine the effectiveness.

Bear—Weasel EWO (Back Seater). These are the guys who foiled many of the best attempts by the bad guys to down attackers with SAMs.

Bingo—A radio call made when a predetermined amount of fuel was remaining. Time to stop what we are doing, get the flight together, and head home to land safely with the required fuel.

BOQ—Bachelor Officer Quarters. Quarters provided for officers on station without dependents. Depending on location, the quality ranged from the Hilton Garden Inn to pup tents.

BUF—Big Ugly F--: A B-52. Sometimes **BUFF**—Big Ugly Fat F--.

Bull's Eye—Bull's Eye was a reference to Hanoi, and MiGs were identified geographically relative to Bull's Eye. For example, a warning from one of the surveillance systems might be, "Bandits. Bandits. Two Blue bandits, Bulls Eye, 260 for 25" translates to a fighter pilot that there are two MiG-21s, 25 nautical miles west of Hanoi.

CAP—Combat Air Patrol.

CAS—Close Air Support. Supporting friendly troops with airpower.

CBU—Cluster Bomb Units. Generally, antipersonnel bomblets released from pods or canisters mounted on or released by fighters against an enemy dispersed in a fairly large area. The bomblets could be set to detonate immediately or at random intervals.

Dart—An aerial-towed gunnery target in a shape resembling a "dart."

DMZ—Demilitarized Zone. The border area between North and South Vietnam that was supposed to be void of military activity. To make certain nothing military was going on in the area, it was bombed, struck by artillery, and seeded with bomblets daily.

Double Ugly—Any model F-4. Two seats, two engines (both considered by single-seat fighter pilots to be one of each too many).

ECM—Electronic Counter-Measures. Equipment to jam, mask, or confuse threat radar.

FAC—Forward Air Controller. Weapons employment with one aircraft directing aim points for attacking fighters. FACs could be in small and slow aircraft like the O-1, O-2 or OV-10, or a Fast FAC in a fighter (F-100 or F-4).

Feet Wet—Over water—the South China Sea, generally away from the target and associated threats.

Fence Check—A checklist run before entering a threat area to make sure cockpit switches were changed from “Safe” settings to “Arm” settings. “Safe” settings were selected over friendly territory. “Arm” settings were selected when over hostile territory and prepared the cockpit for an immediate engagement with minimum switch movements. Pilots also reduced visual and radar detection settings, like Exterior Lights—Off, and sensor emissions reduced to the minimum.

Frag—Short for fragmentary order. Classified instructions in message format from Headquarters directing the next day’s

combat missions. Also, the potentially lethal metal released as a weapon explodes, that is, frag pattern.

GCI—Ground Controlled Intercept. Equipment and operators used to direct aircraft interception.

GEOREF—A Geographic Reference Point. Either the latitude and longitude coordinates of a target or the Universal Transverse Mercator (UTM) coordinates of a target using a grid system developed by the Army Corps of Engineers. The maps the pilots and GIBs carried were laid out in UTMs for conversation with FACs and the Army to determine reasonably accurate target location.

Goat Rope—An event with a lot of confusion, chaos, or complications.

Gomer—The “bad guys.” Vietnamese MiG pilots were “Gomers,” as were their AAA and SAM operators, truck drivers, road construction crews, and kids with AK-47s. USAF T-38/F-5 pilots flying to replicate threat tactics in training missions with other fighter crews often were affectionately referred to as “Gomers.”

Guard—The UHF frequency, 243.0 MHz, for emergency radio calls. Sometimes called Navy Common because the Navy was often accused of using Guard for nonemergency “social” chatter.

Hun—Nickname for the F-100.

IFF—Identification Friend or Foe. A system that identifies US aircraft as “friendly” to interrogation systems.

INS—Inertial Navigation System. An F-4 nav system that was good enough to be better than having nothing. Just accurate enough to get the pilot totally lost.

IP—Initial Point. A pre-planned reference point used to initiate an attack on a ground target.

JCS—Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Jello Riber—*Yellow River* was a popular song. Jello Riber was a play on how the song sounded when sung by one of the Asian groups that performed in SEA Clubs.

KCAS—Knots Calibrated Air Speed

KIA—Killed In Action. Generally applied to personnel losses but sometimes used to describe equipment destroyed.

Klong—A Thai word for canal or drainage ditch for all of an area's waste. An above-ground sewer line. Hence the name for the C-130 that made the SEA rounds delivering people and things.

Lat/Long—Short for latitude/longitude.

LGB—Laser Guided Bomb. A bomb guided to impact by a laser designator. In SEA, the designator could be in the aircraft employing the weapon, on the ground, or in a different aircraft.

LORAN—Long Range Navigation. A maritime navigation system adapted to the F-4 for improved navigation and weapons delivery accuracy. Better than an INS.

MEA—Minimum En Route Altitude. An altitude that guaranteed ground clearance, most of the time.

MER—Multiple Ejector Rack. A weapons rack that could carry up to six weapons.

MiG CAP—MiG Combat Air Patrol. Flights of air-to-air fighters assigned to keep MiGs from attacking the strike flights and other high value assets.

NVA—North Vietnam Army.

NVN—North Vietnam.

PCS—Permanent Change of Station.

Phantom II—F-4 of any model.

PJ—Para-Jumpers, Para rescue men, the best sight in the world when you need them. One of those heroes who are never allowed to buy a drink in a fighter pilot bar.

Pickle—Depressing the weapons release button on the stick.

Pipper—The aircraft gun sight. The pipper is the dot in the center of the sight.

POL—Petroleum, Oil, and Lubricant.

POTUS—President of the United States.

PSP—Pierced Steel Plank used to construct a temporary runway that usually became permanent.

Recce—A reconnaissance mission.

RESCAP—Rescue Combat Air Patrol.

Route Pack 1-6—North Vietnam was broken into seven areas for target area description. Route Pack 1, or RP 1 was the most southern. Route Pack 6 was divided into 6A and 6B, covering Hanoi and what was usually the most heavily defended industrial areas.

R&R—Rest and Recreation. Time off away from the combat zone. Australia, Hong Kong, and Hawaii were popular spots, and the wife, if applicable, was usually invited.

RHAW—Radar Homing and Warning gear designed to provide the crew visual and audible indications of threat radar.

RTB—Return to Base.

RTFL—Not an acronym, just RTFL: Roger the F-- Locher, an amazing WSO.

RTU—Replacement Training Unit, the F-4 schoolhouse.

RVN—Republic of Vietnam.

SAM—Surface-to-Air Missile. A telephone-pole-sized radar guided missile, usually an SA-2, used by the North Vietnamese to defend against fighter attacks. Other SAMs

were also used, such as the SA-7, which was a heat-seeking missile usually used against slower-moving targets below 4,500 feet. All were designed to ruin your day.

SAR—Search and Rescue

SEA—Southeast Asia

S.H.—Sierra Hotel or Shit Hot!

Smash—Airspeed.

SPAD—Nickname for the A-1.

SRO—Senior ranking officer. The highest ranking officer in a group, usually identified so more senior officers would have someone to blame. Short version—babysitter.

Steel Tiger—The boot heel or southern part of Laos.

SVN—South Vietnam.

TACAN—Tactical Air Navigation. The primary navigation system in fighters at the time.

TDY—Temporary Duty

TER—Triple Ejector Rack. A rack that could carry up to three weapons.

Thud—Common name for the F-105 Thunder Chief.

TOT—Time Over Target. The planned arrival time of a strike force over a pre-planned target.

UTMs—See GEOREF.

VR—Visual Reconnaissance.

Winchester—Out of ammo.

WTFO—What The F-- Over?

YGBSM—An often used response to an event or statement that is hard to believe, “You Gotta Be Shitting Me?”

Zot—An F-4D semiactive, manually aimed laser unit that relied on the backseater to visually acquire targets through a high-powered telescope.

ZPU—A double barreled 12.5mm AAA weapon

Reproduction for other than individual or classroom use or any publication of the following stories requires the permission of the individual author. All readers are encouraged to use the stories to understand this air war from a narrow, historical perspective. The stories are best when shared with good aviation friends over a splash of Irish whiskey or a shot of Jeremiah Weed and a good Montecristo Cuban cigar.

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ROLLING THUNDER



FIRST STRIKE NORTH TOM (GOLDY) GOLDMAN

In the summer of 1963, I was assigned to the 613th TFS, an F-100 squadron, at England AFB, Louisiana ("Alex"). Those were the days of "TAC Rote," and our Wing (401st) was using one squadron to base at Clark AB PI to maintain detachments at Takhli AB, Thailand, and Da Nang AB, RVN. Later that fall, my squadron was loaded onto MAC C-135s (not tankers, C-135 transports) and flown to Clark to relieve our sister squadron (612th, I think) and assume their airplanes. Half of the squadron stayed at Clark; one flight went on to Da Nang; and the other flight went on to Takhli. Our squadron commander was a Major (Bob Ronca) and the Ops Officer and the Flight Commanders were captains. I think there were four other captains in our squadron, and the rest of us were first or second lieutenants. We rotated flights every two weeks among our detachments. While at Clark, we flew low levels and bombed on Crow Valley Range. After all, we had to maintain our Nuclear Certification!

We settled into a routine of escorting RF-101s on missions up and down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos and across Northern South Vietnam. We also escorted C-130 and RB-47 Special Mission birds up the Gulf of Tonkin around

North Vietnam and the southern part of Hainan Island. Our job was strictly protective reaction.

In January of 1964, VC activity had picked up in South Vietnam, particularly around the “Alpha” Sites, where US Army Special Forces advisers were collocated with RVN Army units. The 2nd Air Division (predecessor to 7th AF in Saigon) decided to reunite the 613th at Da Nang, a RVN Air Base, on which we were tenants. We had one hangar plus revetments for our airplanes and the ops center, and hooches (one level, screened, double bunks, and no air conditioning in those days) for our pilots and our maintenance troops (total about two hundred plus as I remember). That is the background for the start of our Air War in North and South Vietnam in March of 1964.

An Alpha site was attacked in SVN, and several US Army enlisted advisers were killed. This prompted the POTUS to direct a retaliatory raid on the North Vietnam military facilities at Vinh and at Quang Khe PT boat facilities. The South Vietnam Air Force provided A-1s from their units at Ton San Nhut and from Da Nang to be the primary strike force under the leadership of their commander, AVM Ky. The supporting ops staff was nonexistent for our deployed operation; we ran our own command post. I was the duty officer (there was no base operations staff) when this protective reaction frag came in just after midnight “from the White House,” addressed to my Squadron Commander by name. Pretty heavy stuff for an 18 F-100D unit—the only one in country.

The Saigon VNAF A-1s joined the Da Nang A-1s the next morning and they were loaded with bombs. We loaded sixteen F-100s with CBU-1 (as ordered by 2nd Air Division or “Suckin’ Air” as we called them) for armed escort to two

targets in North Vietnam: the Vinh Army Barracks and the PT Boat Base at Quang Khe. Two missions were conducted at the same time with VNAF A-1s supported by eight F-100s. I was number eight (on Hank Bielinski's wing) on the Vinh raid. The A-1s took off ahead of us, and we were to support them with flak suppression, as required, at the target. Fighter pilot readers will immediately recognize the inadvisability of doing flak suppression with CBU-1—an antipersonnel weapon. For nonfighter pilots, CBU-1 delivery parameters put the aircraft and pilot in a position, low and level, vulnerable to flak.

The North Vietnam Barracks at Vinh looked like a French Foreign Legion Outpost with four whitewashed single-level barracks facing four of the same buildings across a cobblestone compound with a flagpole in the middle. The A-1s were either early or late, because I never saw them, but we were providing flak suppression down both sides of that compound as ordered. As Hank's wingman, my job was to mimic his every move at low altitude while pickling off CBUs alongside him.

We were off target preparing for further support when we were recalled to Da Nang because a USN A-6 (as I recall) had closed the runway and we needed to orbit Da Nang or divert to Thailand. We did land soon thereafter at Da Nang.

We had no combat damage to our Huns, had expended our munitions, and could visually verify the battle damage to the enemy. The other half of the squadron that went to Quang Khe had much heavier reaction than we did, and H. J. Lockhart (our squadron mate) was shot down and spent the rest of the war as a POW. He was the longest serving USAF POW in Hanoi.

We did not know about HJ being shot down when we landed at Da Nang. As number eight, I was parked last but at the end of the line nearest our one hangar. Our ops center, PE shop, and the like were in the back (plywood walls with army cots for chairs) of the hangar. Bob Stuart and I walked back to the hangar together and were the first ones to arrive.

Strangely, the hangar doors were closed despite the very hot and humid temps. In his usual even-tempered way, Bob started banging on the entry door for someone to let us in (his language was directive and laced with descriptive verbs). Someone yelled for us to stand by, and, finally, the door swung open, and Bob and I stepped into the hangar. Momentarily sun-blinded, we were greeted by a very tall USA General (Westmoreland) and a SVN General (Khahn, the President of RVN, soon to be replaced by coup). General Westmoreland asked if we had been on the mission ("Have you boys..." etc.), and when we thought it must have been our parachutes and flying gear that gave us away, he reached around to his aide and picked two Air Medals from a wash pail and pinned them on our survival vests. That is the only time in my Air Force career that I saw a bucket of Air Medals.

Walking to the back of the hangar, Bob and I started laughing, as quietly as we could, at what a strange sight that had been. We were subsequently in a squadron picture in *Life* magazine in recognition of the "First Air Force Raid," and so forth, and so on. I am certain that "first" thing was an exaggeration. It may have been, however, the first one publicized.

Whatever good feelings we had about the day's mission were put aside immediately when we learned about HJ's

loss. B'ski and I were sent to his last known position to see what we could learn. There was not much we could do, although we did report seeing his parachute—or what could have been his parachute. We learned at the First River Rats Convention and Reunion in Las Vegas that he was captured almost immediately.

We became immersed in the war with events compounding almost daily. The 523rd showed up from Clark, and the F-105s from Kadena started arriving, with Robby Risner among them. Combat activity did pick up slowly. We lost our squadron commander and the squadron weapons officer in the following months to ground fire from low-altitude attack. It was not long before the powers that be said to knock off that low-altitude stuff.

One morning our duty officer called the hooch and told us our C-135 transports were on final and those who got their gear together fastest would be on the first airplane leaving.

But not to worry, I got back PCS to the war later at Bien Hoa, still in the Hun. After three years at Torrejon in '69-'70, and later PCS to Udorn in the F-4D in '71-'72. So there are lots of stories to go—some almost accurate.



MAGIC STONE 466
SAM HUNTER-KILLER MISSION
GARY BARNHILL

During an F-105 combat tour out of Takhli, Thailand, in 1965, Russian SA-2 Surface to Air Missiles had begun to appear in North Vietnam. Previously, we had flown over our targets unmolested at 18,000 feet to begin a dive-bomb attack. The newly arrived SAMs canceled out our high-altitude sanctuary and forced pilots down low where antiaircraft artillery (AAA) fire was intense and often withering.

One day our base commander, a colonel who did not fly combat missions, bravely announced: "We are going after the SAMs." Captain Mike "Porky" Cooper, showing more guts than tact, called out from the back of the room, "What's this 'we' shit, Colonel? Are you going along in the F?" (F105F is a two-seater version). Getting shot at every day tends to erode one's military decorum.

The Navy sent an A-4E Skyhawk to Takhli carrying his own 500-pound snakeye bombs. The pilot was the XO of the USS *Oriskany's* VA-164 squadron. The Navy had sent the

very best, and he knew this was a big-time White House-directed mission, and dangerous. His call sign was "Magic Stone 466."

Thuds at that time had no homing or electronic warning gear. The A-4, on the other hand, possessed the APR-23, which would home in on the hard-to-locate SA-2 location.

Each Thunderchief would carry eight 750-pound bombs. This was the era before "smart" bombs. Our hits, if any, required substantial pilot skill. The Navy wanted to fly across the target level at fifty feet and skip-bomb with his high drag snakeyes. We preferred to dive-bomb, using a pop-up from the deck to create a dive-bomb run. This made it tougher for the ground gunners to track us. No sweat, since the A-4 would be first across the target and out of the way; his flat pass would not conflict with our dive-bombing.

We called those Doomsday missions; because invariably someone got shot down from the withering gunfire around Hanoi, but there was no shortage of volunteers. A couple of months earlier the first mission to destroy a SAM site turned out to be an ambush with six Thuds lost. If I recall John Morrissey's excellent mission report, three were killed, two became POWs, and only one was rescued.

The A-4 had a magic black box, or what passed for magic circa 1965. Actually it was similar to the old semiworthless coffee-grinder ADF device we used in the late fifties in Europe. A needle would point in the general direction of a SAM site, when and if the SAM was in the radar search mode. Operator skill was required to find the target, and that meant Powers was the key player on this

mission. One Navy pilot was leading eight Air Force bomb-laden Thuds in hopes of finding a well-hidden missile site.

We launched, joined up, refueled, and headed north, only to find a solid overcast at the letdown point. The mission was obviously a No-Go due to weather. But instead, Powers gave a slight wing rock, a wordless command to join in tight nine-ship V formation, and descended into the clouds. No one would have criticized him one bit if he had canceled for weather and returned to base. Instead, he pressed on, and we followed, tucked in tightly on his wings. In a nine-ship Vic in cloud, heavy with fuel and bombs, bouncing around as number five in echelon formation is in itself pretty damn exciting.

Nearing the target, we finally broke out of the clouds and went to the deck to counter intense ground fire. No longer a tactical formation, we were now just a gaggle of bomb-laden Thuds strung out in loose single file trusting our lives to our Navy leader, a man I'd met only a couple of hours ago.

At one point, there were hills on both sides, with overcast above, making a sort of tunnel. I got slung into cloud during a sharp turn and immediately punched the nose back down, desperately hoping for valley beneath—instead of hillside. I remember thinking, “I’m not going to miss this mission for anything.” Stupid decision? Probably. “Better dead than to be a fuckup” is the fighter pilot credo.

As we screamed low level toward the target, I flew so low over a guy driving a farm tractor that he leapt to the ground. He was doing about two knots; we were doing 550. When they are shooting at you *low* is good...*fast* is good.

Approaching the Hanoi area, my jet was hit by small arms fire, causing various yellow caution lights to illuminate. On we pressed; we were the goats, tethered to lure the lion out into the open for the kill.

Until that day, it was a big deal when just one or two SAMs were launched at us. Today they were firing them like artillery. A secret B-66 orbiting over Laos transmitted repeatedly in rapid order the code word warnings for missile "locked on" and missile "launched." Whew!

As we closed toward the general target area, the Navy pilot calmly transmitted, "I've got 'em on my nose...starting my run." He flew directly over the target at treetop level and his Skyhawk was literally disintegrated by the ground fire. The pilot ejected and got a good chute, although none of us saw it at the time. We thought he was dead, but we learned decades later he became a POW and died in captivity.

My turn. The A-4 pilot's emergency locator beacon was screeching in my headset as I lit the afterburner and popped up to about 7,500 feet. I clearly remember saying aloud to myself, "Oh shit, I don't want to do this." During that brief dive-bomb run, which seemed an eternity, I plaintively shouted into my oxygen mask, "Stop it. Stop it!" as my plane took more hits.

I continued. Bombs on target. Others put their bombs on target as well. The first SAM destroyed in the Vietnam War.

The AAA hits caused multiple red and yellow emergency lights to blink in my cockpit, indicating a fire and other

aggravations. I radioed my intention to try to make it to the water off Haiphong before ejecting. Radio chatter was understandably chaotic. Each Thud pilot was individually living his own hell; each jinking violently to get away from the unrelenting ground fire.

Now alone and doing 810 knots on the deck (canopy melt limit speed), I slowly overtook a Navy F-8 Crusader as if passing a car on the freeway. We exchanged gentle hand waves as if to say: "Oh, hi there, don't know you, but hope you're having a nice day." It was bizarre.

But now over the safety of the Gulf of Tonkin, a sort of euphoric relief set in. If I ejected over the water, the Navy would surely pick me up.

My fire warning light had gone out, so when I saw a couple of North Vietnamese boats capable of capturing downed pilots, I strafed them. The 20mm Vulcan nose gun fired six thousand rounds a minute causing huge damage. Forget the ejection, the bird was still flyable. Last month I was forced to dangerously eject just one second before my plane exploded into a huge fireball over a menacing jungle.

Got lucky and found a refueling tanker with barely anything reading on the fuel gauge. Another whew!

I made it back to Takhli with landing gear, flap, and flight-control problems but landed in one piece. There were 37mm hits all over the plane, except on the extremely vulnerable underbelly engine area. That Thud required four thousand man-hours of work before it could be ferried elsewhere for further repairs.

I passionately pitched General Simler to award the Air Force Cross to the Navy pilot but years later learned he was awarded the Navy Cross.

It was an honor to fly and fight with those hard-charging heroes in 1965. They didn't all come home. Vietnam was not glamorous or publicly supported, but every fighter pilot put his life on the line every mission. Every time climbing up that cockpit ladder felt like playing a Super Bowl albeit with no audience. No applause. No winner. No parade.



THE EARLY DAYS, YEN BAI JOHN MORRISSEY

It was July of 1965. The twelfth to be exact. We were one of the first flights sent north of the east/west latitude line that bisected Hanoi. We had a specific target as well as one of the first armed reconnaissance missions north of Hanoi. Our primary target was a small railroad bridge across a tributary that fed the Red River about twenty-five miles northwest of Hanoi, fairly close to the MiG base at Phuc Yen Airfield. For the bridge we had six of the usual 750 pounders centerline. Our armed recce mission was to hunt for trucks or trains along the road and rail that ran northwest to the Chinese border. There were no thirty-mile border restricted zones in those days. At least I don't remember any. Rolling stock of any kind was fair game. For this we had two LAU 3 rocket pods (nineteen 2.75 rockets each) on our outboard stations and 1,028 rounds of 20mm in our six shooters.

We dropped the bridge in light flak without being nicked and began our big adventure along the northwest railroad!

My flight commander was Charlie Copin. He led our flight northwest and offset us about three miles to the left/west of the Red River. He found a train for us with his

binoculars—nineteen cars! It was stationary in the rail yard at Yen Bai. We had no idea the town was Yen Bai. Never heard of the place. After the twelfth of July, I never forgot that place. Never been that far north before. All we knew was that there was a long train in a rail yard.

Rolling Stock! Attack!

Our first passes were with the rockets. We took up divergent easterly headings. I don't know about the other three (I was number four), but I used the gunnery range sight setting for a 450-knot 30-degree pass to fire the rockets. I must have had my blood up as my speed was at or above 600 knots. My rockets, and I think all the others, went over the top of the train and into the bases of what looked like a line of very tall grain elevators parallel to the train on the far side of the rail yard.

Our second passes were with the Gatlings. We pulled off left from our rocket passes and positioned for gun attacks from the west, again with different headings. By the time I rolled out on my strafe run, I was directly lined up with the train, rear to front. I remember thinking that I would probably never get a target like this again, so I readjusted my mil setting for minimum-range close-in strafe. I held my finger off that trigger until I couldn't stand it anymore, steadied down, and let the Gatling rip. The initial HEI rounds impacted the last car in the line. I slowly (well, as slowly as I could) walked that 20mm water hose down the spine of the train. It was quite a sight. Sides of the rail cars were exploding outward, while not very far off to my right, the "grain elevators" we hit with the rockets began spewing fireballs out their tops like Roman candles. Just before my pipper reached the engine, they hit me pretty hard. I instinctively lit the burner while making a hard pull up to my

left/west as the lights started blinking on the C&W panel. Charlie told me later (he was in perfect supporting position covering my six from directly overhead) that my Thud and its shadow merged. Lost the ATM. That took the utility hydraulics and all the AC-powered instruments and systems with it.

But the fire lights stayed out. Flight control hydraulics stayed solid! And the engine kept running!

We rejoined in defensive posture, and Charlie headed us southwest to Korat, riding the Mach. I was still doing number four's job and dutifully checking six behind the lead element. I could see the large column of black smoke from Yen Bai billowing straight up until it hit the cloud base at approximately 18,000 ft, where it spread out like an inverted table cloth. A big black one.

Just before entering the overcast, I moved into position on number three, Gene Frank (I had no attitude or heading instruments except for the mag compass) and I headed home on his wing in the goo. We had no need to worry about the SAMs—well, not yet anyway! They would not be a factor for thirteen more days. I do remember being concerned about my fuel state. The main fuel tanks were on gravity feed without the AC-powered pumps. And there was no fuel quantity information available without AC power.

She ran fine all the way back to Korat. The electric-powered trailing edge flaps came down, and the emergency gear extension did its job. My gunner told me later that I had fired 987 out of the 1,028 rounds onboard.

Charlie mentioned that being hit probably saved my life. I was in amongst 'em at the bottom of that pull and doing way over 600 knots. Almost disappeared in the big dust cloud those low pulls usually generate.

The color gun camera film should have been great. If it had worked. There was nothing on it at all, just unexposed film. The Thuds had horrid gun camera results in the early days.

So if you hear stories about soft defenses around Yen Bai, take them with a grain of salt. I was back there seven-and-a-half years later in December of '72 during Linebacker II. This time I was the flight commander in an A-7, and still had a Gatling.

Their "gunners" were also still there, and still in fine fettle!



THE FIRST SAM SITE STRIKE MISSION
JOHN MORRISSEY
THE PREFACE

July 27, 1965, forty-eight Thud Drivers saddled up for the world's first aerial attack against Russian/Soviet surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites. It was not the best of days. We lost six F-105s on that mission. Three F-105 drivers were killed. Two more Thud drivers were held prisoner in the draconian North Vietnamese prison system until February 1973. The flight lineup below may not be perfect, but it's as good as existing records and memories will allow. The mission was laid on very quickly. Detailed records were not kept for posterity. It was an early time in the war, when all the squadrons were transitioning from temporarily assigned units to the new provisional wing. The usual administrative staffs were just not available to handle the historical aspects of our war.

Most of the flights from Korat that were tasked to hit the SAM site and associated barracks were loaded with BLU-27 Napalm. Two of the SAM site attack flights from Takhli carried CBU-2A, dispensing BLU-3 "pineapple" bomblets, each of which explodes on impact, firing several hundred 3/16th-inch steel balls at about 2,000 feet per second. One

more flight was to attack the site with napalm. Two other flights were to strike the support facility with napalm, while one would hit the barracks area with CBU. All the Thuds had 1,028 rounds of 20mm ammunition. The targets are also named SAM Site 6 & SAM Site 7, and their associated barracks.

There are some interesting comparisons to be made between that mission and the first World War II USAAF mission against the oil fields in Ploesti, Romania, from North Africa. There were forty B-24s on that World War II mission; there were forty-eight Republic F-105s on ours. Nine of the Liberators were lost; we lost six Thuds. Both were very low-level missions. Both missions had a midair leaving the target. And those two missions were the only two in recorded history that I can find where everyone who got across the target received a DFC. I also find chilling command-and-control similarities between the attack on those missile sites and the Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava during the Crimean War.

All were real heroes that day. A few of the names on the flight lineup may be of interest.

Redwood Three was Chuck Horner. Chuck is featured in Tom Clancy's *Every Man a Tiger*. He was the air component commander during Desert Shield and Desert Storm and was the CentCom vice commander under General Schwarzkopf. He was my boss, who stood by my side when I retired from the Air Force in 1985. He was, and is, a fire breathing fighter pilot.

Chuck Reed, Cedar Flight Leader, was my squadron commander. Chuck had a considerable portion of his

stomach removed about six weeks before the mission and could easily have remained off the flight schedule. He was an ace in World War II who flew P-47s in Europe and in the Pacific.

Lemon Three was Colonel Bill Ritchie. He was the brand-new provisional Wing Commander at Korat, and was a West Point graduate. In 1941, a Squadron Commander in Ninth Air Force flying Republic P-47 Thunderbolts in direct support of our troops on D-Day and all the way into Germany. You can read about him in Robert Dorr's *Hell Hawks*. I had the honor of checking him out in the F-105 a few weeks prior to the mission. He had the Republic Thunderchief, the grandson of Republic's Thunderbolt, figured out in short order. He had been a full colonel for over twenty years when he first flew the Thud at Korat. He was the real deal.

These days, especially with our Republic floundering, I just felt it important to write something to help us remember that day and the legacy we owe to those who gave so much and expected so little in return.



THE MISSION
“HEALTH, WEALTH, YOUTH, AND FAME BLOOM
AND FADE, BUT HONOR LASTS FOREVER”¹

July 27, 1965, 1359. South of the confluence of the Red and Black Rivers, thirty miles west-southwest of Hanoi. Hot. Humid. Hazy. Calm. Disarmingly Quiet. But not for long. Forty-Six F-105s loaded with wall-to-wall napalm and CBU inbound at 600 knots, or more, on the deck at one hundred feet, or less, for the world’s first attack on two Russian surface-to-air missile sites. Forty-six men with hearts of steel in forty-eight Silver Steeds of Tin² flew well and true, onward into a trap.

The missiles were phone poles painted white. All approaches to the target were lined with Russian high-rate-of-fire 14.5 mm ZPUs and AAA of all calibers. Gun barrels lowered to treetop level. Flak from the left, flak from in front, and flak from the right, deadly, intense, and continuous fire. Russian guns thundered and steeds and heroes fell, six F-105s mortally wounded in less than two minutes. Warriors dead, warriors dying, warriors imprisoned. They who had fought so well.

“One of my most vivid memories was of looking at the target area as we approached at one hundred feet. The area was nothing but smoke and a wall of ground fire,” said Jack Redmond, number four in Valiant Flight from Takhli, Thailand. Parachutes in the air, pilots ejecting, 105s burning and dying, napalm cans on their way, CBUs exploding, and Russian flak answering back.

“What really sticks in my memory is the smell of gunsmoke. I have never smelled it that strong before or after,” said Frank Tullo, number two in Dogwood Flight, shot down and the only one recovered in the target area.

And as quickly as it all began, it was suddenly over, once again hot, hazy with some black smoke in the air, calm, and disarmingly quiet.

¹ JCM

² Idea for this metaphor taken from Gods of Tin, James Salter: Shoemaker & Hoard



A BLIND SQUIRREL GETS AN ACORN BUD HESTERMAN

In October 1965, I was an F-105 flight commander on my third tour of duty to Thailand. On this day, I was leading a flight of four to bomb a small railroad bridge in North Vietnam. I was a little scared because of all the bad things that could happen when we dropped bombs in places where people didn't like us very much, but I was more scared because it was a Stan Eval check. One of the guys from the Wing came down from Yokota to make sure that those of us in the trenches were properly following the established procedures.

Our target was one of the many small bridges on the railroad out of China that paralleled the Red River into Hanoi. It was as far north as we could fly without violating the holy land between North Vietnam and China.

Somewhere fifty or sixty miles from the target, we descended to 500 feet AGL. Then at a predetermined IP, probably a bend in the river, we lit the 'burners, pulled up to 12,000 feet, hopefully finding the target at the top of the pullup, and rolled in close to our preplanned dive angle and airspeed. I found the target and rolled in on my attack. The

other three in the flight fanned out and established their own final attack in flight order. Although the Thud had a relatively sophisticated toss bomb computer system, we rarely used it, at least during the early part of the war. Instead, we preplanned our bomb drops using pipper depression, dive angle, airspeed, and altitude to determine our proper release point. The system we used was probably not much different from that used in World War II, and except for the electronic pipper image on the windscreen rather than a ring and post, probably not much different from that used in World War I.

I ended with a dive angle steeper than my planned 45 degrees, and worse, I began to fight the depressed pipper pendulum effect like a kid on his first day at the bombing range. Oops, the pipper's off to the left, roll left; now it's off to the right, back on left, now on right, left, right, left, right; now I'm too steep, too fast, and way too low, and I'm about to bust my backside on a hillside in North Vietnam. Pickle and pull! My poor abused airplane complained with high-speed stall shudder, so I relaxed a little of the back stick pressure, and the airplane started to dutifully change direction. Soon I had blue sky rather than Vietnamese landscape in my windscreen, and I breathed a quick sigh of relief, hit my heart reset button, rolled to my left, and looked over my shoulder at the target. What was once a railroad bridge was now one humongous hole in the ground with shock waves going out, with all kinds of junk blowing out of the hole, caused by 4,500 pounds of iron and high-explosive material. Due to my steep dive angle, there was very little spacing among the six 750-pound bombs, and they all hit exactly on, or very near, the bridge itself.

My check pilot transmitted, "Great hit, lead!" I responded in a very composed and nonchalant voice (like

“What else did you expect?”) with something like, “Ah rogge, let’s go find a secondary for you guys.”

We found another bridge a few miles farther south, and the flight home was uneventful. I received a good Stan Eval report, but I never did tell my check pilot what happened during my dive-bomb attack. Some things are better left unsaid, and sometimes even a blind squirrel gets an acorn.



NORTH VIETNAM'S BAC GIANG BRIDGE BOB KRONE

America's Rolling Thunder air campaign against North Vietnam started under a Department of Defense Directive in 1964. The Rules of Engagement (ROE), designed by President Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, had four strategic goals:

1. Stop the flow of weapons and war material from China to North Vietnam and stop the flow of men, machines, and weapons via the Ho Chi Minh Trail, running through North Vietnam and Laos to South Vietnam
2. Minimize civilian casualties and collateral damage.
3. Enforce a buffer zone extending twenty-five kilometers south of the Chinese border. The buffer zone would be a sanctuary to insure no bombs would be dropped in China.
4. Incrementally increase military actions against North Vietnam under the hope that the North Vietnamese leadership would cease military operations against South Vietnam.

The 469th Tactical Fighter Squadron, equipped with the F-105 Thunderchief, based at McConnell AFB, Kansas, was the first USAF jet squadron to deploy on a permanent change of station to fly combat missions over North Vietnam. The squadron was challenged to implement the first of the four goals. Goal four became a continuing issue as the Vietnam war proceeded and for political-military analysts ever since. Commencing with our arrival at Korat Air Base, Thailand, on November 15, 1965, the pilots of the Fighting Bulls became absorbed with planning and flying combat missions to Vietnam.

President Johnson and Secretary of Defense McNamara personally managed the ROE by selecting the critical targets around Hanoi. These were called JCS Targets because once Johnson and McNamara selected them at their Tuesday lunches, it became the responsibility of the JCS to assign the target to the Air Force flying from Thailand and the Navy flying from carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin. At one luncheon in April 1966, Johnson and McNamara selected the Bac Giang Bridge, a 435-foot-long steel reinforced concrete bridge that carried the Northeast Rail Line and Highway 1A running from Hanoi to Lang Son, China.

There were two major rail lines running from China to Hanoi. Since the Dien Bien Phu defeat of the French in 1954, China had helped Ho Chi Minh build these supply and communication routes and had used these routes to help North Vietnam build a modern and sophisticated air defense system around Hanoi. One rail ran by the Red River from Hanoi north to Thai Nguyen and across the border. The second line ran from Hanoi northeast through Bac Ninh and Phu Lang Thuong and along the 1A highway to China. The Bac Giang Bridge supported the rail and highway over the

Thuong River at Phu Lang Thuong, about thirty miles from downtown Hanoi.

The JCS missions against the Bac Giang Bridge in April 1966 were what the pilots called "Mass Gaggles." F-105s from Takhli and Korat were the strike aircraft. F-105F Wild Weasel aircraft flew anti-SAM missile missions. KC-135 aerial tankers, command transport ships, rescue helicopter forces, and other aircraft supporting the mission often totaled more than 100 aircraft. There were losses on every mission to the Bac Giang. The combination of being able to deliver only World War II-style free-fall bombs, the sophistication of the Hanoi antiaircraft system, and the design of the huge steel-reinforced concrete bridge produced a series of unsuccessful missions. We lost two aircraft, one the squadron commander, on April 23; I became the squadron commander that night.

Both Korat and Takhli were fragged by Seventh Air Force for Bac Giang missions on April 29. Our Thuds, Pecan and Elm flights, were loaded with a 3,000 pounder on each of the two inboard pylons. Time over target was ten minutes after the Takhli Dodge, Volvo, and Nash flights. Takhli's route was north over Laos, across Thud Ridge and into Bac Giang from the west. Our route from Korat was north over the Gulf of Tonkin to attack from the east.

Things began to go wrong on engine start. One aircraft aborted and was replaced by a spare. After takeoff, there was an air abort that had to be escorted back to Korat. Another spare was launched from Korat, and that pilot flew across Laos to join us over the Gulf just north of Hue.

On the tanker an aircraft refueling system malfunctioned and that cost another abort-and-escort back to Korat. That reduced us to six Thuds heading north. Just short of the Chinese border and east of the target, another aircraft aborted for electrical failure, and he had to be escorted to Korat. Now we were four.

Seventy nautical miles east of the target, we throttled up to 550 knots for the run on the bridge. We began our attack just as the Takhli flights were pulling off. This time the bridge went down. I wrote, "We Hit Bridge" on the back of my mission data card.

And, by mid-May I had hung a picture of the Bac Giang Bridge on the wall behind my desk.



BLACK SUNDAY, LONG WAY OUT TO FEET WET KEVIN "MIKE" GILROY

In late April 1966, eight of us received orders to report to the North American Aviation Facility at Long Beach Airport, California. Follow-on training was to take place at Nellis AFB in Las Vegas. Highly qualified F-105 pilots were selected to be part of a new Air Force Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) killing program called Wild Weasel. I was among the Electronic Warfare Officers included in the class, drawn from B-52 bombers and Strategic Air Command. I remember not being impressed with the EWOs and wrote in a letter to my wife back in Fort Worth, Texas. "All the pilots are volunteers for the program and seem to be pretty good. A few of the EWOs will leave heel marks all the way to Korat."

Orders were vague as to the location of the North American Aviation facility at Long Beach Airport. I placed a telephone call to Nellis Air Force Base and the Wild Weasel Squadron, where I was told to check in to the American Inn Motel on Long Beach Boulevard. So, on a Sunday afternoon in early May 1966, I arrived at the American Inn Motel. I asked the middle-aged desk clerk if she knew anything about the location of an Air Force training facility or a North American Aviation facility at Long Beach Airport. She said,

“No. But there are several other guys with short haircuts who have recently checked in. They have a hospitality suite set up in Room 124. They may be Air Force guys. You might ask them.”

I thanked her, headed to my room, showered, and changed clothes and went by Room 124. Sure enough, there were a few guys there drinking scotch and shooting the breeze. They said that they were part of the Wild Weasel program. I joined them for a few toddies. By Sunday evening, the whole group had arrived, and we had all introduced ourselves. The pilots had been stationed together before and knew each other well. None of the pilots had a clue as to what EWOs did for a living. We went out to dinner and got to know each other better. Training started the next morning.

The training at Long Beach was pretty uneventful with the exception of the welcome briefing. We were told that we would pair up into two-man crews, one pilot and one EWO. We would remain as a crew through our classroom and flying training and until the completion of our “100 Mission” combat tour. This major commitment was to take place by the end of the morning coffee break, so we could participate as a crew in the afternoon simulator classes. We each took a few minutes to tell about ourselves, where we were from, how much flying time we had, what airplanes we had been flying, whether or not we were married, and, if so, how many children we had, what our interests were outside of flying, and anything else that we felt like sharing. Based upon that and the little time we had spent together the evening before, life-altering choices were made and in many cases, lifelong friendships were started.

Ed Larson and I agreed to team together. Neither of us remembers why we made that decision. We were both former enlisted and were Officer Candidate School graduates. And, we were both Captains. Ed had a son whose birthday was June 4th, the same as mine. For whatever reason, we made our choice, and it proved to be an excellent one. This pairing of Weasel crews continued throughout the program. Some turned out to be good pairings, others not so good.

Each day consisted of classroom lectures given by civilian engineers from Applied Technology Incorporated, the company that built the Weasel equipment, followed by rides in their simulator. To call it a simulator probably brings up visions of modern simulators with realistic visuals and motion. Instead, we had two tandem seats in a boxlike structure; each pretend cockpit was equipped with a control stick mounted in the floor and mockups of the ATI equipment in both front panels. When the stick was moved to the left, the signal moved to the right. When we flew toward it, it got longer, and when we flew away from it, it got shorter. Ed mastered the task after about two minutes and got bored. I took a little longer.

After the first day of training, we went back to the motel, changed clothes, and met in the hospitality suite for a few drinks before going out to dinner. I remember well sitting there with the group after our soup course had been served and looking across the table and seeing my pilot fast asleep with his face an inch or two above his bowl of soup and thinking, "What the hell have I gotten myself into with this guy?" Any doubts I may have had would soon be dispelled.

As our week of academic and simulator training drew to an end, we were told that our Wild Weasel modified F-105F aircraft were not yet ready. The next phase of our training would be delayed, and we were to return to our home bases for two weeks before continuing to Nellis AFB. This was a disappointment, as we were eager to get to the flying portion of our training. Ed approached me with the suggestion that instead of going back to Carswell AFB for the two weeks, I come to Nellis, where he had been an instructor. He would get a two-seater (an F model) for instruction, and I could fly his missions with him and get some experience in the airplane. After a few telephone calls to both bases and to my family, the decision was made, and after completion of the course at Long Beach, I followed Ed to the "Home of the Fighter Pilot," Nellis AFB.

Ed insisted I spend much of my free time at his house. I was introduced to his much-younger wife, Carolyn, and to the children, as well as to a concoction Ed called "Blabbermouth," a mixture of rum and fruit juice. I remember being in a slightly drunken fog during much of my free time, including daybreak tee times at Craig Ranch Golf Course. Ed did his best to properly introduce me to tactical fighters. My first F-105 flight with Ed was a check ride for a tall, gangly student pilot, Jack, about to flunk the "formation flying" portion of his F-105 training. Ed was to give him one last chance to either pass or fail. Ed introduced us and told him that this was to be my first flight in a fighter, and that we would climb out from Nellis, proceed to the Grand Canyon area, descend into the canyon, fly underneath the rim of the canyon for a while, climb out, and then fly over to Death Valley for some more low-level flying. He asked Jack if he had any questions, and off we went to the airplanes. Shortly after takeoff, with our wingman tucked closely off our right wing, Ed asked me if I wanted to fly the

airplane. I said sure, and did my best to maintain heading and rate of climb (my best at that time was pretty damn bad). We finally leveled off, heading for the Canyon, with Jack flying a pretty fair close formation. When time came to descend into the Grand Canyon, Ed took control of the plane and rapidly descended below the rim of the canyon. Flying through the canyon was a great thrill for me, having spent all my flying hours in relatively slow-maneuvering bombers. Ed said that the secret to flying the canyon was to know where the cables were located that ran across the top of the canyon. I thought he was kidding. Ed pointed out an Indian reservation, an area of bright green on the floor of the canyon, with its own waterfall. Jack was hanging on the wing in pretty good fashion. After about fifteen minutes, Ed climbed out of the canyon, and we headed over to Death Valley, where it was possible to fly below sea level. Then, back to Nellis for a formation landing. As we entered the squadron building, the Ops Officer asked Ed how Jack had done. Ed laughed and said, "He did fine. I figured if he could fly off our wing, he could fly off anyone." So Jack passed his formation flying check ride and later was to fly one hundred Wild Weasel missions.

Ed did his best to give me a taste of every kind of mission: dive-bombing, low-level strafe, and even toss-bombing, a tactic used for nuclear delivery. In that tactic, the fighter approaches the target at low level and high speed. While still a distance from the target, the plane is pulled up into a sharp climb. The weapon is released during the climb and is tossed toward the target. The plane continues the climb, reversing its direction until the plane is heading back the way it had come in. The bomb arcs over toward the target as the plane is escaping at high speed away from the blast. The target at the Nellis Range was a large circle of around fifteen hundred feet in diameter, as

the tactic and the weapon (supposedly a nuclear weapon) did not allow or need exact accuracy. The circle had a pylon in the center from which miss distance was measured. When Ed completed his delivery, the range scorer called out on the radio in an excited voice, "You hit the pylon! You hit the pylon!" The range scorer had never seen that happen before. At 500 knots, Ed had hit a telephone-pole-sized pylon, giving him bragging rights around the squadron for quite a few days. He continued to amaze me with his flying skills and his ability to make the F-105 aircraft do whatever he wanted it to do.

As mid-May approached, we were notified that our Wild Weasel modified planes would arrive the next week and that the flying portion of our training would start then. The Nellis portion of our training was conducted in the loft of the Thunderbird Hangar on the Nellis flight line. The rest of our class joined us there. Class instruction was mediocre and conducted by pilots and EWOs from the F-100 Weasel test program. They all had a few combat missions, a few had even killed SAM sites, but they lacked the experience and the teaching skills necessary to prepare us for what was ahead. The flying was fun, though. Every morning we would take off for an hour-and-a-half mission, making homing runs against a SAM simulator at Hawthorn, Nevada.

During a classroom session, one of the F-100 pilots talked about how to dodge a SAM. It was very likely that we would be fired on while attacking a SAM site and needed to know what to do when that happened. This discussion had our undivided attention. We had been told in the lectures on missiles that they were around thirty feet long, they looked like big telephone poles, and that they closed on you at around two thousand miles per hour. They were equipped with a proximity fuse that would detonate the warhead

when the missile got close. The instructor said the missiles were quite easy to dodge if you could see them coming and position the missile at either your 10 or 2 position. Light the afterburner, push the nose over to get your airspeed up, when the missile gets close you just pull up hard, turn sharply into the missile, and the missile will fly under you and miss. You would repeat this procedure for any follow-on missiles. Someone in the class asked how close you let the missile get before pulling up hard and turning in to it. The instructor got a blank look on his face, which told us all that he was describing something he had never done. He recovered by saying, "Well, you will know." However, his advice would prove to be sound.

Ed and I became pretty proficient in finding the SAM sites at the training range. During this time, some of the crews got to fire the AGM-45 Shrike antiradiation missile at China Lake, a Naval Training Range in California. Our first time to launch a Shrike was in combat, against an enemy who was shooting back.

As the end of June approached, we prepared to deploy to Thailand and the war. As we had eight crews and only six airplanes, two crews would go on ahead as an advon team with our bags and make sure the base was ready to receive us. We each packed a B-4 bag (a large canvas folding bag) that held around forty pounds of clothes. These went with the advon teams and would be in place before we arrived. As our flight over would take four-to-five days, we packed a spare flight suit and six individual small plastic bags, each containing a T-shirt, a pair of shorts, and a pair of socks. Ed showed me how to stow them in the nose of the airplane in the many small spaces around the gun drum. At each stop we would have the crew chief open the panel so we could

retrieve the next day's clean underwear and socks. The dirty laundry would take its place the next morning.

On June 27, after ten training flights, we said good-bye to our wives and children and headed off to Thailand, our big adventure, the Vietnam War, and a combat tour that would last a year, one hundred missions over North Vietnam, or until you were shot down, killed, wounded, or captured. Our total cadre consisted of six F-105Fs and eight crews. Our destination was to be Korat Air Base in Thailand. Our stops were Hickam AFB Hawaii; Anderson AFB, Guam; Kadena AB, Okinawa; Saigon, South Vietnam; and Korat, Thailand. At each stop we spent the night, headed to the bar and consumed copious quantities of mai tais. Needless to say, after four nights of this, we were ready to fly some combat.

We arrived at Korat on July 4, 1966. Our stay there was pretty short. We landed and taxied to the parking spots, where the 13th Squadron Operations Officer met us. He told us that our orders had been changed and that we should take off immediately and fly to Takhli, the other F-105 base in Thailand. As it was lunchtime, we shut down our engines and went to lunch.

I think we were all a bit disappointed to be going to Takhli instead of Korat, but after lunch we made the thirty-minute flight over to Takhli, arriving there at around 3:30. We flew over the town of Takhli, a town of around twelve thousand people approximately three miles from the base. The town, we were to find out, had several excellent restaurants and numerous bars that catered to the base personnel. Our advance team met us when we landed and took us to where we were to live for the duration of our combat tours. Our living quarters were open-sided teak huts

called hooches, set on top of concrete pillars. We were warned that if we used the latrines at night to always carry our flashlight and to watch where we stepped, as there were cobras and kraits in abundance. In fact, the nickname of the town of Takhli was "Land of the King Cobra." The Thais called the kraits "two-steppers," as they were considered so poisonous that if bitten by one, you were only able to take two steps before falling dead.

Our hooches had eight GI iron beds with mosquito netting along each side and four large ceiling fans suspended from the center roofline. The top half of the sides of the hooch were screened in to allow some airflow. Our first impression of Thailand was that it was a very hot and humid place. No one slept well at night. The incessant noise as the maintenance crews ran jet engines and repaired and readied the planes for the next day's sorties may have contributed to the heavy losses sustained by Takhli crews during that time. (Korat's lodging was air-conditioned).

The next morning we all walked down to the Wing Headquarters building for our briefings. We were seriously jet-lagged, as well as being a bit worse for wear from too many mai tais along the way, and had a bit of trouble staying alert. We received a series of briefings; probably the most critical concerned the Rules of Engagement, a rather fancy title for what was to be a long list of those things we could not do. Those rules were reinforced by a posted list of "Be-No's" in each hooch. Such as there will "be no" shooting at MiGs unless they were off the ground with their wheels in the well. There will "be no" shooting at MiGs until we first closed to within visual range and positively identified it as a MiG. There will "be no" attacking of ships in the harbor nor any attacks made on industrial or military targets unless specifically ordered to do so. There will "be no" multiple

passes on a target. The list was extensive and its impact on our morale throughout the war was severe.

Of note during the day was our greeting by the Wing Commander, who didn't seem too happy to have us there. He especially got bent out of shape when one member sitting in the front row fell asleep during his talk. The Wing Commander let loose a tirade as to what would happen if anyone fell asleep again during one of his briefings. His tirade went well beyond what was appropriate. We all felt less than welcome at Takhli. Thankfully, the short-tempered Wing Commander was at the end of his combat tour and departed a few weeks later. His replacement turned out to be no bargain either.

A word is appropriate about our food. The officers ate all their meals at the Officer's Club. The US Navy was tasked to supply food to all the US forces in Southeast Asia. We all knew that there must have been some really good food shipped from the states for the war zone, but we quickly found out we were at the end of the supply line. The Navy ships got first choice, the headquarters folks in South Vietnam second choice, the other air bases in Thailand third choice, and Takhli, which was the most western base, got what was left over. I remember well a two-week period where all the Officer's Club had to serve was eggs. You could have them poached, boiled, or fried, over easy, over hard, sunny-side up, or scrambled. We even took to calling one of the young Thai girls who was a waitress in the club "No Hab." You'd ask for shrimp fried rice, she'd say, "No have," which sounded to us like "No hab." We'd ask for a steak or hamburger. She'd say, "No have." The waitresses were young, spoke fair English, and had a good sense of humor. Older Thai women cleaned our hooches, made our beds, and did our laundry.

One would think that a mission as dangerous as that of the Wild Weasels would have some sort of super-duper training program to get us ready. All we could say was that they tried. Two crews from Korat were in place at our new base to give us the benefit of their experience. Unfortunately, the summer monsoon made the weather in the heavily defended portions of North Vietnam so poor that no missions could be flown there. In the southern portions of North Vietnam, there were few, if any, SAM installations for us to attack. In addition, those who were going to show us how to do the job had been doing it themselves for only six weeks. After a few weeks and only a few flights, none by Ed and me, the Korat crews went back to their base.

The realities of war were quickly brought home to us. On the day of our arrival, July 4, AAA shot down an F-105. The pilot managed to fly his airplane to the water before ejecting and was rescued. On July 23, Takhli lost the first of its Wild Weasel crews while attacking a SAM site. Both men ejected and were killed or died in captivity. In July, another Weasel aircraft was severely damaged by AAA while crossing the Red River in North Vietnam. The losses continued.

Our first missions together were pretty uneventful. However, on August 5 we destroyed two SAM sites.

August 7, 1966, or Black Sunday, as it was to become known, saw several strikes scheduled against oil storage facilities along the railroads north and east of Hanoi. This area was one of the most heavily defended areas of North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese at that time had, by Intelligence estimates, over six thousand anti-aircraft gun positions, around thirty Surface-to-Air-Missile sites, and dozens of MiG fighters. All these systems were to protect a

country with fewer than fifty targets of any value. The gunners along the area north and east of Hanoi were Chinese, as were the many laborers who were kept busy repairing the bomb-damaged roads, bridges, and railroad lines. Probably the centuries-old distrust between Vietnam and China caused the Vietnamese to isolate the Chinese laborers and gunners to that area.

Our Strike Force consisted of sixteen F-105D single seaters, each carrying six 750-pound bombs on a pylon under the fuselage of the aircraft. There also were two flights of Wild Weasels interspersed among the strike force. The Weasel flights consisted of one F-105F and one single-seat wingman. Our armament consisted of two AGM-45 Shrike antiradiation missiles, one mounted on each outboard wing pylon, two pods of 2.75-inch rockets, one mounted on each inboard wing pylon, and our 20mm Gatling gun with 1,029 rounds of ammunition. We also had a 650-gallon centerline fuel tank. Our antiradiation missile, which was our only standoff weapon, wasn't the greatest. The Shrike had a seven-mile range, traveled at Mach 1.5, and had a 45-pound warhead. The SAM system we were attacking employed missiles with a range of nineteen miles, a speed of Mach 2.5, and a 430-pound fragmentation warhead.

Our bosses in the Wing hadn't yet decided on the best way to employ the Wild Weasels. We took off from Takhli at first light and flew directly east across Thailand, southern Laos, and the most southern part of North Vietnam. We would then head directly north, refueling over the water thirty to forty miles off the coast of North Vietnam.

Later, as our tactics evolved, the Wild Weasels would fly in flights of four aircraft, with an F-model in number one and

sometimes also in the number three position and single-seaters in the numbers two and four positions. We would precede the Strike Force by five-to-ten minutes and remain in the target area until all the strike aircraft had struck their targets. From that came the Wild Weasel motto, "First in, Last Out." The 2.75-inch rockets would be replaced by two canisters of CBU-24 Cluster Bomb units.

When we got north of Haiphong Harbor, we would turn west into North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese had no ability to shoot at us while we were over the water, but they did have Russian made Early Warning and Height Finder radars that tracked our aircraft as soon as we headed north. They would know we were coming and how many aircraft we had at least forty-five minutes before we entered enemy territory.

We crossed the coast into North Vietnam at around 8:00 a.m. The weather was marginal for the visual dive-bombing tactic that the strike force employed. There was a layer of haze at about 3,000 feet and scattered towering cumulous clouds (thunder clouds) whose tops were far above our altitude. Not great weather for dive-bombing nor was it good weather for finding and attacking missile sites. I started to pick up the air defense radars on my receivers. At first there were no SAM radars on the air, so we decided to attack one of the Firecan radars, plentiful in North Vietnam. Firecans usually controlled 57mm, 85mm, or larger caliber antiaircraft guns. Our AGM-45 Shrike would home in on that radar also.

"Gun at two o'clock, Ed," I called, and we began our homing run. Ed lined up the aircraft, heading toward the gun radar. As we flew toward the Firecan radar, a SAM radar came on the air. That was the target we had been looking

for. It was around ten degrees right of where the Firecan appeared to be. "Contact at two o'clock, Ed." Ed turned right and readied one of our Shrike missiles for launch. The SAM operators had seen us and were tracking our aircraft, getting ready to fire. It was now a matter of who could fire first and score a kill. For some reason, the SAM operators delayed firing, giving us the chance to fire first. Ed fired our first AGM-45. The SAM site operators in this site weren't very good, as they should have noticed the plume of our Shrike rocket motor on their radar. They continued to track us as our Shrike streaked toward them. Thirty seconds after launch, the SAM radar abruptly went off the air. We had scored a hit.

Another SAM radar had in the meantime come on the air at our 2 o'clock position. I gave Ed a heading toward this new target. The weather ahead was poor, with several towering cumulous clouds extending from near ground level up to 40,000 feet. As we got our wings level and headed for the second SAM site, I received a launch indication. The second SAM site had fired at us and as many as three Mach 2.5 radar-guided missiles were headed our way. I called "Launch!" to Ed. He turned slightly to the right, pushed the nose of the airplane over, lit the afterburner to get maneuvering energy, and started looking for the missiles. Thirty-foot-long telephone-pole-sized missiles closing at over two thousand miles per hour aren't easy to see, even when the visibility is excellent, and it was far from that.

After what seemed like an eternity, Ed called, "I see the missiles." He waited until the first missile looked like it was going to climb into the cockpit with us, initiated a hard pull up and turn to the left, and dodged the first missile. He quickly leveled the wings, lowered the nose again to pick up airspeed, pulled hard left, and dodged the second missile.

We were now right next to one of the towering cumulous clouds. The approach of the third missile had been hidden by the clouds and left us no time to maneuver. We saw the missile come out of the clouds about three hundred feet away. It exploded below and slightly to the right of the aircraft. Everything then seemed to happen in slow motion. The cockpit was filled with black smoke and the choking odor of burned cordite. The 20mm ammunition drum with its 1,029 rounds of ammunition had exploded, severely damaging the aircraft. All I saw through the black smoke were the bright red Fire Warning light and the bright yellow Master Caution light. Neither were good news, telling us that we had major system failures and that the plane was on fire. I was choking on the toxic smoke and reached for the Auxiliary Canopy Jettison handle, which would allow me to blow off my canopy. I couldn't find it and was about to inhale a huge gulp of air that would probably do me serious bodily harm. I made the only rational decision I thought I could make at the time and decided to eject, figuring that I would rather take my chances on the ground than stay with the airplane and asphyxiate. I rotated the handles on my ejection seat. This served several functions. It armed the ejection seat, jettisoned the canopy, and exposed the triggers, which must be pulled to fire the ejection seat from the airplane. I had initiated this sequence fully intending to leave the airplane and take my chances on the ground in enemy territory.

As the canopy left the airplane and cool, clean air rushed in, I reconsidered. Being able to take a deep breath of fresh air made the situation seem a lot less tense. I attempted to call Ed on the intercom system. No reply. I tried the Call Position on my intercom box, which amplified my transmission. "Ed, are you there?"

“Yes, Mike. Are you there?” responded my ever-amusing pilot.

“I had to rotate my ejection seat handles to get rid of my canopy,” I said.

“Me, too,” responded Ed, making me feel a bit better about the situation. “Hang on, Mike, I’m going to try to get us out of here.”

Ed turned north and then east toward the coast, which was the closest way out of enemy territory. I took the time to assess our damage. Besides the damage to the front of the airplane, which I have already mentioned, there was serious damage done to the leading edge of the left wing as well as damage to the upper part of the vertical stabilizer. The drag caused by the damage to the leading edge of the left wing required Ed to keep the control stick full right just to keep the plane level. At least we were heading east. Our maximum airspeed was less than 300 knots, about half of what we would like it to be when flying over enemy territory. The good news was that the Fire Warning light had extinguished, indicating either that the fires were out or else the circuits had burned through. Ed put all his considerable piloting skills to good use in keeping our mortally damaged airplane headed in the right direction.

I looked around for our wingman, whom we hadn’t seen since we started dodging missiles. I did see a circle of flak bursts from 57mm or 85mm antiaircraft guns, which were tracking us. “They’re shooting at us Ed,” I called.

After a few moments Ed responded, “Roger, Mike. I see them.” The first circular series of bursts were around a

thousand feet behind us. The second halved the distance. The third burst was right under the aircraft and jolted us hard. Just then our wingman closed in on us with around a hundred knots overtake. He zoomed under us and out to our right a mile or so before he could get slowed down. The flak, instead of hammering us again now that they had our range, followed our wingman's airplane. This gave us time to get across the coast and over the water, where our chances of rescue were considerably better. The hits by the 57mm flak had dealt a fatal blow to our plane.

Ed called, "Mike, the hydraulics are gone. We need to get out." As the plane started a spiraling left turn, Ed and I exchanged short pleasantries. I finished the ejection sequence I had started fifteen minutes ago. Ed left the plane seconds later.

For the next hour, Ed and I were out of contact, so I can only tell you what happened to me. The ejection sequence was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The ejection seat accelerates you from the airplane with a force of 18 Gs. This stress is instantaneous and lasts only for a few seconds. Once you are clear of the airplane, a device called a Butt Slapper releases the seatbelt and shoulder harness and throws you from the seat. In sequence, your parachute is automatically opened. All this happened so fast that all I recalled was squeezing the ejection triggers, a sharp hit in the butt, and the jolt of an opening parachute. I then checked that my parachute canopy was properly deployed and pulled my survival kit release handle, which was by my right leg. I did all that and was ready to throw the survival kit handle away. I thought it would make a fine souvenir and stowed it in my G-suit pocket. The survival kit dropped below me about ten feet or so, and my one-man life raft deployed below that another ten feet, all attached by a one-

inch flat white nylon cord. It was extremely quiet after the noise of the struggling F-105. I took out one of my survival radios and listened on the emergency frequency to see who, if anybody, was coming to rescue us. I heard my parachute beeper, which told other aircraft that we had ejected, and reached behind my shoulder to turn it off. Continuous broadcast of that signal is not necessary once it has been heard, and listening to it can be a major annoyance.

Ed and I had been in our parachutes for only a few seconds when we heard a loud explosion. Our airplane, which had been in a spiraling left turn exploded at 4,000 feet, about a half-mile away. A fire had still been burning in the airplane that we were not aware of. We were fortunate to have ejected when we did. We dodged another bullet.

Descending under the parachute, I tried to review all I had been taught in Survival School about a parachute landing in the water. My parachute canopy was intact, my raft had deployed and inflated. I remember feeling pretty calm and in control of the situation. I remembered to do all of the water-landing sequence and found myself sinking like a rock. I had forgotten one important step—to inflate my life preserver. By some miracle or chance, the white nylon cord, which had me attached to my life raft, appeared just in front of my face. I pulled myself hand over hand up the cord and scrambled into the life raft. I felt very fortunate to have survived thus far in this adventure.

I took out a survival radio again and was comforted to know that our wingman was directing our rescue effort. Reassured that help was on the way, I opened one of my baby bottles of water and drained the whole thing. After my thirst was quenched, I pulled up the survival kit, still attached by the nylon cord, to see what I could use. The

survival kit was supposed to contain a .22 Hornet rifle (disassembled), fishing tackle, sea dye marker, emergency flares, shark repellent, survival rations, canned water, and extra socks. When I opened my survival kit it was empty with the exception of one pair of black wool socks. Don't know who got the rest, but hope they put all of it to good use. So much for grabbing a little snack.

I couldn't see Ed, but heard our wingman say that he had both rafts in sight and that they were around a thousand yards apart. The sea was fairly choppy, which limited visibility to a few hundred feet.

We were in our rafts in the water for an hour and a half when Crown Alpha, an HU-16 Albatross seaplane, called asking for our location. Ten minutes or so later, the seaplane passed overhead. Ed popped one of his orange smoke flares and Crown Alpha called that he had seen it and set up to land. I had not yet made my position known, but had my smoke flare ready to ignite. As the HU-16 landed and taxied over to pick up Ed, I popped my smoke flare, and the rescue crew called that they had me in sight. Five minutes later the HU-16 taxied within twenty yards of me. Curiously, it had no markings indicating that it was a USAF airplane. To make matters more interesting, standing in the door was an Asian in a black wet suit. Was this some sort of a North Vietnamese trick? I reached for my pistol, which we wore in shoulder holsters.

The guy in the door shouted, "Don't shoot. I'm Hawaiian!" With the formalities out of the way, he jumped into the water, swam over to my raft, and towed me to the Albatross door. As they helped me into the airplane, I saw Ed seated against the bulkhead wrapped in a GI blanket. Ed gave me a weak smile and a thumbs up. The rescue crew

said, "Your pilot has hurt his back really bad." I went to the cockpit and thanked the pilot and copilot. He said to have a seat, and he would see if he could get us out of there.

The adventure wasn't over yet, as the HU-16 had a sick right engine. In fact, the crew had considered aborting the rescue mission because of the engine. As the wind was coming off the land, the takeoff run was toward North Vietnam and the many islands off the coast. It took three attempts to get enough airspeed built up to get airborne. The two aborted attempts took us close enough to the islands to draw small arms and mortar fire from one of the islands, which was returned by a few of the Rescue crew hanging out the right side window of the plane, firing their M-16s. The HU-16 creaked and groaned as it bounced off the waves, seemingly trying to get a high enough bounce to become airborne. I'm sure the takeoff attempts did little to help Ed's back injury.

Around an hour later, we landed at Da Nang Airport in South Vietnam and were met by photographers, flight surgeons, and ambulances. Ed and I were taken in separate ambulances and didn't see each other again for almost two years. I was checked out by a Marine flight surgeon. He asked if my back was hurting. I said not much. His response was, "Well, it will." He was right. He said that Ed's back injury was quite severe and that he would remain hospitalized. After checking me out, they gave me a new flight suit and a ride to the Officer's Club. An airplane from Takhli would come to pick me up the next day.

I met the HU-16 crew at the club. They insisted on buying me drinks and dinner and asked me if I wanted to make a MARS (Military Affiliate Radio Station) call back to the states. I called Mary Nell, told her what had happened,

and to call Carolyn and say that we were OK, but Ed's back was hurt pretty bad. The HU-16 crew treated me well and seemed to be as happy as Ed and I were that they had rescued us. Sadly, on October 18 of that year, Red and his crew took off from Da Nang on a routine patrol in bad weather. They encountered worsening weather and failed to make a scheduled radio call. Although extensive efforts were made to find the crew, no wreckage was ever found, nor were any bodies ever recovered. All seven crewmembers were listed as killed in action.

The next day a T-39 from Takhli picked me up. The Wing and Squadron Commanders met the plane when I landed at Takhli. The Wing Commander asked me what I wanted to do. I said, "How about a thirty-day leave?"

He said, "Sure." I left a few days later for Fort Worth and an unplanned visit with the family. While there, I went out to the B-52 alert facility and gave a talk to my old bomber buddies. As a result, five of the EWOs volunteered for the Wild Weasel program.

Ed's journey wasn't nearly as pleasant. After hospital stays at Da Nang, the Philippines, Japan, and Washington State, Ed was released many months later, but was unable to fly ejection-seat airplanes and was not able to tolerate the G forces required in fighter duty.

I returned to Takhli after my thirty-day leave and was able to complete my hundred-mission tour with two other pilots. Our initial efforts with the Wild Weasel operation had not been very successful. We had killed a few SAM sites. Within forty-five days after our arrival at Takhli with our sixteen crewmembers and six airplanes, four Weasels were

dead, three were wounded, two were prisoners of war, and two left the program. One airplane remained flyable. From the day Ed and I arrived until the day of our shoot down, twenty-seven F-105s had been lost from our wing. We later received new airplanes and replacement crews, but the incredibly stupid tactics and general conduct of the war remained the same.



EARLY DAYS AT KORAT FLYING THE THUD JOHN SCHROEDER

I was there from March 1965 to mid-June 1965 and flew some of the first Rolling Thunder sorties with the 354th TFS/355th Wing. Later that year (November) the wing was broken up. We deployed to Takhli to finish our combat tours with the 357th, and joined with two squadrons of the 4th Wing out of Seymour Johnson to reconstitute the 355th Wing.

In early 1965, operations at the base were run collegially by the two ops squadron commanders and a base commander. All three were lieutenant colonels. Missions were equally split and scheduled by their respective operations officers. A rep from each squadron manned the command post. Our vehicles and some equipment were castoffs from other bases in the Pacific Theater and the remainder was brought with us as part of Tactical Air Commands's standard squadron deployment package. What a lesson in effective, operational simplicity!

We slept in open-sided teak hooches. Each hooch held ten beds, a refrigerator and at least a dozen gecko lizards that obviated the need for sleeping under netting. Each one

had a Thai maid assigned who did the laundry and kept the refrigerator stocked with fresh pineapple and other goodies—bought or scrounged. The urinals were outdoors with a four-foot-high, three-sided solid screen. They were standard second-generation Army field sanitation facilities. They consisted of large funnels stuck into pipes, which were stuck into the ground. Lord knows what was under the ground, but it wasn't a sewer line. The two-holer latrine was adequate but also attractive to a cobra once in a while. One of the pilots was using it late one night and the critter was laid out in the rafters looking at him. Another snake story involved one of the guys wandering home from the club on the duckboards to avoid the mud from a recent rain. A cobra was staring him down from a break in the duckboard. We also had a swimming pool that one of the Kadena guys managed to scrounge and bring down on the daily C-130 airlift run. It was a twenty-man life raft. Every morning, the base water truck would stop by to refill it on its rounds to fill the shower tanks. We also managed to scrounge a refrigerator for each hooch from Kadena's salvage yard.

The O'Club at Korat was an open-sided, screened hooch made out of solid teak and a sheet-metal roof. A two-holer served as the latrine, along with the standard urinal on the other side of the duckboard walkway leading to the club from the residential hooches. The club was pretty lively. You could get most anything to drink. As I recall, Tiger beer out of Singapore was pretty good stuff, as was San Miguel out of the Philippines. A few of the pilots were into slot-car racing and had stowed their rigs away in one of the fly-away aircraft parts containers used for the deployment. That kept a lot of folks occupied. They were set up on the floor in one wing of the club. Bridge was popular in those days, especially on the fighter alert pads, and that helped.

The usual games were played, especially Dead Bug and ringing the bell over the bar for infractions of decorum, mostly for wearing one's cap when entering the club. Dice games for money and drinks were also standard fare. A favorite prank was to wander all around the club with a can of lighter fluid, leaving a trail. The real trick was to also run it along the length of the bar and then light it before anyone could detect your trail and light it from behind you. Late at night seemed to be the most successful time for obvious reasons. And you were very good if a string of fire ran all the way to your starting point.

God, those were the days. Although the missions were mostly in Route Packs I, II, III, and IV in North Vietnam or in Laos, they took their toll. I flew three missions against the Thanh Hoa Bridge in North Vietnam, two strike and one recce RF-101 escort. I was not on the first strike, but two nights before that one, I was the duty hog and took a call directly from the Pentagon. It was Secretary of Defense McNamara's office asking to be connected to the "Commander." One of the squadron commanders was the "Duty Commander" and was called in to take the call. McNamara wanted to know if we could take the Thanh Hoa Bridge down with the fragged ordnance and aircraft. The "Commander" told him no and recommended that we stand down the next day and double the strike force. McNamara approved. Talk about a direct chain of command. We had to then coordinate back to 2nd Air Division (predecessor to 7th AF) in Saigon and all the way back to HQ Air Force.

The BDA of the bridge after this first mission showed very little damage, so another mission was laid on for the next day. It was my first combat mission. All aircraft were loaded with eight 750-pound bombs. The Bullpup missiles

used by half of the force the day before were like throwing firecrackers at the bridge.

At the time, for big missions, we had a mission commander orbiting over the target to control the traffic and act more or less like a FAC. I was unlucky one mission to be the wingman for him, and the North Vietnamese loved to see if they could bag one or both of us. The strike force would orbit at a holding point, and the flights would stack at thousand-foot intervals. One of my squadron's flights was in the stack that day awaiting a call from the mission commander to drop on the target. A flight of four MiGs came up through a very heavy haze layer, split one-on-one, and attacked the flight. They shot down both lead and three. I was inbound to the holding point and I'll always remember hearing the cool voice on the radio as one of the pilots nursed his bird toward the South China Sea so he could have a decent chance to be rescued. We believe he went down just a mile off shore. The next day, a SAR flight was fragged, and we spotted a large slick and turbulent/muddy water northeast of the holding point. There was no sign of a chute or raft.

The two survivors of that flight used John Boyd's tactics to get away. He had been directed to tour all of the bases in the Far East to brief pilots on his theory of energy maneuverability and, more importantly, to brief the tactics for each type of our fighter aircraft vis-à-vis each model of MiG we could encounter in theater. He had briefed us that morning before the mission took off to make the "standard" 1:30 p.m. TOT. Both survivors used the F-105's ability to lose energy faster than the MiG-17s and the MiGs squirted out in front of them. The only problem was the MiGs disappeared in the haze before the F-105s could get their energy back and position for a tail shot. We had very few

people in the line fighter units in those days that had combat experience, and the years of concentration on the nuclear mission left little time or training for conventional tactics.

I had spent the previous four years at Bitburg AB, Germany, and we did almost no air-to-air except to illegally hassle, and get waxed by, the Canadian Mark VIs from time to time. But we did get a fair amount of conventional gunnery by deploying to Wheelus AB, Libya, every six months for both nuclear and conventional qualifications, and hopefully to fire on the dart. This was infrequent for the Thud because the Gatling gun could tear the dart up too much. It was too expensive to allocate a dart to just one aircraft or at most a single flight of F-105s. Rather than download the thousand combat rounds from the birds and having to trash the entire load, they would put them on the dart missions. If you were lucky and drew one of those birds, it was pretty spectacular and a load of fun to plink a dart.

Back to the bridge mission. Imagine a holding pattern with several flights of four, loaded with eight 750-pound bombs and external fuel tanks, orbiting and waiting for clearance to the target. For that first strike, some birds were armed with two Bullpup missiles. Also, imagine being told to hold a wings-level 30-degree dive angle while spending about thirty seconds in the flak to manually guide the missile to the target. The warhead was only 250 pounds and looked like a firecracker when it hit the bridge. Needless to say, the second pass into the heavy flak by the unlucky pilots saw a few missiles go ballistic as they jinked to try to stay alive. Also imagine a standard TOT of 1:30 p.m. Nguyen the gunner and his buddies would finish their tea at 1:25, get into their gun pits, elevate their guns to the "standard" 45 degrees, and the Yankee Air Pirates would be rolling in at

precisely 1:30. Training and planning have come a long way since that era, not to mention the wonders of guided munitions. We had three strike missions, twenty-four to forty-eight F- 105s per mission, against that bridge in a little over a month. We bent it enough that they had to work hard to get stuff across it. But they did.

I don't know how many other missions or losses were taken to get the bridge. I heard one story that they tried getting it with a fuel-air bomb sliding off the ramp of a C-130 as it pulled up into a climb over the bridge. At least, it makes a good story. But toward the end of Linebacker I, reportedly, they got it with one 2,000-pound, electro-optically guided-bomb (EOGB). I believe it was a Navy strike and the bomb was experimental at the time. I know a lot of us tipped more than a few at the bar, wherever we were, when we got that piece of news.

When I returned to Thailand in 1972 to fly a tour in the F-4, air combat had changed substantially. In the intervening seven years, planning, tactics, command and control, and living conditions had all changed—mostly for the good. However, life with the guys in the hooches, in the club, and on the flight line was pretty much the same. The exhilaration of combat flying and the comradery would never change. That combination would be timeless.



FIRST COMBAT F-105S IN SEA CARL HAMBY

In September 1963 I was assigned to an F-105 wing in Japan. The wing had twenty-four airplanes on nuclear alert at Osan AB, Korea. Every third week I would go to Korea for a week. In June 1964 I was sent to Air Force HQ in Saigon for four months. The wing sent an F-105 squadron to Korat AB in Thailand in support of the war with North Vietnam.

This was a three-month tour, and they were relieved by the 35th TFS (my squadron) to be relieved in three months by the 80th TFS. So the wing had one squadron at Osan, rotating each week, and one squadron at Korat, later at Takhli, for three-month rotations. In June 1966 the Wing received orders to PCS a Squadron to Korat. The 36th TFS was selected and staffed with volunteers. The Wing Commander took a busload of wives to the end of the runway at Yokota AB for our departure. We were required to land at Kadena AB, Okinawa, where we became the 34th TFS. Departure was to be at 10:30 a.m. the next day for Korat. The Squadron Commander and I were standing near his airplane, awaiting take-off time. He was listening to his radio and told me that we had to return to the command

post for a briefing. In the command post, we were advised that the Secretary of the Air Force in Washington was briefed on our departure for Korat. He said, "Isn't that part of the nuclear wing in Japan?" He then said, "I did not approve that transfer, so send them back to Yokota."

When we landed at Yokota, twenty-four hours after we left, the busload of wives were at the end of the runway with a sign saying, "Welcome home, combat heroes."

The crewmembers had PCS orders to Korat, but the airplanes now belonged to Yokota with no crew members. After two weeks of sorting things out, it was decided that the crew members would go to Korat via C-130, but the F-105s would remain at Yokota. The whole world is either on nuclear alert or flying combat, and you take a squadron of F-105s RON to Kadena. What a way to go to war. After about two weeks the airplanes arrived at Korat from Yokota.

The Squadron policy was to have four-ship formations to go North to Hanoi. On June 30, 1966, we were fragged to bomb the POL across the river from Hanoi near the northeast railroad. Taxi, take off, and join up with the tanker were normal. We passed four or five flights that were above us, and when we crossed the Black River, Fitz turned right, descending between the two mountains on each side of the river, and called the flight to jettison the fuel tanks. We still had 500 pounds of fuel in each tank when they were jettisoned. As we were descending, when my afterburner lit, the main air line overheat light on the master caution panel came on, indicating a severe problem. I quickly analyzed the situation and knew if this were the case, I would bail out and walk home. When the light came on, I didn't feel anything, I didn't hear anything, and I didn't smell anything, so hopefully for me it would be only a bad sensor and not a

broken air line, which would cause a fire. So I didn't say anything.

The Delta was flooded and the airplane wanted to tuck, so I applied back trim and looked at the airspeed/Mach meter, which read .97 Mach. The F-105 at speed in humid air created a condensation streamer around the canopy. I was looking to my right through the windshield quarter panel and saw something to my left. It was Son Tay, and I was level with the windows, so I pulled up to go over it at .97 Mach in afterburner. It must have surprised them, because you couldn't hear an F-105 coming at that speed. We popped up over the lake northwest of Hanoi.

There I was, 12,000 feet on my back over downtown Hanoi, so I rolled in to put my bombs on the target. I came off the bomb run supersonic, and when I came out of afterburner to join with Fitz, the main air line overheat light went out—good. Fitz still had six 750-pound bombs on his centerline rack, so he jettisoned them over Thud Ridge, then on to the tanker. Refueling and cruise home were normal.

My F-105 felt so good clean that I did a couple of aileron rolls. The crew chief asked if I had been going fast because the fiberglass around the edge of the canopy was frayed.



FUEL STARVATION AND EJECTION RUSS VIOLETT

I was number three in a flight of four Thuds that were targeted against a munitions storage site in the Dien Bien Phu complex of northwestern North Vietnam on July 3, 1965. Our squadron had deployed in April from McConnell and had been flying daily since then. The flight was led by the D Flight Commander in the 563rd TFS.

The flight briefing, takeoff, and refueling en route were normal. As the flight was crossing the North Vietnam border northbound, lead advised the flight to "Green 'em up." A few minutes later, lead said, "My low-level fuel light just came on." Our configuration was eight 750s and two 450-gallon fuel tanks. We were cruising at 20,000 feet at about 380 knots. Let's think back to the tanker.

In the F-105, internal fuel was selected on the fuel system selector before refueling. After refueling, external fuel was selected for the wing/belly/bomb bay tanks, in turn, to use that fuel first. If you didn't do that, you continue to use fuel from the internal tanks. When he said the low-level light was on, number two in the flight told him to jettison his external stores, and instantly, lead cleaned his wings

including two 450-gallon external fuel tanks. This all took place inside of a few seconds.

As I watched the bombs and tanks streaming fuel as they fell away, I realized lead had just jettisoned two full 450-gal fuel tanks. YGBSM! I told him to climb and turn to the south. I jettisoned my bombs, and remained with lead, and told two and four to recover. We climbed to about 30,000 and then started a minimum fuel consumption descent, about idle and 275 KCAS heading south. We were above the clouds, which topped at about 12,000 with a few holes in the cloud deck here and there. As we descended through about 18,000, lead flamed out. We were north of the PDJ (Plain of Jars) in Laos, and I was talking to an ABCCC controller and identifying our position and heading to them so they could move some rescue aircraft toward us. I was also getting our Thud jock to go through his ejection checklist and had him convinced he had to get out of the aircraft before he entered the cloud deck so I could see him. He didn't do that until he was in and out of the clouds; then he ejected.

I saw him and the seat separate from the aircraft and then lost him in the weather. I didn't see a chute at that time. I marked my position on the instruments, made a 180 turn while descending, and saw the ground through some holes in the clouds. I reversed course and was in the clear about 3,000 feet above the ground. I proceeded back to my "marked" position and started looking for him. Nothing. I was flying in a circle, and on the second or third circle saw his parachute as it settled into the tree canopy. I was in contact now with some rescue folks, but I was getting low on fuel and advised I had to get some fuel. ABCCC directed me to a tanker, and then I returned to the scene.

Now a chopper was in the area, but he hadn't located the parachute in the tree canopy. It took me several passes; I did see the parachute again and directed the chopper to it. They lowered a "horse collar" to him. After he was in it, but before he had disconnected from his parachute, which suspended him about 150 feet above the ground, the chopper attempted to lift him out of the trees. Didn't work. Dislocated one of his arms, and they had to cut the cable to release him back into the trees to save the helicopter. The chopper then found an opening in the trees about 1,000 feet from him and landed. Two PJ's hiked to him, climbed the tree, recovered him, and carried him to the chopper. The rescued pilot spent several months in the hospital and/or in therapy regaining the use of his arm.

This was an accident created when the postrefueling checklist was not followed, and the aircraft ran out of fuel because the external tanks were never selected. Simple things that can ruin your whole day. Another example of how paying attention to the details can save your life one day. An unfortunate outcome—lost an airplane, put many people in jeopardy, but did save a pilot. He was lucky.



THE FATE OF DOGWOOD 2 FRANK TULLO

It was the first day I had my Captain bars on. The night before, we had a small party at the so-called O'Club at Korat. Two of us made Captain the next day.

The next morning had all the earmarks of a large mission. Everyone was running around with hair on fire. We found out we were going inside the thirty mile "Restricted" zone around Hanoi on the first mission against SAMs the USAF had ever flown.

As the frag came down, I found I was flying on Hoz's wing. Hoz was leading a flight of eight as the last strike flight of the day, and our mission was to recce all the targets and clean up anything left over. I had flown on Hoz's wing many times and felt I was bulletproof when I flew with him. As Dogwood 2 I felt safe doing anything. He was the best pilot in our squadron.

I'm not ashamed to say I was plenty scared that day. Just a few days prior, the SAM site had shot down an F-4C and damaged three others. We may as well have

telegraphed our intentions, which was typical of the tactics we were forced to use under the Johnson Administration. This was to be a maximum effort, twenty-four aircraft from Korat and the same from Takhli.

When I went out to my aircraft that day I was surprised to find a 650 centerline hung in addition to two 450s and two 2.75 rocket pods. My crew chief told me the aircraft was scheduled to ferry back to Kadena that day, but it had changed because of the mission. It was full of fuel, and there was no time to defuel. Because of this, the flight had to fly over the bomb dump area after takeoff so I could jettison the tank before we went to the tanker.

As we started our letdown into the target area, somehow we knew there were downed aircraft. I don't remember hearing a beeper, but we knew. The adrenalin was flowing. We were northbound low and fast between 100 and 200 feet coming up to the first SAM site. We were unpressurized, so I could smell the gunsmoke in the air, and there was a haze layer of gunsmoke over Hanoi.

I was on Hoz's right wing, and I remember him saying something about salvoed missiles when he broke hard left. As I followed him, I flew through a cloud of white smoke, and when I looked down, I saw four-barreled guns spewing embers and white smoke. It looked like they were on flatbed trucks but later I found out they were ZPU 14.5mm guns on wheeled carts. When I looked back into the cockpit, I was greeted by a big red Fire light. I told lead I had the light about the same time the other members of the flight told me I was on fire. Hoz reminded me to jettison my load, which I did.

For some unknown reason, I was convinced that all was going to be OK, the fire would go out, and I'd go back to Korat. Not to be! I took the lead going straight west and I had my eye on a mountain or hill that I was hoping to make it to. I kept ignoring the calls to eject because things didn't look that bad. All my instruments had failed, but I still had the emergency gauges. The small airspeed indicator was pegged at 400 knots, as high as it goes.

I heard small explosions and when I pulled back on the stick *nothing happened!* I told lead "everything just turned to shit" and started the ejection sequence. When I pulled up the handles and the canopy went, I was astounded by what happened. The noise of the rushing air at that speed and the engine noise from the intakes just outside the cockpit stopped me cold. I was almost blinded by all the dirt and loose debris that flew out of the cockpit. There was a few seconds' delay between the canopy going and me ejecting. Some in the flight thought I was waiting for the right location, but that wasn't the case.

I don't remember anything between squeezing the triggers and feeling the chute open. As I told the PE Sergeant when I got back, everything worked perfectly. When I felt the chute open, I was in a completely different world. The silence was deafening. I didn't see or hear my aircraft, and I might have heard my flight off in the distance but it was really, really quiet. When I looked up to check my chute I could see only with my right eye—didn't concern me one bit—I was alive!

I was in the chute just a few seconds but I did see a U shaped farmhouse and field off in the distance to the west and the city of Hanoi to the east. When I looked down, the blood and flap of skin above my left eye cleared, and I could

see with both eyes again. I landed in elephant grass six or seven feet tall near a large tree. My first concern was to disappear. I stuffed my chute under the grass and grabbed my radio. When I turned it on, all I heard was my own beeper, which I silenced. About then I heard the flight and Hoz's voice calling me. I reported that I was in a great place for a pickup but I had lost my cigarettes in the ejection. I was on the side of a hill and to the north was the top, so I told Hoz I was going to climb to the top.

I clearly remember as they capped me that whenever they strayed too far to the east, I could hear gunfire and I think I heard rounds falling short around me. The next thing Hoz told me was something I didn't want to hear. He said he had been ordered to RTB and said, "Looks like it will be an all-nighter."

Then it real got quiet. I found myself breathing shallow, to be as quiet as possible. Every little noise got my full attention. I remembered that I had not deployed the emergency pack attached to the harness, so I pulled the handle and to my surprise the life raft started to deploy. The rush of air into the raft was really loud, so I pulled my knife and attacked it. It took at least three stabs to deflate it. It got quiet again. I often wondered what a North Vietnamese would have thought about the "Air Pirate" killing his raft I decided to climb to the top. I gathered all my emergency equipment and started up. I had gone less than a hundred feet when I realized I couldn't make it. The elephant grass was impossible to move through. I was exhausted, completely drenched with sweat, and dying of thirst. I was sweating so much that the bandage over my eye fell off. I decided to stop there and wait for a chopper. I took the ball ammo out of my pistol and loaded tracers.

After a short period I heard prop engines. I turned on my radio and made a call. Canasta flight, two Navy A1s were in the area, and I guided them to my position. Canasta lead had a very soothing voice, and when I told him I was looking up his wing at him, he said "I got ya." That was real good news. He said they had to leave, but there was an effort to get a chopper for me.

A while later I heard jets. A flight of two F-105s flew near my position, and I guided them over me. Lead asked me to pop smoke and I told him in no uncertain terms I would not. He told me to "relax" and then said he saw buses unloading troops at the bottom of the hill I was on. They left without doing anything about the buses.

I stayed as quiet and still as I could for a long time and then I heard it. It started out just a few gunshots but built to a crescendo of fire. It stopped, and then it was quiet again. I could hear voices working their way up the hill toward me and the shooting started again. They fired salvos a few more times, and at one time I saw the top of an old man with a conical hat seventy-five or one hundred feet below me but moving west. For some unknown, reason they stopped climbing up the hill and started moving west, chopping their way away from me.

I kept myself busy arranging my emergency equipment. I kept all the signal equipment lying out in front of me, and I had everything else in the carrying bag that came in the emergency kit so I could move quickly if necessary. I tried to keep from drinking all the water I had, but I was real thirsty. Then I heard the noise I had been hoping for. It was Canasta flight coming right at me. I turned on the radio and called. Canasta lead said he had a chopper right behind him. "You do good work," was my reply.

It was an aircraft I had never seen before, not what I was expecting but unbelievably welcome. It was Jolly Green One, and he was coming directly at me. I fired the pen flares and popped red smoke. He said he didn't have me, so I emptied my pistol tracers straight up. He said he had me, and soon he was directly over me, lowering the sling. I grabbed my carrying bag and got into the sling. They raised me about ten feet off the ground and stopped. I hung there for quite a while when they finally pulled away with me hanging well below the chopper. I dangled there for what seemed an eternity, my arms hurting more and more as time went by. Whenever I looked down, I saw little white puffs of smoke everywhere, so I stopped looking down.

I then saw a rope coming out of the chopper door and understood they wanted me to tie the rope to the sling. When I did this, I noticed that I was losing feeling and control of my hands; it felt like I had boxing gloves on. I saw two or maybe three guys looking out the door and felt the rope lifting me. They were able to lift me three or four feet but then stopped. The good thing was the original cable became a loop in front of me and I was able to put my foot in that loop and release some pressure off my arms.

The chopper began to move to the west, and to my horror, I realized they were going toward the little U-shaped house. As I looked around off in the distance to the west, I saw a large group of fighters, I'm even positive I saw a B-57. As we approached, I could see there was a dry rice paddy next to the house, and that's where we were headed. When we got close, a brightly colored rooster ran across the field. I was set down in the field, and the chopper maneuvered off to the side. My eyes were glued to the house, and when the chopper landed, I took off. As I approached the chopper door, I heard an automatic weapon firing from the house.

I dove into the chopper, and when I looked toward the cockpit, I saw both pilots ducking to the center as they applied takeoff power. We were off, and I was safe. I thanked the pilots, and then the PJ wanted to take care of my eye. My flight suit was soaking wet with sweat, and as we climbed up it got colder, and I began to shake. I've always blamed that on the cold, but I'm sure it was shock. They covered me as well as they could, gave me water and a cigarette, and I eventually stopped shivering. I don't know how many holes there were in the chopper, but there were holes.

We landed at Lima Site 36 in the dark guided by fifty-five-gallon drums filled with burning gasoline. I was greeted by a blond-haired American with a fifth of White Horse scotch in his hand and was lifted out the next morning by Air America.

I was taken to Vientiane, Laos, and debriefed by two lieutenant colonels. They weren't exactly nice to me, insisting I saw more than I was telling them. A general's aide interrupted the debriefing. I was told that the Pacific Air Forces Commander was at the Officer's Club with all the base dignitaries and wanted to see me. I entered the club and was seated next to the general, who was genuinely interested in what had gone wrong. I had been sweating in my flight suit for two days and slept on the dirt floor of a bunker at Lima Site 36, so I couldn't have been good company.

He insisted I have lunch, which I eagerly slam dunked, and he listened to my story. When lunch was over, he asked if there was anything he could do for me, and I told him I just wanted to get back to my squadron. He told his aide to

make sure I was on the KC-135 he was flying to Korat that afternoon.

On the ride into Korat he had me sit in the cockpit, and when we got close, he made me call my squadron on our frequency to tell them I was aboard. When we landed and taxied in, I left the cockpit and stepped into the cabin, not wanting to be in the way. The shiny 135 stopped in front of all the base dignitaries, the door opened, and stairs were brought up. The general called me and made me go out the door first. There I was in my entire stinky-flight-suit glory.

Korat had taken a beating the day before, losing four aircraft. They were glad to see someone return. The general went to the O'Club with us, and we all downed a cool one. Finally someone told me I stunk like a goat and should go take a shower.

We had taken off around 1430 from Korat, and I landed at Lima site 36 around 2000. It was when I was on the ground that I found out how many Thuds had been shot down that day. My good friend Percy was bagged and became a POW. Of the six Thud pilots shot down that day, I was the only pilot rescued. The chopper pilot, Hoz, the two Navy A-1 pilots, and I have had thirty- and forty-year reunions, and I will be "eternally grateful" for their bravery.



MIG-21S CAN MAKE RUNNING OUT OF GAS
HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH
W. HOWARD PLUNKETT

“Anvil” flight, two F-105Fs, and two F-105Ds was a Takhli Iron Hand mission July 11, 1966, one of the first Wild Weasel missions flown by the 355th Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW). The flight supported strikes against targets in the Kep area of North Vietnam.

The crew of Anvil 1 was one of two crews from Korat sent to Takhli to provide combat training to new crews. The crew of Anvil 3 was from Wild Weasel Class 66WW III-2, recently assigned to the 354th TFS, and this was their first combat mission to the Hanoi area.

The mission began better than it ended. The flight spotted a SAM site in RP-6 and Anvil 1 fired two Shrikes. The Fan Song went off the air fifteen to twenty seconds later. Anvil 1 then spotted a second SAM site and strafed it while Anvil 2 fired his rocket pods. The flight pulled off their target into a cloud layer, and all four planes became separated. Popping out of the cloud over Thud Ridge, Anvil 2, following a Direction Finder (DF) steer, attempted to rejoin his lead.

He spotted two planes at a distance and thought they were part of his flight, so flew toward them to join up. Two miles away he realized he was joining on a pair of MiG-21s!

At that instant the MiG-21 on the right broke sharply up and to the right, and the other aircraft continued straight ahead. Anvil 2 went afterburner, jettisoned stores, and made a hard right 180-degree turn to parallel Thud Ridge northbound. As Anvil 2 relaxed Gs and started to roll out, he sighted a MiG-21 in an inverted canopy-to-canopy position, approximately thirty degrees ahead, 500 feet high, and to the right. He broke right into the MiG, pulling the nose down and rolling under to recover at minimum altitude on the deck heading northwest, hugging the north side of Thud Ridge.

Although he had lost cooling and flight instruments, Anvil 2 knew he was supersonic due to the vapor that formed around his canopy, obscuring all rearward visibility from 2 o'clock and 10 o'clock aft. Since Anvil 2 could not clear his 6 o'clock position to determine if the MiG had disengaged, he crossed Thud Ridge through a valley and continued west in supersonic flight on the deck, jinking hard right and left until crossing the Red River.

Crossing the river with two thousand pounds of fuel remaining, Anvil 2 came out of afterburner and zoomed to 25,000 feet, continuing a full military climb to 35,000 feet. GCI was saturated with three other emergency fuel aircraft and could get only intermittent skin paints since his IFF was inoperative. He flamed out shortly after gaining visual contact with the tanker and ejected, descending through 4,000 feet. Picked up in Laos by a Jolly Green from Nakhon Phanom (NKP or "Naked Fanny"), the chopper took him to Udorn.

In a Red Baron interview on February 2, 1967, Anvil 2 explained why he remained supersonic for so long. "The greatest problem that I had was determining whether that man was still back there and at any given time...I could have accepted that as an alternative and come out of AB, but I didn't feel that north of the Red River was an acceptable place to take this chance."

Anvil 4 also had equipment problems that complicated his encounter with two MiG-21s. He described what happened to him in a Red Baron interview. "Lead fired his Shrike, and I attempted to get into position to see where it struck and perhaps follow up with my rockets. I maneuvered around by the clouds and lost sight of the lead and two. About that time I looked at my fuel and discovered that my bomb bay had not fed properly, and I was almost out of fuel. So I pulled off target and made a call to the flight, and learned that my radio also was out...I was unable to contact the flight, so I started west across Thud Ridge headed for the Red River...into as safe territory as possible for bailout 'cause I didn't think I'd be able to get home with the fuel that I had."

"As I was climbing up...working with a circuit breaker for the fuel system, attempting to get the bomb bay fuel, it did start to feed. Then it would stop, and the circuit breaker would pop, and I continued working with it. As I was doing this, I happened to look over my right shoulder to the rear and noticed two MiG-21s about my four o'clock position in a pursuit curve. They were high on me, coming down...It was instantly recognizable that they were MiG-21s because I had a good profile view of them. So I punched off all my tanks and pylons and went AB and started picking up speed...I broke very hard into the MiGs...The 105 came around real well. It surprised me how well it did come around, and I

think it surprised him also, because we met each other head on. He broke up and to the right and down, and I rolled off the top to keep him in sight and was right on his 6 o'clock position approximately 2,000 feet out when he started northward down through the clouds."

"Well I didn't have any fuel. I couldn't go after him. I figured...I couldn't make it back unless I could continue getting all my bomb bay fuel. I went after him a little while and it really hurt me to pull off because I had him. There was no way for him to leave me, if I'd just had the fuel. I broke off, started my climb again to conserve fuel and get into a safe area. I started working with my bomb bay fuel and about that time, I remembered that there was another MiG around. So I racked it very stiff over to the left and took a look back, and there was the other one about fifteen hundred feet out right in a perfect firing position. He fired two air-to-air missiles at me. I was pointed at the ground and I'd gone AB again when I saw him. I think I was doing over six hundred this time...that old bird was really performing. I had it in a hard left turn and also pointed at the ground, which probably assisted me in his missiles not being able to guide on me. I hauled it around real hard and again caught him unawares. He broke up to the left and rolled over, and I pulled up into him with a rollover and he started down. I started after him. Again, I had another one, right on his tail. I was set up properly with my switchology for air-to-air, as I always do when I leave the target. But he dove down toward the clouds and north. I had to leave him and turn around and head on out 'cause I didn't have any fuel.

"After I'd shaken them both off my tail, my main concern now was to get back with the airplane. My radio was completely out, so I had no way I could get a tanker and

get fueled. I was strictly on my own. I kept working with the circuit breaker and managed to get the bomb bay fuel and came on back to Udorn, ending up with about two hundred pounds.”



BAD DAY AT BLACK ROCK BILL SPARKS

It was easily the worst mission I ever had to fly. Wrong ordnance, wrong courses, horrible tactics, all topped by McNamara having printed the coordinates of our targets in the US times. Not one Flag objected, and no one fell on his sword. I have never been as angry or felt as abandoned in my life. We were poorly commanded and even worse, were not properly trained or equipped. I think that the first SAM raid epitomizes the whole damned mess that lasted so long. For whatever it's worth, I am sending my version of what I remember of that debacle. I wrote it for my family several years ago, and I still am as angry as I was when I landed from that f-- mess. I looked all over Takhli for a Full Bird to punch out and could not find one on the base. This may give you a slightly different look at the first SAM raid. I am still mad as hell!

In early May 1965 a Thud driver landed from a mission near Hanoi and reported that a SAM site was being built about fifteen miles south of Hanoi. My reply was, "The rules are that we get all of the technology, they get all the elephants, and they're cheating." I flew to that area in the afternoon, and someone was indeed building a SAM site. We

went to our boss and reported our concerns. The boss took a flight to the same area early the next morning and found the first of many sites. He called all of us together and told us to get a plan ready to kill the SAM and left the next day for Saigon. He returned two days later with his tail between his legs, carrying a message to not fly within five miles of *any* SAM site. The word was to not disturb any activity because it might anger the Russians doing the construction. A few days later, a directive came down from the Air Division ordering everyone to not overfly or disturb any SAM activity in North Vietnam. The penalty for noncompliance would be courts-martial.

The same month, Takhli received a squadron of EB-66 aircraft to track all electronic activity in the North. The EB-66 had four EWOs sitting on downward-ejecting seats in the bomb bay that kept track of any and all electronic emissions. It was an underpowered, old, clunky aircraft, but they did a hell of a job that has never been properly recognized. Our EB-66 friends kept track of the SAM and all other radar activity and reported daily the progress of building missile capability in the North. We continued to receive directives not to bother the Russians. The number and activity of the SAMs continued to increase.

My Flight Commander, an Edward's test pilot type with almost no operational time, was killed on a mission in Laos about this time. His replacement was Charlie Chicken Expletive-deleted, one of the very best, most aggressive, natural fighter jocks ever born. He was a firm believer in flying with the same people every mission. He was mean enough and strong enough to make it happen. D Flight became Charlie Foxtrot Flight and flew thirty-nine consecutive missions together. We grew to be very competent, totally confident in each other, and were sure

that Charlie Foxtrot Flight was the meanest SOB in the valley.

The reports from the B-66 EWOs convinced us that the SAMs were ready to shoot at any time. By the first week of July, the EWOs announced that all of the SAM component systems were operating, had been checked out, and were fully operational. At that time 2AD issued a code phrase to be used when a SAM was being launched, Bluebells are Singing. They also reiterated the ban on any attempt to take out the threat. To say that we were nervous is an understatement.

On July 24, Charlie Chicken was leading the Charlie Foxtrots south of Hanoi after having hit a target nearby when I heard an EB-66 on Guard channel say, "Bluebells are Singing, repeat; Bluebells are Singing, south of Hanoi." I was on Paul's left wing looking north and saw an SA-2, followed by a second, liftoff and climb into the clouds at about 5,000 feet. The Russians had finished the checkout of their systems. The target for the SAMs was a flight of F-4C aircraft from Ubon that were in close formation, penetrating the weather. The F-4 flight had switched off Guard channel and was hit with no warning. One aircraft was blown away and the other three were badly damaged. The damaged birds managed to make it back to Udorn and land where one was written off. It is amazing that all were not lost. The missile is twenty feet long, smokes along at almost Mach 3, and has an almost 500-pound warhead.

The restrictions on hitting SAMs remained in effect, and we were restricted from flying within thirty miles of Hanoi. This was a totally stupid reaction that deserves to be questioned by anyone with any knowledge of the use of force. Two days later, Charlie Chicken brought a clipping

from the Bangkok paper quoting McNamara. The main point was, "We can take out the surface-to-air missile systems at any time we desire." The quote also contained the coordinates of two sites. In the same article "Dr. Strange" stated that we had too many fighter pilots and that we should reduce the number. Charlie Chicken commented on the article in rather foul language and pointed out that a good way to reduce the number of fighter pilots was to print where they were going. We also couldn't understand why two sites when only one had fired.

I was told that a message was delivered to the South Vietnamese Headquarters by DoD directive on July 25 that listed, in detail, two SAM sites to be attacked, dates and times, route of flight to and from each target, ordnance, speeds, and altitudes that would be flown. Since anything given to the South Vietnamese would be in Hanoi in hours, I am convinced that any such directive constitutes at least dereliction of duty, if not treason since 2AD, and everyone else in Saigon, knew of the leaks from the South Vietnamese HQ.

About 0600 on July 27, I felt a hand shake me awake and tell me that I didn't need to get up for my scheduled mission brief since I was now on Iron Hand One, the first SAM raid. I pretended to be asleep for as long as possible to be cool and then went to the Club for a breakfast martini with Charlie Chicken. We left for Intel as soon as we could and found the mission order. It was the absolute most incredible bunch of crap imaginable. The 563rd was to hit a SAM site, the one that had fired a few days earlier, with three flights of four F-105Ds in trail with only one minute spacing between flights. The ordnance listed was rear-dispensed bomblets (CBU-2) dropped from fifty feet at 360 knots. My grandmother knew more about targeting than

that! The next two flights were ordered to carry napalm and also drop from fifty feet and 360 knots. The idiocy of DoD was now apparent to all. If you tell anyone that you are going to hit him, and then give him almost a week's notice, any half-wit can figure out that the place will be empty and/or well defended. To overfly an extremely well defended complex at fifty feet and 360 knots is a suicide order. The Japanese had better sense when they sent out their Kamikazes. To exacerbate an already insane order, have all aircraft fly at the same altitude and airspeed and attack from the same direction, with close intervals. I may have been a slick wing Captain, but I certainly knew better than that.

HQ USAF, HQ PACAF, and 2AD all passed this load of excrement down without demur. I had been taught that you were supposed to, or at least try to, keep some of your troops alive. This was the Light Brigade all over again.

We truly bitched, whined, and moaned. Our boss got on the horn and tried to talk to Saigon at least three times. The Yokota squadron commander also gave it his best shot, all to no avail. Korat called as well. What we asked was to change the ingress and egress, change the altitudes, and increase our drop speed to at least 500 knots. At no time did we ever request not to hit the site. We were ordered to go as directed *with zero changes!* The 563rd was to launch twelve aircraft to the SAM site. Twelve aircraft from the Yokota squadron were to hit the supporting barracks. Korat had the same order for a SAM site and support area less than five miles from ours. The TOT for both sites was the same, and the directed routes to and from insured that we would be almost head on with the Korat aircraft. It appeared that DoD also tried to schedule a midair collision.

We realized that we could either comply with this stupid order or mutiny, so we went to the squadron and briefed the insanity. The boss led the first flight, and Charlie Chicken was leader of the last flight. All of the wingmen were volunteers. Charlie Chicken never spent much time on routine details, and this day his briefing was very brief. He said, "Well, we're going to take off with four. I wonder how many will land? Let's look at the photography and figure out what the hell we might be able to salvage." The boss stuck his head in the briefing room and told us to screw the airspeed restriction and to hold 540 knots from our letdown point to the target. We completed what little we could and suited up for the debacle. We were not happy campers.

Takhli was most fortunate to have an outstanding chaplain, Father Frank McMullen. Father Mac started the Takhli tradition of blessing, complete with sprinkling, every aircraft that took off anytime day or night. This day Father Mac, who often attended our briefings and flew with the B-66 guys, came to the line and blessed each pilot before takeoff. He climbed up the ladder of my Thud just before start engine time and gave me absolution along with his blessing. I was raised as a Methodist and was definitely not used to having a guy wearing a shawl to either bless or absolve me. I decided that I needed all the help I could get and was truly thankful for the gesture. We launched on time and headed north.

We flew into central Laos at 28,000 feet and then let down below 50 feet above the terrain, held 540 knots, and headed for our IP, Yen Bai, on the Red River. In July 1965, Yen Bai had more guns than Hanoi, yet it was a mandatory checkpoint in the tasking message. DoD strikes again. Charlie Chicken didn't overfly Yen Bai, since he was at least as smart as a chicken. We hit the Red River below 50 feet

and started for the target two miles behind from the second flight.

Almost immediately 37mm flak burst directly over our flight path. Thirty-seven millimeter guns do not have a fuse that will detonate on proximity; ergo, all of the rounds had to have been manually set to detonate at a fixed time after they were fired. The time corresponded with the expected range from gun to target. It was absolutely obvious that they knew we were coming and the route. The reason the 37mm rounds were high was the guns could not be depressed any lower. We flew either down the Red River or over its edges for about forty miles, always with 37mm bursting over us. When we hit the confluence of the Red and Black Rivers we left the river and flew over rice paddies for the next twenty-five miles to the SAM site. A B-66 took a picture looking down on one of our flights, and it was leaving rooster tails in the paddies. We started to take hits from small arms and .50-caliber equivalent automatic weapons as soon as we left the river. I was hit twelve times between the IP and target, all .30- and .50-caliber equivalents. As we neared the SAM site, we came under fire from the 37mm and 57mm weapons that had been brought in to protect the site. We counted more than 250 37mm and 57mm guns and a horde of automatic weapons around each site when we finally got the poststrike photography. Korat's experience was similar to ours. We underwhelmed the Bad Guys a ton. I saw what looked like a missile propped up against a pole and a couple of huts in the cleared area of the site when we were about a mile out. There were no vans or other service equipment normal to an SA-2 site. Surprise, surprise, it was a dummy site! It was hard to see much since the Boss's flight had hit the area with eight CBU-2s with all nineteen tubes dispensing bomblets. The second flight had dropped twenty-four napalm cans. We dropped twenty-four

more cans into the mess. As the first flight hit the target, number two was hit, started burning fiercely, and made it back to the Black River only before he had to punch out. As I dropped, I saw another aircraft on fire from in front of the inlets past the burner. The aircraft slowly pulled up, rolled right, and went in. A pilot who had gone through Cadets with the stricken Thud pilot, called, "Bailout, bailout" and then, "No way, he went in!" Charlie Chicken started to pull up through a hail of bursting flak to cover and we both yelled at him to stay down and get the hell out of Dodge. He stayed on the deck, accelerated to 600 and wheeled for the Black. I found out after the POW return in 1973 that he was hit just as he picked off his napalm, burst into flames, and ejected at 50 feet, 540 knots and blew several panels in his chute. He told me in after he was released that I had rolled some napalm under him before he hit the ground. We passed Charlie Chicken trying to CAP Walt's parachute and dinghy in the Black River. He ordered the rest to go home, staying for thirty minutes to see if the pilot could be found, went out to a tanker, and returned for another thirty minutes, still all alone. The pilot was never recovered.

We stayed low past the Black and then climbed to 35,000 and flew back to Takhli. For the first time in my life, I completely lost all control of myself. I bawled, raved, beat the canopy, and totally acted like a fool. I have never been so very angry. Luckily, I could put the Thud on autopilot and indulge my childish behavior. I finally got myself under control about the time we crossed back into Thailand. In the meantime, I heard various radio calls indicating that Korat had lost four F-105s. We had lost at least two Thuds. We lost six F-105s in less than three minutes. An RF-101C was shot down with the pilot killed while photographing the same site two days later. Of the forty-six F-105s from both bases in the attack, we lost five of the six pilots flying number two and

one leader. I was so damned angry, I was spluttering. I am still almost as angry as I was then.

I had a major problem with the Thud losses that day. The F-105 community was so small that we either knew the drivers or knew someone who knew them. It was a very bad day at Black Rock.

We landed at Takhli with three Charlie Foxtrots and we counted holes. Of the twelve 563rd aircraft that went on the mission, two were shot down and nine had multiple holes. Only one was not hit. My aircraft had twelve holes and was one of only four flyable aircraft in the squadron the next day. When I parked my bird, the first one up the ladder was Father Mac. He handed me a French 75 drink, slightly warm, and blessed me again. I told him that if he ever came up my ladder again, I would jump off and abort. He laughed, kissed my forehead, and said, "It worked, didn't it? Be thankful!"

I joined Paul and Marty for an Intel debriefing and noticed that the Intelligence folk seemed to be afraid of us. We were on a short fuse and irked at everyone. We grabbed a jug of Old Overshoes, mission whiskey, from a poor lieutenant and waded through the debriefing. We then went to the squadron and covered the mission, taking the Old Overshoes.

How do you debrief an insane mission? Charlie Chicken said that he would never again allow anyone to dictate such a stupid set of rules. I agreed. I promised myself that I would never, ever allow anyone, regardless of rank, to waste so many folk. I owed it to the people I flew with to take better care of them than that. Every one of us would have volunteered to go on a mission to whack SAMs. To be thrown

away by idiots is another thing. I flew my second tour as a Weasel and never allowed anyone to put my flight in that kind of a bind. Rank or position cannot excuse incompetence. I decided that being promoted mattered much less than caring for my troops. What was anyone going to do to me, make me fly to Hanoi?



PRECISION-GUIDED AGM-12 DICK HEYMAN

The mission I am writing about happened so long ago that I not certain of all the facts; however, I will try to relate it as well as I can remember.

Those who ever had a mission involving a “Bullpup” will probably agree that it was one of the most unreliable weapons we had in Vietnam. I was in a two-ship into North Laos, and I was carrying the weapon. My wingman had the standard ordnance of bombs or rockets or a combination, I don’t recall. We were working with a FAC, and he had a target that he told us had bad guys in a building that was in among other small buildings on the side of a small mountain. Supposedly it also held munitions.

He put a smoke marker very close to the target, and I lined up several miles out, put the controller in its bracket by my left knee, fired the missile, and gave the immediate nose up as the rocket came in sight. It guided pretty well and seemed to be headed for the target, but about a quarter mile from the target, I lost all control. I tried all the known remedies like reset, hit the fire button again, but all to no avail. Seconds later the Pup went into a small shack

right on the side of the mountain. The shack fell down, but there was no explosion. The FAC was close enough that he saw a cave exposed where the shack had been. I had time to fly in close to the mountain when suddenly the top of the mountain exploded in several places, and smoke came out of numerous places. Evidently, according to specialists that viewed recce film and our info, the Bull Pup had gone a fair distance into the cave before it hit a bend and came into contact with a solid area, causing the initial explosion. The caves must have been loaded with lots of munitions because it continued to blow for a period of time.

I didn't have the nerve to claim the target, although being an intrepid airman, I had caused the results. My only contribution had been to carry the weapon and fire it. It had a mind of its own.



ONE WAY TO WEASEL BILL SPARKS

When I went through the Weasel School in early '67, I didn't have the foggiest idea of what a Weasel did for a living other than they were supposed to hunt down and kill SA-2 SAM sites. A couple of the instructors decided that it would be the funniest thing in the world to team Carlo and me up. The odds were seven to five that we would kill each other in less than a week. The best thing that could have happened to me was to have Carlo as my Bear. We did argue just a wee bit; however, neither of us ever really wanted to kill the other.

Carlo knew enough about fighter types to know that they needed to be taught at least the basics of Electronic Warfare. He started me off with the equivalent of EW 101 and I never got to the 200 course. I had been in the business for over eight years in USAFE and TAC and didn't really know squat about the systems, other than aircraft, which were designed to kill me. Carlo taught me about EW with all of the emphasis on SAMs and Gun-layers. By the time we left Nellis, I at least knew that I didn't know squat and that Carlo sure as hell did!

We got to Takhli, the 357th TFS, and he really turned up the gain on the lessons. We flew our first mission on the wing in RP-6, and for the first time I heard all of that damned noise Carlo understood. We met all of the radars on Day One and even saw two SAMs in flight. It was a very sobering trip, and I did realize that I sure needed to listen and understand what my Bear was saying. My second Weasel sortie was in a "D" flying number four in a Weasel flight. I listened to the racket from the APR 25-26 and the Shrike and even recognized some of the squeaks and squawks. Mission number three on day three was as Barracuda lead on the Dawn Patrol, a fairly quick check out for Carlo and me. We managed to get Shark Flight in and out with no losses. Carlo and I then spent more than five hours in Intel, just the two of us, figuring out what we had done. We walked the planning area, trying to decide how to understand this God-awful mess. Carlo suggested that he build a picture of what the Radar Order of Battle looked like each time we went to the Barrel so we could use the best tactics for the situation.

I was about as uninformed about how the systems all played together as my dog and needed to really work on my ability to understand what was out there gunning for us. Carlo tried to teach me as quickly as he could. We would go down to the Operations Center every time we were scheduled for a mission, either as lead or wing, and spend at least two to three hours looking at the maps and photos on the walls. We would study all of the latest intelligence we had and try to figure out how it was being orchestrated by the Hanoi Cowboys. It was a ritual, and we started to be able to retain more and more of what we were looking at. Carlo would start looking at radar systems in an orderly way as soon as we dropped off the tanker each mission. He would look for BARLOCK, the big arrays that were used to

track us and send the MiGs in for intercepts. After he checked for BARLOCKS, he would look for height-finder radar, since they were vital for direction of MiGs. He would start looking for gun-layer radars and count the number that were looking in our direction early, since they could track the jamming noise from the strike force's pods. The more gun-layers, the more attention we could expect when we got into the Hanoi Valley. He used all of our gear, the APR-25/26, the Shrike sounds, and his ER-142 and every possible mode. By the time we flew to the Black River, Carlo had a very good picture of how the Bad Boys were set up to shoot at us.

I flew twenty-four combat sorties in June, our first month. We were scheduled every day and were weather canceled seven times. Of the twenty-four sorties we flew, we led eighteen of the twenty-four. We flew eighteen in RP-6 and led fifteen of those. We were very busy and very tired. Carlo had almost set a pattern in how we conducted each sortie. He would build his picture of what was waiting for us and would suggest just how many and how ferocious the SAMs would be. He was starting to be able to predict the MiG activity with more and more accuracy. I was starting to be able to catch what he was trying to tell me, and I was getting so I could hold more and more in my head.

Carlo kept up his attempt to understand what was operating each day and changed his techniques as time went by to better understand what the Bad Guys were doing. He also never stopped trying to educate the Nose Gunner, AKA Sparky, on the finer points of EW. We had become a very smooth team. We had one extremely weird day when not one signal came up. Carlo was totally confused and bitched constantly. We had four EWOs in the flight, and all of them were nervous as long-tailed cats in a

room of rocking chairs. Our gear was working, and nothing was being intercepted. We went into and out of the target with zero signals. Carlo and I were scared spitless and fretted like crazy. No signals will scare you half to death! It happened only once, and I still remember being really jumpy.

As we neared the Hanoi Valley, Carlo would start to drop the nonthreat radar commentary. This would normally happen as we crossed the Black River or about halfway to the Northeast Railroad. By then the big picture was built, and I had a very good idea about whether it would be a MiG day or a SAM day or both. Very seldom did both MiGs and SAMs come up and threaten at the same time. I saw an SA-2 lift off and head away from the Weasels and the Force once as we passed by the middle of Thud Ridge. I checked way high at my left 8 and watched the missile smack an MIG-17 right in the wing root. Bad coordination by the Bad Guys, but good for us! Even Carlo could talk only so fast. The threats always take precedence over information systems. By late summer we were like a very-well-oiled machine and could communicate with grunts and moans. I felt totally at ease with Carlo and trusted him to give me exactly what information I needed at the exact time. I'm sure that all of the good Weasel crews have similar stories to tell about how we learned to really talk to each other.

Every Weasel crew had to be different, since each crew was unique. I flew with a few other Bears after Carlo went to Saigon to a headquarters job, and we flat could not work the way Carlo and I did. I flew with all of the Instructor EWOs when I got back to Nellis, and the same things occurred. Unique abilities drive unique methods of coordination. The Weasel mission required, and still requires, the very best coordination by the crew and between crews. If you can't

communicate, you are in deep and serious crap. I was most fortunate to have Carlo to teach me how to stay alive and then give me the best possible information to do my job. Carlo used to bitch loudly that, "All of the brains are in the back seat and all of the decisions are in the front seat!" He was right, and that's the way it works best. The methodology of information transference doesn't matter as much as the ability to transfer information quickly and accurately. It ain't how you do it that matters, as long as you do it right!



TYPICAL TAKHLI MISSION IN '67 BILL SPARKS

Scheduling, planning, and even some tactical considerations were different between Korat and Takhli because Takhli chose to assign the Wild Weasel crews to each squadron. Korat kept all of the Weasels in one squadron. There are strengths and weaknesses in both systems; however, I am partial to the Takhli method. That is based on my observations from May until Dec '67 as both a Weasel and Strike pilot in the 357th Tactical Fighter Squadron. I was able to fly with our own Force Commanders more often. Since the Force Commander was selected from each squadron, I was able to really get to understand those from my squadron and to help them understand how the Weasels could best support them. Being familiar with the Mission Boss's mindset paid great dividends.

Each squadron in the 355th Tactical Fighter Wing had five flights instead of the normal four. E-Flight was the Weasel Flight. The E Flight Commander was normally the ranking Weasel and was also, normally, the Route Pack 6 Weasel Flight lead for his squadron. I was E Flight commander in the 357th TFS as a Captain and usually had at least one pilot and always had an EWO who outranked

me. I did have the most combat and total fighter time. This seemed to be enough for the 357th Commander to name me to command his Weasel Flight. I kept the job until Carlo, my EWO, went to Saigon in October. I was then assigned as D Flight Commander until I left.

I scheduled my folks to fly on a daily basis by giving an updated list to my Operations Officer each day for the next day's flights. I led almost all of the 357th RP-6 Weasel missions. In addition to the crews directly assigned to each squadron, all Wing staff pilots were attached to a squadron for flying duties. My squadron had the Wing DO assigned as well as two very good folk from Standardization and the Wing Weapons shop. Everyone was needed and everyone was used. We always seemed to be shorthanded. We periodically were short of RP-6 qualified Weasel leaders in the wing. We would often be asked to furnish a flight lead, an element lead, or a wingman. This happened quite often early in my tour, and I flew with all three squadrons and almost every Weasel in the wing. We did not fly with other EWOs. I would rather share my toothbrush than share Carlo. We flew as designated crews unless we were short of two-seat aircraft and had to fill in with F-105Ds. We later had some very experienced strike pilots volunteer to fill in when we were shorthanded and had to use F-105Ds in the Weasel flight. It worked extremely well.

Takhli and Korat both were scheduled for two Alpha Strikes each day, strikes flown into RP-6, the Hanoi area. An Alpha package normally consisted of sixteen F-105D single-seat aircraft, loaded with bombs, and four F-105F two-seat aircraft for the Weasel support. Each Alpha package also had four F-4D, two-seat aircraft from the 8th at Ubon or the 366th at Da Nang. Although there were variations of this scheme, more than 90 percent consisted of sixteen F-105D

strike aircraft, four F-105F Wild Weasels, and four F-4C MiGCAP. The targets, ordnance, refueling tracks, times, special instructions, and a Partridge in a Pear tree were all sent out daily in what was called the Frag.

The Frag, or Fragmentary Order, was a huge thing that arrived each day electronically to the Com van sometime in the afternoon. If we were lucky, the Frag would arrive by about 1500 and if not, we were stuck with a late-session planning for the early-morning launch. It took about an hour for the CRYPTO folk to "Break" the Frag apart and hand the portion that applied to us to our Operations staff. On a normal day, we would get a call that the Frag was in and ready by about 1630.

The responsibility for each Alpha Strike rotated through each of the squadrons in the wing. The squadron responsible for furnishing the Strike Commander also, normally, furnished two flights of four F-105Ds strike pilots and one flight of four F-105F Weasel crews plus one spare for each flight. Each of the other squadrons furnished one flight of four F-105D strike pilots and a spare. That worked out so that any given squadron had two days of responsibility for planning and leading an Alpha Strike in a row and then had to furnish only one flight for each Alpha Strike on the third day. Of course, there were also missions assigned each squadron every day for Laos and the lower parts of North Vietnam. Maintenance would assign aircraft, including spares for each mission, as soon as they could figure out how many flyable aircraft were available in each squadron. They did an absolutely wonderful job, and all of the ground personnel worked incredible hours to keep us in the air. You were usually able to fly your assigned aircraft or, at least, a bird from your own squadron. When we had been

hurt badly, we were assigned what was available from any squadron.

The planning for an Alpha Strike started as soon as possible after notification. The Force Commander would take those folk he thought he needed, or wanted, down to the Wing Operations Center and look at what was on tap for the next day. The first mission was usually a very early launch. Mission briefing for the crews was seldom later than 0400 and normally earlier with a takeoff time of 0530 or so. In order to be ready for the 0330 briefing, the dawn patrol was planned the day before.

The Mission Boss, the Force Commander, would look at the target and the included instructions and ask for comments from his picked guys. The planners almost always included the Weasel Flight lead and at least the Deputy Force Commander. Each Mission Boss had his individual way of planning and of obtaining advice. The good ones always asked for advice, especially contrary positions. The key to any mission was the quality of the planning. The best way to have the loss rate climb was to assume that anything was easy and that we could repeat what had been done before. We kept a "Big Book" that held a debriefing of each mission, stressing what was good and what was not for the mission flown. Smart folk really paid attention to the book. Once the Mission Boss had decided his plan for the next day, the Worker Bees with him would draw up a map, fill in the mission cards with the pertinent information, and hand them to the super staff in the Ops Center. They would prepare all of the materials for each member of each flight and have it all filed in slots for the 0-dark-30 briefing. The planning could take from one hour to several hours depending on the target, the thoughts of the Mission Boss, and the phase of the moon. Each mission

consisted of a Primary Target, a Secondary Target, and a Tertiary, or dump, target. All were planned for each mission. When planning was over, the planners could go to the Officers Club and relax with a fifth of Scotch and a pitcher of beer. How else can you sleep after looking at all of the bad things planned for your body the next day?

Carlo and I had a ritual that we went through for every trip to RP-6. We would walk the walls in the Ops Center. The walls of the planning area were lined with very detailed maps and photography. Several maps of the Hanoi area were kept updated daily, ranging down to 1 to 20,000 scale. The photography was updated as often as possible and was printed in the same scale. If you walked slowly about six to eight feet from the walls, it was like looking at the ground from 4,000 to 10,000 feet altitude. We would walk along our projected route of flight and visualize the actual ground. We would check for any markers that would lead to suspected SAM sites, locate the most numerous gun pits, and try to memorize what we would be seeing the next day. This would continue for at least an hour every time we planned a mission. Even if I had not been scheduled to lead, Carlo and I would walk the walls. I was not nearly as senile as I am now and could remember what I had visualized. We had points to hit in order to loft Shrikes at each site, references to find each SAM site, offsets in order to roll in the flight and bomb a given site, and, lastly, not be surprised if everything turned dark brown. When you play You Bet Your Rear, there is never too much preparation.

The area around Hanoi was a circle with all sorts of strange restrictions. It was colored a bilious shade and had lines and markers in red, pink, and green. We went to one early morning coffee klatch, and a friend popped up and said, "Jesus, the damned thing looks like Sparky's eyeball!"

And it stuck. Carlo and I were invited to Ubon to give a dog-and-pony show for the 8th Wing, and we were introduced with this comment: “If you wonder where Sparky’s Eyeball came from, come look at these orbs.”

When the evening stroll was completed, we would repair to the Takhli Club for attitude adjustment. The Club was our home. If I had ever acted at my lovely lady’s abode the way I acted at the Club, I would have been shot. The “CRUB” (Club with Thai accent) was home there, and it was a fairly rowdy place. Mostly it did allow us to let off what passed for steam and forget what was on tap for the next day.

My alarm would wail at about 0230 or so and I would shower, shave, and leave the trailer I shared with Carlo and walk the fifty feet to the back door of the Club in fifteen minutes. Breakfast was quick, and we would be at the Ops Center in a very short time. The morning briefing always started with a time hack and a word from our favorite weather guesser. Stormy would pull out his crystal ball and give us his very best guess for the target area. Intel would follow Stormy, and then the Mission Boss would start his brief on the targets. If we were lucky, the WORD would come in telling us which target we were going after. If not, the Mission Boss would brief all three. The Ops Center would deliver the WORDS. Each target had a designator word with an assigned code word for success, a code for SAMs, a code word for MiGs, and so forth. These designators were the WORDS. Every activity has its own silliness, and that was ours. The Mission Briefing took maybe thirty minutes. Once we were committed—that is, sent to a target—the Mission Boss would finish his pitch, and then each flight, including the spares, would head for its own squadron and conduct a flight briefing. The flight brief covered procedures, bombing

tips, MiG lookout, RHAW (Radar Homing and Warning) items, and/or what the flight commander wanted to cover. Most briefings were brief. The average briefing lasted thirty minutes or so. If you had an newbie (new guy), the brief could push the walk time.

Once the briefings were over, everyone tried to have a few seconds alone before donning his flight gear. When the flight was suited up, the squadron Pie Van would drive you to your aircraft. By the time you had put on your G-suit, helmet, survival vest, guns, knives, parachute, survival radios, lucky charms, several baby bottles full of water, and so forth, you had added about ninety pounds to your weight.

The Crew Chief would meet you with the aircraft forms and hold your flashlight so you could read them and sign the release. Preflight was normal given the darkness, and it was very normal to have a flight line supervisor show up and follow you around. This was their way of showing you, and the Crew Chief, that they cared about each pilot. I have never seen better maintained aircraft anytime, anywhere. I can't say enough about our wrench benders. They worked incredible hours and gave all of their effort to the aircraft.

Start engine time was when the pace really started to increase. We used a big shotgun shell-like charge about the size of a two-gallon jug to start the big bird. Black smoke would roll, and the engine would wind up in about thirty seconds. All checks followed in sequence, and about 95 percent of the time, all five in a flight would be ready to taxi in sequence. The Alpha Launches were called Elephant Walks by the folk. The flight line would go from silence to bedlam in less than a minute. The first aircraft to taxi were the five or six KC-135s for takeoff about twenty minutes before the fighters. The last two flights in the Strike Force

would taxi first, followed by the Weasels, and then the Force Commander and the second flight. The order was caused by the refueling cell arrangement. The last two flights and the MiGCAP refueled on the high cell, while the Weasels, Force Commander, and second flight had the low cell. The takeoff sequence allowed us not to fly through another flight's altitude block. We would have all twenty-five F-105s following each other like a circus parade out to the arming area at the takeoff end of the runway. If you really wanted to look like an elephant walk, you could extend and retract the refueling probe. Weapons were armed, and the four primary birds for each flight would take the runway together.

Runup was followed by single-ship takeoffs at ten-second intervals. The burner plumes of each Thud lighted the night as it accelerated to takeoff speed. As soon as one flight took off, the spare for that flight taxied to the far end and sat in the de-arming area until released by his flight leader. The next flight would pull into the arming area, and the cycle would continue.

After all the Force was launched, we would head to the refueling assembly point. The refueling tracks were named for colors. The one used most often for our trips to Hanoi was Green Anchor. Green track ran from about 180 miles north of Tahkli into northern Laos. The anchors were the ends of the tracks. The KC-135s would join up with the low cell of three, leading them at about 17,000 feet altitude. The high cell took off first and was based at 19,000. The low tanker cell refueled the Weasels on the lead tanker, the Force Commander's flight next, second flight next. The high cell was only about five miles in trail and refueled the third flight, fourth flight, and the MiGCAP. Each flight joined with its tanker and initially took only about a thousand pounds of gas just to check the system. Occasionally we would take

two or four spares along to the end of the track, where, if no one needed a spare, they were released to a mission in Laos. About forty minutes prior to our drop point, I would start the refueling cycle. We always refueled lead, three, two, and four, in that order. It takes five or ten minutes to completely fill up from the airborne gas station, and the order insures that the wingman have the most fuel at dropoff. Wingmen always use more fuel than the leader or element lead, since they have to maneuver more to stay in formation. After four finished, I would jump back on and top off, followed by the rest of my flight in the same sequence. We would continue this dance at shorter and shorter intervals until we were only taking about a hundred to two hundred pounds. We could hook up, sip a bit, unhook, and have the next guy on the boom at fewer than thirty-second intervals. When we hit the drop point, Barracuda always had maximum fuel in every bird. There is no such thing as too much fuel.

When we dropped off of the KC-135, the mission really started. Up until then, there was always a chance that you could be recalled or diverted. After dropoff, you were committed to go "Downtown." The Weasels were supposed to be "First in and last out" on every mission, and we were, with few exceptions, since it was best for the force to have us out in front and sniffing for SAMs on the way in. The best place to be on the way out was trailing the force five miles or so to insure that Mr. SAM couldn't jam one from behind. The MiGCAP worked best when they trailed the Strike Force by five to ten miles. This caused the MiG-21, our worst airborne threat, to have to pull in front of the F-4's missiles to get a shot at the strike pilots. The distance that the Weasels would be in front depended on several factors. How many MiGs were we to expect? What was the weather? How obstreperous were the SAMs going to be? How good were

the Weasel Crews? What did the Mission Boss want? All of these things had been thrashed out in the planning phase, and an agreed-to distance had been decided.

The sixteen-ship Strike would form up in a gaggle of four separate flights that actually were a single jamming package. Each flight flew with all of the aircraft about 750 feet apart, no less than 500 feet, and no more than 1,000 feet. This allowed the jammers to overlap each other and create a huge blob of jamming coverage on the enemy radar screens. The Force Commander would fly as smoothly as possible, since all four flights were cueing from him. The number two flight would move into position about 1,500 feet out and almost line abreast from his lead on the side away from the planned roll-in direction. His wingmen would fly the same formation as the lead flight. Number three flight would fly in trail about 2,000 feet back from the lead, and the number four flight would fly behind the second flight. We called it The Gaggle or "The God Awful Formation," and even though it worked and cut down tremendously on SAM losses, we still hated The Gaggle. It was very hard to maneuver and really cut down on our ability to look around for attacking enemy fighters. The clumsiness of the formation caused us to fly in straight paths more than anyone liked. Since there is really no free lunch, we did the best we could and flew the Gaggle. The Weasels didn't carry any jammers because they would jam our receivers. We would go blind to the threats if we turned on a jammer mounted on our own aircraft. A jammer would also replace a Shrike. I would much rather have a Shrike than a jammer that worked only in formation. Think of it as having a very sensitive listening device that can hear whispers at eighty miles and then having Led Zeppelin start to play ten feet away. We existed only to protect the Strike force and couldn't do it if we used the jamming pods. The Strike

package would join up in the briefed formation with the Weasels in front and the MiGCAP in trail and head for the Barrel.

As we crossed into North Vietnam we would “Green ‘em up, Music on.” When the gunnery switches were all set to release ordnance, the station buttons would light up green. “Green ‘em up.” The jammers were a kind of music, and we always wanted to be escorted into the Barrel by a band. We still were, in many ways, an elephant walk. The normal distance for the Weasel Flight was five to ten minutes ahead of the Force. This allowed us to root around and stir up the SAMs. Once we got them on the air, we could play games with them and place ourselves in position to best cover the Strike package. We needed to be between the Force and the main SAM threat when the Force broke formation and started their dive-bomb runs. They were very vulnerable at this time, since a single jammer didn’t help against the SA-2 system. They needed all the help they could get until they were able to get back into overlapping jammer formation. Another trick the bad guys tried was to fire missiles, especially from behind the Force, and try to get them to break formation. By being several minutes in front, the Weasels could also give a weather report to the Force Commander. An accurate weather report would allow him to change the direction of attack, change altitude, or even abort the mission if the weather was really foul, before getting into the nest of SAMs that lived in the Hanoi area.

The real high threats started at the Red River. We tried to keep the speed of the whole Alpha Package at or above 540 knots from short of the Red River to the target and back to the Red. This speed cut the threat from the MiG-21 by more than 50 percent. In addition, the shorter time you are in range of any gun, the longer your life expectancy

becomes. Once past the Red River, the SAMs and guns multiplied at a great rate. The area around Hanoi, the Barrel, had over twelve thousand 37mm and larger guns, up to eighteen SAM sites, and two MiG bases. This was in an area about thirty miles in diameter, about the size of the Las Vegas valley. It was a bit like being in hell with your back broken. As we approached the pool-table flat ground near Hanoi, the Weasels would double back and set up a much closer coverage of the Force. The MiGCAP would move out of trail and cover from a flanking position. The radio would get very noisy if we weren't careful, and radio discipline was always a problem. One of the jobs for the Weasels was to "call threats." The EWO in each Weasel would keep a running commentary about the electronic threats around us and discriminate valid missile launches from spurious ones. They could tell if the indication was valid, where it was coming from, and who was being fired at with a fair degree of accuracy. Only Barracuda One made all threat-warning calls from Barracuda Flight. Calls of "Shark Force, disregard the Launch Light, Barracuda heads up, it's at us" were common and helped the Strike Force when they were at their most vulnerable. The call the Force did not like was "Heads up, Shark, it's a valid launch from Lead's nine!" At least they would know where the missile was coming from and that it was aimed in their direction. The Weasels would try to have at least two Shrike ARMs lofted toward the SAM sites that were the worst threat to the Force during their dive-bomb run. The Shrike homed in on the radar energy from the SAM radar. If the SAM driver kept emitting in order to guide his missile, the Shrike would hit his antenna. To stop the Shrike from hitting him, he had to shut off all power to his radar and abandon the missiles in flight. Very seldom did the SAM site stay on the air and risk both their radar and their own rears.

If we could find a SAM visually, and if the situation allowed, the Weasels would dive-bomb it using cluster bombs. It only took one of the eight CBUs we carried to total the site. They did not want that to happen, so they were very cautious. The Guideline Missiles were kept fueled. The propellants were kerosene and red fuming nitric acid and are hypergolic. If only one softball-sized bomblet of the more than five hundred in each CBU hit near a missile, it would ignite, run around on the ground, and explode. The vans were equally vulnerable, and a hit would kill the site and the folk. The whole idea was to make the SAM drivers nervous and shaky. Nervous and shaky folk are prone to not taking good shots at our folk. When the Strike Force rejoined and started out, the MiGCAP would fall in a staggered trail to cover them, and the Weasels would trail every one out of the barrel. Happiness was recrossing the Red River.

The trip home was much easier, since we were almost impossible to chase down from behind, and the Weasels were in position to hammer any SAM stupid enough to fire at the Force. The tankers would be waiting at Green Anchor Extend in Laos with fuel for anyone who needed it. We would climb to a good cruising altitude of about 30,000 feet, where we used much less fuel, and it was cold. When we were in RP-6, we normally kept the air conditioning system shut down to inhibit smoke and fire coming into the cockpit in case of a hit. The cockpit temperature would be well over 120 degrees. We were expending energy at a great rate, drenched with sweat, and everyone had a mouth full of cotton as we crossed the Red. Happiness was the cold water behind the headrest of the ejection seat. The 450 miles to Takhli was very easy and allowed time to determine what had happened that was good and what could be done better the next day. The trip home was an excellent time to rate our individual and group performances. It was also a very

good time to go on autopilot and get rid of the whips and jangles from all of the stress.

The entire Force of twenty F-105s would arrive at home base at nearly the same time. The ground crew all would stop and count the birds as we came down initially and broke for landing. If they counted all of us, they were very happy; if we were shy of that number, the faces that came up the ladder were very grim. The ground crew took every loss as a personal affront. We were always marshaled out of and into the revetments with a salute and a big grin. The Crew Chief would hook the ladder onto the cockpit and almost run up to hand us a cold washcloth and a very welcome cold beer. They would bring up our Aussie Outback hat and take the helmet. Their first question was about the mission and the next was "Can I turn her around?" We would go to maintenance to debrief the aircraft for any discrepancies and then head for the squadron and rack our flying gear. As soon as possible, we went to the Intel shop at Wing Ops and sat through a detailed briefing. The Force Commander would normally have the Strike Flight leaders and the Weasel lead meet him for a very quick debrief, and then we would "put it in the book" for the next planning session. A debriefing at the squadron followed for each flight to determine how we could do better and to ensure that anyone who had messed up learned not to do *that* again. After this last debriefing, the mission was over, and we could go to the bar. The mission really lasted about a day for the Force Commander and the planners. It was a short ten hours for the line jock that flew as four, no hill for a stepper.

The next day, we would do it all over again. The typical Thud Driver at Takhli was tired and needed rest. To quote the Commander of the 357th TFS, "All you have to do is hurl your butt at the ground a hundred times, and then you can

go home and peck crap with the chickens.” That summed it up as well as anything.



A BAD DAY UP NORTH CAL TAX

This is the mission I flew on August 21, 1967: A Bad Day over North Vietnam. I had been flying combat in the F-105 since June and had some pretty exciting missions before, but this one stands out in my memory for several reasons.

I had just returned from an R&R in Japan, and it was a very rough welcome back to the war. This was mission thirty-seven, and our target was the Yen Vinh railroad yards, just north of one of main bridges across the Red River from downtown Hanoi. This was a JCS target, which meant that it was important and would be heavily defended with everything they had.

Departure and Green Anchor refueling were normal up over northern Laos. We were the third flight of four to attack in the sixteen-plane strike force. The flak was heavy, but I had seen worse. Just as we rolled in to our dive-bomb pass. someone called, "SAM, take it down!" I finished my bomb pass. and as I pulled off to the left, I saw a huge fireball engulfing what had been an F-105, possibly two F-105s, coming apart in the air with pieces flying everywhere, a

terrifying and fascinatingly horrible sight—something I will never forget and still see the images of to this day. I heard a beeper on Guard channel, but this was no place to hang around and look for a chute. Then came the missiles! Not just one here or there, but everywhere: all around us, above us, below us, and every time I jinked left or right, I saw the huge orange fireballs from the detonating SAMs. I had never seen so many at once, at least twenty to thirty SAMs and some close enough that I could see the little fins and antennas on them. I never thought we could get our flight through them.

We had no idea who had been hit, but RESCAP was an impossible option here, and we had our flight back together. The egress was intense, and we had definitely poked a finger into the hornet's nest. They wanted our blood and were not going to quit. I can remember hyperventilating so hard that I had to pull my O₂ mask off because it was collapsing on my face and I couldn't breathe. We finally made it out of the area, and I was very thankful that my Thud was still functioning normally and I was alive!

After we landed, I found out that one of the pilots who were downed was a good friend and former squadron and pilot training classmate. Another pilot was also MIA, and the speculation was they might have had a midair in the frenzy coming off the target. We didn't know at the time if either had survived or were able to eject, but after the war learned both were killed on that mission.

This was one of those days that will forever be etched in my memory, as I not only lost a close friend, but the vision of those two airplanes burning and coming apart will be with me forever.



EXCERPTS FROM COMBAT DIARY, JULY 30, 1967 CAL TAX

Early morning brief for a long mission up the Gulf of Tonkin to the hated target of Kep Railroad Yards. This target made everyone jumpy, as it was one of the most heavily defended on the Northeast Railroad. It was also right next to the Kep Airfield, where there were innumerable guns and MiGs and lots of active SAM sites. Our base, Takhli, and the 355th TFW had lost a least four airplanes there in the three months I had been there.

The weather was the worst I had ever experienced, and we were literally in thunderstorms almost the entire time we were over the Gulf and into the target. I was flying number two on the wing of Red Dog, the Squadron Commander. We were the lead flight, as he was the Force Commander. The weather was so bad that the lead had all four of the flights in fingertip-close trail so we could stay together until we got into the clear. It was raining hard and very turbulent, and it was all we could do to just hang on the wing with the fully loaded very heavy airplanes, having just topped off from the Brown Anchor tankers. He called to "green 'em up," and we turned on the ECM pods and armed the bombs.

The pods often had trouble in the rain, as I remember, and there were status lights up on the glare shield next to the RHAW scope, which would tell you whether they were online or not. The reset button, if the pod went offline, was the red button on the left side of the stick, which had multiple functions. Well, I am hanging on the wing in this awful weather, and out of the corner of my eye, I can see twelve Thuds tucked in three flights of four in close trail behind and below. It would have been a great show for a flyover somewhere! I can see lead fussing with his pods because the red light was showing on his pod status panel. He was resetting them and they kept going from green to red. You guessed it—he was looking at the light and must have accidentally hit the pickle button, and the next thing I see is two 3,000 pounders release and drop slowly off his plane and descend into the clouds right in front of the all sixteen Thuds! Here go—two huge live bombs right in front of all of us, and these guys did not even *jiggle*! The bombs must have made a spectacular splash in the middle of the Gulf of Tonkin. Nobody said a word, but being a dumbshit Lieutenant, I transmitted, “Hey, lead, you just lost your bombs!”

All of us of course knew the obvious, and Red Dog replied. “Roger, I’ll just strafe the bastards!” We continued on with the mission and finally had to weather abort about ten miles short of Kep. We split up and dropped on a railroad bridge about five miles inland from the coast. Nobody regretted that we did not have to go to Kep. We knew we would get many more chances.

At the Red Dog’s hundredth mission dinner, some months later, another pilot and I got an old stick grip from scrap. We mounted it on a nice piece of wood and put a big red doorknob where the pickle button was supposed to be.

We had “No Step” printed on the top of it, and everyone had a great laugh out of it!



CARLO'S BEST DAY BILL SPARKS

Carlo, Grouchy Bear, was my EWO for my second tour. The method of selecting crews at the Wild Weasel School was a bit strange. We had to select each other, jump over a broom, and then be married for one hundred missions or "till death do you part." I had never met an EWO before, and now I am married to this big, old, grouchy person for my second combat tour at Takhli. We didn't kill each other during training, graduated, and arrived at Takhli RTAFB, Thailand, in May '67. All EWOs were affectionately known as Bears, all Bears had nicknames, and Carlo was dubbed Grouchy Bear. The name was fitting.

Carlo and I flew a bunch of excellent missions and managed to rack up five photo-confirmed SAM kills complete with secondary fires and explosions. I am convinced that Carlo's very best mission was flown in early August, when we were scheduled to lead the Weasel Flight, Barracuda, on a mission to Hanoi.

The assignment to lead Alpha Strikes rotated through the three squadrons. On this mission, the Wing Director of Operations was the Force Commander for Shark Force. We

had the normal Alpha Strike (Hanoi Package) setup consisting of two flights from the 357th, my squadron, and one each from the 333rd and 354th. The MiGCAP was from the 8th Wing at Ubon. The target for this mission was downtown Hanoi near the center of the city. The F-105Ds were all configured with two 450-gallon fuel tanks, a jamming pod, and a MER centerline. Shark carried six cluster bombs for flak suppression, and the other three strike flights had six 750-pound bombs. The four F-105F Weasels had our standard configuration consisting of a single CBU-24 on each inboard pylon, a Shrike on each outboard station, and a 650-gallon centerline tank. That load allowed us to kill SAMs, keep our Mach up, and have the endurance to stay in RP-6 for at least thirty minutes. The four-ship MiGCAP flight of F-4D aircraft had a standard load of AIM-9 and AIM-7 missiles, jammers, and fuel tanks.

Since we were the early-morning launch, we planned the mission the afternoon before with the Force Commander and a few guys from the 357th. SAM activity had been very low for a couple of weeks, and I hadn't seen a missile in the air for over two weeks. When the SAM activity dropped off like that, the situation normally shifted to a sharp increase in missile firings a few days later. The bad guys operating the SAMs would get scared after we killed a site or two, and they would pull in their horns. Their bosses would get on their cases, and the SAM drivers would come out shooting for a while. We would smack them another serious lick, and the cycle would repeat. Carlo and I had decided that this day might be a busy one, and we had better be ready to dodge at a great rate if it looked like it would be a "SAM Day." We discussed this with Colonel White and came up with a good plan for a SAM Day.

We had three very good, very experienced crews scheduled to fly with us. Two and I were from the 357th TFS, the element lead from the 354th, and four from the 333rd. Each pilot was Weasel flight lead qualified, the low time jock had over two thousand hours of fighter time, all four EWOs were aggressive, and everyone had been to RP-6 more than they wanted to. All four crews had flown together as a flight several times before and we expected a smooth, very disciplined flight. Disciplined it was; however, it was to be very rough, rather than smooth.

Shark Force, all twenty crews plus spares, briefed at 0-dark-30, did the usual individual flight briefings, normal preflight stuff, and the whole Gorilla taxied on time for a predawn takeoff into the very black Thai night. Everything was a piece of cake through the refueling on Green Anchor in northern Laos. After everyone refueled, I moved the Weasels out to about ten minutes in front of Shark Force.

Carlo was doing his standard bit of trying to figure out the Radar Order of Battle for the day. He would start while we were still in Northern Laos and use every piece of gear in the aircraft. Carlo's office was my backseat. The instrument panel had been modified and two extra systems installed. The first was the ER-142 System, designed to listen to all of the electronic signals in the bandwidth used by the Gun Director Radars and the SAM radars in North Vietnam. It had a very small scope, a little more than two inches, and controls that allowed him to select a signal, shift to a time-based scan, and determine what the radar was doing. The system was clumsy and hard to use; however, it allowed us to find and kill the threats. The second set of gear was the APR-35/36 RHAW system. The RHAW system consisted of a round scope that visually and aurally showed the type, direction, an approximate range to a set of threats, and a

billboard showing the threats received. One of the lights on the display in both seats was the Launch Light. The Launch Light indicated that a missile guidance signal was being transmitted. In addition to the light, there was a loud tone transmitted. Carlo could listen to the Launch Tone and tell if the guidance triplets were moving or not. If they were, it was guiding a missile; if not, it was a false signal—if any of you remember the call, “Disregard the Launch Light, it’s not valid!” That was one way Carlo could distinguish a valid from an invalid signal.

The RHAW gear was in both cockpits. In addition, we could listen to the signals picked up by the Shrikes. Carlo would have me turn up the audio on the Shrike Missile and slowly move the nose around to see what he could hear in that spectrum. He would have the Shrike audio turned back down and would use the ER-142 in all of its modes, creating all sorts of strange squeaks and squawks. He’d diddle with the RHAW press-to-test buttons. That defeated the logic of the system and allowed him to get a raw feed from each band. All of these strange noises made little sense to me; however, they made a bunch of sense to Carlo. He was especially interested in the fairly high-pitched “eek/eek” sound made by height-finder radar and the much-lower-pitched, more slowly spaced “unk” sound from the BARLOCK (GCI) radar. When a radar beam passed across our aircraft, we could hear the Pulse Repetition Frequency (PRF) that was unique to that radar. This produced the squeaks and squawks.

If there were no GCI Radars operating and only one or two height finders, we could expect very little trouble from the MiGs. We never saw a MiG-21 without a BARLOCK and two or more height finders up and operating. If we expected few MiGs, our problem was easier.

Carlo then started checking out the number of FIRECAN Gun Layer radars that were up. They gave out the normal modulated sizzling sound that always seemed to be in the background. Carlo had figured out a month or so back that since they could not see us at ranges of seventy-five miles or greater, they were being used to track the blob of jamming put out by the sixteen-ship Strike force and the trailing MiGCAP. Although the radars were denied range, by using several FIRECANs, they could get line-of-sight bearings to the jamming blob, and they could then triangulate our position and track our course.

The ideas seemed logical. According to Carlo, I was only a nose gunner and not very bright. He would tell me what was really happening, and I was to shut up and listen. I seldom argued with Grouchy Bear and never won. There were three reasons: First, he was older than God; second, he was downright mean when crossed; and third, he was always right. Carlo had joined the US Army two weeks before I entered the first grade in '41. He was in one of the first classes for Electronic Warfare in '42. He had more electronic warfare experience than anyone I ever met and was an exceptional EWO indeed. I was extremely fortunate to have him in my pit. Carlo was forty-nine and earned his nickname, Grouchy Bear.

On this day we had more FIRECANs than anyone in the flight had ever seen as we crossed into North Vietnam from Laos. They were all operating from well inside the North and watching our track inbound to the Red River. The FIRECAN activity coupled with GCI radar and no height finder transmissions meant that we should expect few enemy fighters. It was looking like a SAM day.

As we headed for the Red River crossing point, the count of FIRECANs increased until the ER-142 scope was almost solid in that bandwidth. Carlo estimated more than thirty gun-layers up at one time. We started to pick up the rattlesnake noise of a couple of SAM radars along with the associated blinking strobes on the Radar Warning Scope as we passed the Black River, well short of the Red River, and the count started up. This was earlier than normal for the SAMs. In fact, all radar activity was much higher than we were used to. Carlo had been right. It was shaping up as a real "SAM day."

By the time we crossed the Red River and turned toward Thud Ridge, a range of 3,000-to-5,000 foot mountains northwest of Hanoi, we had more SA-2s up than I had ever encountered. Carlo counted a total of eighteen different SAM radars by the time we were about to enter the outer Hanoi ring of missiles. Our best Intelligence estimate was that they had only twenty-one in the whole country. Carlo kept a steady stream of commentary going that covered all of the threats we were about to meet and as much additional information as he thought I could handle. He could hit peaks of ten thousand words a minute on a good day. As we passed the middle of the ridge, maybe thirty miles out from the valley, he told me he was dropping all guns because he couldn't break them out and would only call three-ring SAMs. This meant that I was assigned to look out for the more than ten thousand guns in the valley, since he was too busy with the SAMs to help. Very reassuring. I had never heard him do that before and figured that we were in deep trouble, and we weren't even in the Hanoi area yet.

The Hanoi area is about the size of the Las Vegas valley. Thud Ridge runs from the northwest toward Hanoi. We

preferred to come down the ridge toward the city because there were no guns on the ridge, it was easy to see, and it gave us a place to play hide-and-seek with the radars in the flats. The valley floor was as level as a pool table, had no place to hide, and extends all the way to the Gulf of Tonkin, south of Haiphong. What we had were eighteen SA-2 sites in an area about thirty miles in diameter. For the next twenty-eight minutes, we faced no fewer than sixteen at any one time, all operating simultaneously, and all in range for a shot. We were headed for a very busy day.

One of the reasons Carlo was a Grouchy Bear was his working environment. I would turn off the aircraft pressurization system—this included the air-conditioner—in case we took a hit and caught fire. The cockpit temperature would rapidly hit 120 degrees. If you intended to stay alive in RP-6, you had to jink randomly in order to keep the aimed flak from hitting you. I randomly jerked the bird up, down, right, left, every three to four seconds. Carlo had to keep his head buried in the cockpit as he peered at the scopes and fiddled with the controls. While he was leaning over trying to make sense from chaos, the idiot in the front continually jinked the airplane around like a frog on a stove. It would make a buzzard puke. He never missed a beat, never put Caesar salad on his scopes, or even bitched. All he did was groan when I hit 7 Gs. He had every right to be a Grouchy Bear.

I split Barracuda Flight into our normal formation of two cooperating elements in a staggered trail about three miles apart. Every time either element would head for a site to take it down, that site would stay up, and three or more others would challenge us. Normally, when you headed directly toward a SAM site, it would drop off the air, and another would come up and try to catch you from a blind

spot. Not this day; they came up, stayed up, and kept shooting missiles. The APR-35 scope had three concentric rings etched on it from the center dot to the edge of the case. Any signal strobe that extended from the center to two-and-half rings or more was considered to be a valid threat and in range to fire a missile with a good chance of a kill. A “Four-Ringer” out to the edge of the case was a really close, heart-of-the-envelope shot and a “Waterfall” bouncing off the case was cause for browning of the shorts. Needless to say, we had almost continuous Four-Ringers and numerous Waterfalls for what seemed forever. The scope seemed to be full of blinking SA-2 threats, with most of them extending to the case.

A phenomenon of stress is that time becomes elastic, and seconds seem like minutes, or, in other words, time flies when you’re having fun. I never, before or after, saw so many SAM radars up or so many SA-2 missiles in the air. We came up with a count of approximately seventy-two launches during the debriefing. I really don’t know how many there were. I do know that Carlo called every launch to include the bearing and approximate distance. He called them by saying they were targeted at Barracuda (lead element), Barracuda Three (the element), or the Force. I had to dance with twelve separate firings that day alone. When a SAM is being directed at you, you dance with it. First you visually acquire the missile in flight, turn to place it at your right 2 o’clock or left 10 o’clock, push up the power, lower your nose for extra airspeed, and wait until it is about to hit you. While you are watching the supersonic telephone pole approach, you alternately pull up and then push down in order to see if it is tracking. If it is tracking, it apparently sags or rises and then settles back to a tracking position. When you think it is about to hit you and can’t stand it any longer, you pull up and into the missile with at a minimum

of 4Gs, which normally overshoots to at least 7. This will cause the missile to miss, break apart, or go ballistic. The Guideline missile can pull over 10Gs; however, the rolling pull up presents it with a reversal requiring much more, and it can't hack the turn. You have just been forced to dance with a very ugly partner.

Barracuda Element had about the same number to jig with as us. I would line up a site and try to fire, or have my wingman fire, a Shrike. If we were lucky, we could get the Shrike off before we had to waltz with another incoming flying telephone pole smoking along at almost Mach 3.

At some time during the fray, I had the flight jettison the 650-gallon centerline tanks to give us a bit more maneuverability and staying power, since we were really going through the gas. After about fifteen minutes of this extreme amount of fun, my element was forced to join up with me. The element lead had to do this because his EWO and his wingman's EWO had both lost the electronic picture of the fight, and all four heads were now out of the cockpits, looking for supersonic telephone poles. My wingman's EWO also had to go head up for the same reason. This left Carlo as the only EWO with his head down, watching the scopes, deciding what all eighteen SAM sites were doing, and calling the shots for Barracuda flight. We basically were just rolling with the punches and absorbing missiles to cover the Strike Force.

Shark came down Thud Ridge, located the target, and hit it while a hail of missiles was being fired at the Weasels. Less than half the missiles headed anywhere near the strike force, and of those that were fired at or near Shark Force, all were very wide misses. Shark made it to the target and through rejoin without having anyone hit or having to really

dodge a single missile. During all this time, Barracuda Flight spent over twenty-six consecutive minutes inside the overlapping missile envelopes of sixteen or more SAM sites. Carlo called every shot and kept up a running commentary on "what's happening." If he had hiccupped, even once, we would have been history. The bad folk were after the Weasels for sure and pulled out all the stops to get us. They failed. My shorts were very brown, and, I suspect the rest of Barracuda flight had the same problem. We all made it.

We still had our CBU-24s as we finally followed Shark and the MiGCAP out of the valley because we just flat couldn't pick out a site and hit it due to the activity all around us. I would have lost at least one or more wingmen had I tried. We found a 57mm gun site near Thud Ridge and killed it with our CBUs on egress. I didn't have the foggiest idea whether we hit any radar emitters with our Shrikes. We were a bit too busy to really determine if we hit anyone or not. We tried to determine what, if anything, we hit during debriefing and decided we hit an emitter with more than four and less than all eight of our Shrike shots. I still don't care. We did as well as we could.

Shortly after we crossed the Red River, Carlo called, "Cold Mike" (no transmissions on intercom) and went dead silent. He stayed cold mike until I turned on initial at Takhli almost an hour later. His first transmission as we turned for the break was "Check your f-- lanyard." I could smell the cigarette smoke all the way to Takhli (450-plus miles) while he decompressed. I checked our fuel and decided that we did not need any gas from our poststrike tanker and went directly home at over 30,000 feet and landed ahead of Shark Force. I think all of us were too beat to really care.

As usual after an interesting mission, I got the whips and jangles as I wound down. We were way too busy to be nervous while we were in the barrel. Going home was as good a time to calm down, decide what happened, and figure out how to do better next time. I decided that we had done about as well as we could and that Carlo was the key to what we did right. To this day, I have never seen anyone function as well, or even nearly as well, as he did that day. Grouchy Bear was the very best, at least that day. There is an Asian curse that states, "May you be born in interesting times." The curse was obviously aimed at Barracuda. The only person who knew how truly afraid I became was my laundress, and I slipped her enough extra coin to keep her silent.

We had a very lengthy debriefing with Intel. Carlo conducted most of it. Grouchy Bear was never at his best in debriefings and had a habit of really jumping down the necks of the young Intel debriefers. We had all four tapes from the flight voice recorders to pull times and other information. He did a masterful job of re-creating the mission, including which site shot which missile and from where. The Force Commander came by our table and listened for a while and tapped me on the shoulder for a chat. He said that this had been a very good mission. I replied that it was a "Dog Squeeze" mission from our viewpoint. He reminded me that we were supposed to be "First In and Last Out" and to "Protect the Force." He said that that was what he had seen and to shut up. I normally agree with Colonels, especially those I like and respect. This guy had and has all my respect. He asked if Carlo had a good day. I assured him that Carlo did everything except give milk. He suggested that he should get an award. I agreed and he recommended a Silver Star. I agreed and he asked, "What about the nose gunner?" I told him that I had

earned at most a tenth of an Air Medal (an Air Medal for every ten missions in RP-6 was standard). His reply was "Sounds about right to me." Carlo later received a Silver Star to go along with two others, and I got another tenth of an Air Medal. It still seems about right to me. Given the circumstances that day, I am convinced that we did about as well as we possibly could to protect the Force.

Carlo was the bravest man I ever met. At the risk of having several other EWOs call me collect at 0200 some weekend for a sense-of-humor check, he was the best EWO ever. He kept me alive on forty-nine trips downtown to Hanoi, the majority as lead Weasel. That alone makes him very damned good. It is an honor to have been a part of an effort that demanded total dedication and competence. The Wild Weasel mission saved a bunch of lives and was worth every bit of effort expended. To watch anyone perform at such an extreme level of excellence day after day was worth the heightened pulse rate and the subsequent whips and jangles. Carlo's day-to-day performance was uniformly outstanding, and he never had a bad day. The Grouchy Bear just flat didn't make mistakes. Carlo, I want to thank you for making us a hell of a team. I also thank your family for lending you to me for that tour. You did a very hell of a job of keeping Kathleen Sparks's only child alive.



A VERY LONG DAY IN PACK SIX BILLY SPARKS

On this particular mission, nothing much happened exciting, but it was unique since everything was off the cuff and really unplanned.

This mission was in early August 1967 and used one of the truly Dog Squeeze water refueling routes, Brown Anchor. Everyone hated the overwater tracks due to the length of the mission, nearly six hours. The two overwater refueling areas ran north along the Gulf of Tonkin and were parallel, Brown and Tan. Both ran from just north of the DMZ to a drop-off point north of Than Hoa, and Brown was closer to the coast of North Vietnam. For some reason we seemed to be assigned those anchors only for afternoon missions, so the North Vietnamese gunners didn't have to squint into the sun. We would fly from Takhli about due east to coast out near Hue and then northeast to the Brown Track. We would refuel uptrack, drop off, and head north of Haiphong along the coast well out from land. We would turn toward the coast just north of the Kam Pha mines and head west to the targets. The ingress routes then normally went from the coast into the Northeast Railroad, Kep Airfield, Bae Giang, or

some other choice area. The RTB was the reverse. A round trip was almost six hours.

The mission for this day was a small bridge west of Bae Giang, and, as usual, it was surrounded by guns and covered by about four or five SAM sites. The Takhli Force Commander was the Director of Operations for the 355th TFW. The force consisted of a Strike package, Wild Weasels to protect the force from SAMs, and a MiGCAP to take care of the enemy fighters. The Takhli strike force had sixteen F-105Ds with six bombs each, two 450-gallon fuel tanks, and jamming pods. The Strike Force call signs were Shark, Marlin Bear, and Barracuda. Each of the four F-105F Wild Weasels carried two Shrikes, two CBU-24s, and a 650-gallon centerline tank. The MiGCAP Olds flight from the 8th Wing consisted of four F-4Ds with AIM-9s, AIM-7s, fuel tanks, and jammers. The 8th TFW at Ubon had call signs that were cars. Strangely enough, Colonel Robin Olds always seemed to have Olds as his call sign. Korat was scheduled twenty minutes ahead of us with a target within ten miles or so of our area. Their force also consisted of sixteen F-105Ds, four F-105F Wild Weasels, and a four-ship MiGCAP also from Ubon. All had the same configuration as the Takhli package.

Carlo Lombardo, my EWO, and I were doing our usual routine grousing about long, overwater, rear-end numbing, six-hour missions. As we approached Ubon, I heard a call on Guard that said, "Sparky, Sparky come up 123.4." This was repeated three or four times, and I asked Carlo who had the call sign "Sparky" when I heard, "Damn it, Sparky I can't remember your call sign; come up 123.4." I switched to his frequency and checked in. Major Baldwin was the Korat Force Commander and had a problem. All of his Weasels had aborted, and he flat did not want to head in north of Haiphong with no Weasels. He wanted to know if I would

cover them for their mission. I told him that I was only a Captain and I had better get my boss, Shark Lead, on frequency.

I went back, brought Shark Lead up on the frequency, and Colonel White and Baldwin discussed WTF0. I told both that it wasn't a very hard thing to do, and Barracuda could cut it easy. White was worried about MiGs and said he would approve if Barracuda could have Korat's MiG CAP cover him instead of Ozark, the Korat Strike Force. Baldy's answer was, "Hell, if you send them, they can have my wife. I want some Weasels." It was agreed that I could cover both Korat and Takhli.

I changed radio channels, briefed Barracuda for about thirty seconds on the changes, and then switched the flight to Korat's strike frequency. We cut about 45 degrees left of the heading to Da Nang in order to join up with Ozark Force off the coast of North Vietnam. We went between Vinh and Than Hoa, to where I thought the Korat force would be, coasted out, and the whole string of tankers was smack in front of us. I joined with the lead low KC-135, normal position for the Weasel tanker, and filled up. We hit the drop point on time and headed for the mines.

I took Barracuda in about twenty miles or so in front with the Korat MiGCAP five miles behind us. This allowed us to root around for the SAMs and keep the Strike Force covered. We had only a few sporadic SAM signals along with the normal bunch of FIRECAN gun layers. I briefed my flight to drop the 650-gallon centerline tank as soon as it went dry to allow as much time as possible in the Pack. My four ship of Weasels were good and experienced.

We did our usual five-mile or so split into pairs in semitrail and had some SAMs come up fairly seriously near the target. I lined the SAM up for my wingman to take a Shrike loft shot, and I covered Barracuda 3 as he lined up on another SAM and had his wingman shoot a Shrike at it. The SAMs both went down, and Korat hit the target bang on. We fell in trail with the Korat package and came out behind them with few problems except for another nosy SAM that we smacked with two Shrikes on the way out. Barracuda now had one Shrike each and all our CBU-24s.

As we hit the coast, I picked up Shark Force about ten miles out and pulled a hard 180 turn to stay in front of them. I went to the Takhli strike frequency and checked in with Shark. We accelerated to 600 knots to get fifteen miles in front and led Shark back in to the target area using similar tactics as the first trip. Two more SAMs came up and we knocked them down with Shrikes. Shark had nothing but guns around their bridge, and they put it into the water. We exited behind Shark and Olds flights and hit a 57mm gun emplacement near the Northeast Railroad on the way out. We couldn't use the CBU-24 bombs on SAMs, since they wouldn't stay up and play long enough for us to find them.

As we neared the coast the second time, Olds asked if we could cover them for another swing back through the area due to some MiG calls from the radar picket ship, Red Crown. At that time Barracuda 3 and I had one Shrike each, no bombs or centerline tank, while both wingmen had no ordnance except the gun. I wagged my wings and hand signaled Sam for a fuel check. He had enough for about ten or fifteen minutes more before we really had to scoot. I had a couple hundred pounds less. I told Olds we could cover him and sent Barracuda 2 and 4 to the tanker to RTB with the force.

Barracuda 3 and I went back to the Northeast Railroad in front of Olds. The F-4s worked the area until Olds 2 called Bingo, and we covered Olds's six as they went out. When we hit the coast, we had been in RP-6 for forty-three consecutive minutes, had never been below 540 knots and had enough fuel remaining to make Da Nang straight in with 600 pounds of fuel (six to eight minutes flying time). Piece of cake.

At this point I screwed the pooch. I was sightseeing and allowed Olds to get to the tanker first. Very dumb thing to do when skoshi for petrol. No problem, Barracuda 3 had ten minutes' fuel to play with, and I had a bit less. Olds 2 was a brand new First Lieutenant on his very first Pack 6 mission. He forgot how to refuel and was really rocking and rolling behind the KC-135 filling station. It did not help to have both Robin Olds, his Wing King, and Bill Kirk, one of the best fighter pilots in the world, give him flying lessons while he made a fool of himself. Sam and I were starting to sweat a bit, and Carlo began to gripe at me and state his belief that my parents had not been legally wed and other less charming comments. The poor Lieutenant kept making a fool of himself in front of his Wing King and Kirk. After a subjectively long time, I called Olds and the following conversation ensued.

"Olds, Cuda, we are hurting."

"Barracuda, bad?"

"Tres bad, Boss."

"Olds Two, get off the boom."

“Lead, I’m Bingo.”

“Olds Two, get off the damned boom now.”

“Olds two is Bingo minus five hundred.”

“I don’t care if you fucking die! Get off the boom *now*!”

Olds Two moved off, and I had Sam refuel first, with me very close on his wing. He had just enough fuel to go straight-in to Da Nang and still have 300 pounds (three minutes) remaining and I had 100 less. Sam took about 3,500 pounds, and I did the same. We departed the tanker just north of Vinh with enough fuel for a straight line for Takhli.

As we started our turn to RTB, I thanked Robin for the gas. He said, “No sweat. Barracuda, thanks for the cover. OK, two let’s see you make a fool of yourself one more time!” Sam and I changed channels and headed for home.

Sam and I joined our flight at the Intel debriefing and then had a separate debrief with Colonel White. Everyone was happy, and we wrote it all up in the Tactics Book in case we had to do it again. At least I never had to do that again, and I’m not sure anyone else did either.

As a footnote, as I was leaving the Wing Headquarters for the bar, I was told I had a call on the Red Phone in the command center. It was Colonel Olds calling from Ubon to say hello. He talked about the mission a bit, and he never asked how low on fuel we were. As he ended his chat, I asked if his Nugget ever got any gas. “The damned fool finally took fuel. Don’t worry about that ass; he’s going on

night missions and will never fly with me again." I asked him a couple of years ago when we were skiing at Steamboat Springs if he remembered that mission and he told me, "Hell yes. That jerk never did fly with me again."

I finished with over a hundred missions in RP-6, and forty-three consecutive minutes remains my max for time in an aircraft inside the Pack. I later had about two and a half consecutive hours in Pack 6, but that was on the ground waiting for a helicopter.



MY LAST COMBAT MISSION BILL SPARKS

I flew my 145th and last combat mission November 5, '67, not by choice. I had arrived at Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base on March 15 after completing the Wild Weasel School at Nellis. I talked to my boss, the commander of the 357th Tactical Fighter Squadron, and the deal was I would fly one hundred missions as a Wild Weasel and then complete another thirty-seven missions as a strike pilot. This would make me one of the first guys to get two hundred missions in North Vietnam in an F-105, since I had flown sixty-three missions in '65 when the 563th TFS had been at Takhli for four months. In fact, it would make me one of the first to get two hundred in anything, since Carl Richter at Korat would be the first to finish two hundred in September. My Boss sent me up the command chain. The Deputy for Operations for the 355th Tactical Fighter agreed as well. My next stop was with the Wing King of the 355th TFW. He also agreed, and I was off to the races.

By late October I had flown seventy-seven missions as a Wild Weasel, and Carlo and I were a hell of a fine Weasel Crew. That month the Deputy for Operations was reassigned to Saigon to become the Director of Operations for all Out-

of-Country missions. He was the first director to have ever flown in the North and that, along with all his excellent other qualifications, made him the best man for the job. We really needed someone in that shop who could walk and chew gum without gagging. He promised to be an absolute treasure. The only problem was that he needed an EWO in his shop and wanted Carlo, easily the best choice for the job. But it would break up our team, and I was selfish enough to want to keep him. I was actually asked—me, a lowly Captain—if he could take Carlo. I was forced to smile and be a nice boy. I became an instant Strike Pilot and also D Flight Commander instead of E Flight, Weasel, Commander.

Our new Wing Commander, Colonel Giraudo, AKA “The Great Kahuna,” reluctantly agreed to let me finish out my remaining sixty missions for the magic two hundred. Carl Richter had been killed recently with only a couple to go for two hundred, and all of the Brass were a bit nervous about allowing anyone to try for the two hundred mark. I would rather have been a Weasel; however, captains take what they can get. I took over D flight and started to relearn how to lead a strike flight. I flew my first strike flight lead to Kep Airfield and my second to Phuc Yen. My third was to Kep again, and I was back in the saddle. Three Route Pack Six missions in three days are a good way to get back in shape.

I managed to slow myself down in the Takhli Stag Bar by dislocating my right shoulder while rolling for drinks. A “roll” consists of several staid, sober, careful folk looking at each other and yelling, “Last one with his feet on the bar rail buys!” Everyone does a front roll, and the last one to whack his feet on the bar rail buys a round for the mess. I tripped, dislocated my shoulder, *and* had to buy for the bar. Not a very swift way to “roll” for drinks. Ted Moeller took me over

to the hospital and had my arm taped to my side for ten days.

I spent the next fortnight being Supervisor of Flying (SOF), a job that ranks somewhere near dental work without anesthesia. I also heard a whole bunch of my “friends” offer to “roll” for drinks. I finally got the shoulder working at about half speed and flew an engine change test hop to prove I was ready and went back on the schedule.

One of the reasons I had been reassigned as a strike pilot was that all of the squadrons were short of Mission Commanders. My squadron had only two, and we really needed at least two more to keep the workload down. While I was SOF for ten days, one of the two was shot down over Hanoi and not recovered. I was scheduled to become a Mission Commander after my first three missions, but the dislocation put that on hold. I was scheduled for two more to see if the shoulder would work before I would be certified.

I led a flight to Kep the first day back, and the next day, November 5, I led to Phuc Yen again. My call sign was Marlin and we were to be the last flight to roll in. Flying a raid against Phuc Yen is about like being in hell with your back broke. The only thing worse is to be Tail End Charlie at Phuc Yen. The bad guys kept all of their MiG-21s there and objected rather firmly when we hit the airfield. As I remember, there were over a thousand 37mm and larger guns surrounding the place, and it was covered by between six and sixteen SAM Sites. Not exactly the best spot for a sightseeing trip.

The briefing for Marlin flight was a bit different on that day because I was checking out a new element lead, Frank.

He had come to the F-105 from C-141s and had never flown any single-seat aircraft since he went through pilot training. He had been one of our students at McConnell, and I had given him a couple of check flights before I went to Weasel School. Frank asked me to cover RESCAP during the mission briefing at the squadron. I asked why, and he told me that if he were to really be an element lead, he might have to run a RESCAP. I told him that I would run the RESCAP if required. He said, "Not if you're the one on the ground." I covered RESCAP for at least fifteen minutes and asked for questions. There were none, and we suited up.

All of the ground routine went smoothly. Taxi, takeoff, join-up, refueling, pod formation, and all of the other aspects of an RP-6 mission were as routine as they could possibly be. The strike force held a good pod position as we made our way through Laos and North Vietnam to the Red River crossing point about ten miles downstream from Yen Bai. From there toward Phuc Yen the strike force flew at about 6,000 feet and 540 knots until we neared the MiG base and started our afterburner climb to roll-in altitude. For some reason, the third flight hung it high and waited way too long to start their attack, which caused Marlin to be almost at 18,000 before we could head down the slide. Our attack heading was almost east instead of southwest because of the delay, and it seemed as though it took a week to fly down to release altitude of 7,000. Since our target was the last standing hangar on the airfield, it was easy to spot. The normal problems caused by the flak bursting in layers caused us to lose sight of the hangar two or three times, but it didn't move and was there when we got to our release parameters of 7,000 feet, forty-five degree dive, and 540 knots. The pass looked good at the time and, the next day when I saw the Bomb Damage Photos, we had put eighteen of our twenty-four M-117 750-

pound bombs through where the roof had been. Not too shabby for manual bombing.

I reefed my bird hard up and left at 5+ Gs and did my normal roll right and then left to allow my wingmen to see me for the rejoin. Our problem was that we were now headed almost directly toward Hanoi and really had few options to avoid the vast amount of flak. I took the easiest way out by flying a loose left, jinking turn around Phuc Yen in order to fly on the north side of the complex and head for Thud Ridge. There were fewer guns on the north side. It took over a minute to rejoin. Before the flight could get into Pod Formation for SAM protection, we had three missiles launched at us from our 6 o'clock.

My choices were not very good. I could turn right and overfly the north railroad and dodge the missiles while in the flak from the rail lines. I could turn left and fly back over Phuc Yen, dodging missiles in even worse flak. Or I could put the flight down in the weeds supersonic and haul for the ridge below 50 feet. I chose to mow the grass. Red Dog, the Weasel flight, called the launch and told me which SAM site it was from. I jerked the bird around enough to catch sight of the first SA-2 and watched it hit the deck. My wingmen were almost in formation by now, as I saw the second missile lose guidance commands and go up out of sight. At about the time I heard Red Dog Three call that he was hit and burning. I caught sight of the third missile as it went into some houses and exploded. I decided to come up out of the grass and started a climb as Marlin Flight got into good Pod formation. We were at 750 knots and were below 100 feet above the rice paddies as I came out of afterburner and continued to climb. As I passed through about 100 feet altitude, I saw several rounds zip by me, and I took three 57mm hits almost simultaneously. The rounds came from a

57mm site almost a mile north of us and were optically fired. These were the same guns that had hit Red Dog Three. One round hit the afterburner section just above the right slab, one was in the bomb bay directly under my feet, and one was in the Air Turbine Motor (ATM) compartment just in front of my right knee. I kept in the climb at near military power, and the cockpit instantly filled with smoke. I heard Red Dog Three calling that he was on fire and also heard his element lead tell him that he was in "great shape," a big fat lie. Red Dog three bailed out over a rail yard fewer than 20 miles away and was put in the Hilton.

I couldn't see anything because of the smoke and decided to blow the canopy. I flat could not find the canopy jettison handle on the left console and pulled some knob off trying. So, I flipped the manual canopy unlock lever under the canopy rail and the canopy went like it had been blown off. I was now in a convertible at 695 knots, still supersonic, climbing through 300 feet. I got two or three radio transmissions out before the radio died and everything else decided to quit. It was probably a good thing the radio failed, or everyone could have heard me squealing. The fire from the AB section caused the Fire and Overheat Lights to both come on and then quit. I checked the circuits, and they didn't test, just like the good book says can happen when a big fire is on board. All three hydraulic gauges started down, bounced a few times, the utility gauge went to zero followed by primary flight gauge (P2). PI went slowly down and then dropped to zero. The oil pressure gauge went to visit the hydraulic gauges, and every light on the peek-and-panic panel came on, and then all of them quit. Shortly after the radio quit, I had a complete electrical failure followed by the failure of all pitot static flight instruments. The only thing in my Thud that worked was the Whiskey Compass, and I think it was leaking alcohol.

I was still flying and heading up Thud Ridge away from Hanoi. I still had smoke coming into the cockpit and swirling around before the truly tremendous slipstream sucked it out. I caught myself reaching up and fanning the compass mounted on the canopy to see what heading I had. Now that is very stupid. I am in a 450-knot convertible fanning a compass. If my arm had gotten caught in the slipstream, I would have been sans arm. I started to laugh at my stupidity until I noticed that the right front quarter panel of the windscreen was starting to melt. I reached as far forward as I could and felt extreme heat from the fire in the ATM compartment. I am sure that the utility hydraulic reservoir had ruptured and was burning. The right quarter panel melted almost completely, and shortly thereafter the right rudder pedal collapsed and dangled from the cables. I was now over halfway up Thud Ridge and had turned for the Red River crossing. That was pure reflex, I guess. I then had an explosion in the bomb bay, which blew the doors off and a small amount of fire came into the cockpit below my left foot. I had to hold my left foot up to stay clear of the flame. It wasn't all that hot due to the suction from the canopy area.

I had a couple more minutes to get to the river. I held what I had, trying to be the smoothest pilot in the world, since I didn't have the foggiest how much hydraulic fluid I had in P2. The fire burned up from the AB section and the Aft Fuel Tank blew, leaving only the aircraft frames showing. The fire also burned up the right side of the aircraft, out into the right wing and the right main tire blew causing the right main to smack down into the slipstream and be ripped off the aircraft. All three of my wingmen looked like the Thunderbirds at an Academy graduation. I had no right rudder pedal, no right gear strut, my bomb bay doors were missing, no lid on my cockpit, a melted hole in the

windscreen, my left foot up, sundry other things disastrously wrong—*but* I was coming up on the Red River. I found out afterward that I had been called out as a SAM twice by other aircraft as I burned my way up the ridge. Marlin three only said, “That’s no Sam, that’s Sparky.” I started to think I had it made until the controls went, and I became a passenger.

I still had five miles or so to go to cross the river when all of the controls went south. The bird pitched up, shuddered, rolled right like it was going to spin, and then started another pull-up. It was still going my way, so I held on to the stick to keep my arms from getting outside and stayed with my Thud. It would pull up sharply, shudder, shake, and snap right as if it were going to spin, and then start another pull-up. It did this three times until I was over the Red River. The last time it did snap into an inverted spin entry, and I decided that it had taken me as far as it could go and pulled the handles up and squeezed the triggers. Only an F-105 could have taken that amount of punishment for seven-and-a-half minutes and deliver the driver to the river.

I still had one of my wingmen trying to fly formation and saw him flash by as I ejected. I had no idea what my altitude, airspeed, or attitude was since nothing worked except the Whiskey Compass. I learned that I was at 24,000 feet, 270 knots, and entering an inverted spin, *but* I was over the Red River. Being over the river was wonderful, since the Rescue Jolly Green Giants were not allowed to cross the Red River for a rescue.

I fell about a week, subjective time, waiting for the chute to open at 10,000 feet and remembered that the last time I had ejected, I had caught the risers under my chin and really put a raspberry on my neck. I was at least not

going to do that again. I stabilized on my back in a head-down position that didn't spin, and when I heard the spring motor in the parachute whir, I snapped my chin down just in time to catch the risers under it. I put another raspberry on my neck. When I looked down, I was not quite across the river, so I hauled on the front risers and slipped across. I then saw that I was going to land near a small group of houses, so I went back up the risers and turned the chute and headed downstream. I pulled the front risers down and then got my knee in the riser Y and did front riser slips to put as much distance between me and the houses until I was at about 200 feet or so above the jungle. I had come almost four miles and had two ridgelines between me and the nearest house or road. I looked down and decided that I needed to stop the slip and land in what I thought was "elephant grass." I landed in seventy-five-foot tall bamboo.

I smashed into the bamboo and the chute caught with me at least forty feet up. The bamboo broke, and I fell the last forty feet and landed like a sack of feed on a fairly steep hillside with no place to do any kind of a parachute landing fall (PLF). I didn't even do a Fighter Pilot PLF of heels, ass, and head; instead I just crumpled into a mound of goo. I broke my right patella, chipped a bone in my right elbow, dislocated my right shoulder again, had hairline fractures in several small bones in both feet, and landed on the family jewels with a mighty thump. But I was down and across the river.

I moaned some, cursed even more, and managed to get the beeper from my parachute and shut it off. I pulled out my primary survival radio and found that the radios were very weak. Not to worry, I had two survival radios, three sets of batteries, the chute beeper, and a partridge in a pear tree. I drank one of my six baby bottles of water, contacted

the RESCAP, Frank, in an exemplary fashion, and started to move down the hill and find a place where I could see the sky.

If you have never been in bamboo, don't go. It is not a nice place. I would end up several feet in the air trying to squeeze through the bamboo and have to break my way back down. I moved about two hundred yards in about fifteen minutes and worked my way into twenty-five-foot tall ferns that made the bamboo look like a good place. It took another ten or so minutes to wiggle out of the fern thicket and get under a huge tree. I tried to find a better place and gave up, since the whole area was bamboo and/or ferns. I talked to Frank and vectored him over my tree and asked him to check his fuel. He informed me that he was running this show and to shut up. He also told me that he had a better view than I did, had sent the wingmen out for fuel, and was about to leave for a while. I found out that he left my tree seventy-five miles northwest of Hanoi with fewer than 2,000 pounds of fuel. He went to a tanker and was back in twenty-nine minutes. The tanker could not have been in Laos. Everyone was trying his best to pick up my worthless butt.

I sat under my tree for almost twenty minutes—it seemed like a week—until I heard a burner light. I came up on the survival radio and had a call from Ozark, a flight of four from Korat who had my cap until my element got back. I vectored them into my tree and they set up a cap away from me to keep the bad guys guessing. Frank called back a few minutes later with the rest of Marlin Flight and took over the RESCAP duties. I was starting to get lonely and had finished two of my baby bottles when Frank told me that the Sandys were inbound. I had been on the ground for only a bit over two hours clock time, or a month subjective time. I

started to believe I had a chance. I inventoried my stuff and put away everything I was going to take out. Both pistols, spare radio and batteries, the beeper, all seven knives I carried, my medical kit, and my trade goods kit. I kept out several flares and two pen gun flare kits.

The Sandys called shortly thereafter, at about 1630 local time, and I managed to vector them over my tree. They left to set up an orbit away from me, and I waited very anxiously for the HH-3 to arrive. I listened to the Jolly call in, and then all hell seemed to break loose. Some MiG-17s showed up and the Sandys became most nervous. The Jolly tried to calm things down and the Low Sandy came by to mark my position with a Willy Pete (White Phosphorous) Bomb. The Sandy then marked another location for some reason and the Low Jolly went there. I had seventeen aircraft in my CAP, and everyone started to talk at once. The Jolly went to the wrong place and then headed back to me. All this time I could see a little patch of sky only about thirty feet in diameter. Frank made a pass at the Low Jolly and turned him toward me and shouted for me to "Do something!" I pulled out my pen-gun flare and fired and reloaded as fast as possible. I bounced a flare off his canopy and saw the pilot jump and then hover in my tree.

The radio went absolutely Able Sugar with people shouting out MiG calls as I watched the penetrator come down toward me. I had stowed my radio and did not hear a transmission from the Jolly pilot, who was told that there were MiGs in the area. His answer was, "Keep them off my ass; I've got better things to do!" and stayed in the hover with his rotor blades whacking the tree well below the top. I backed out to see the cable operator, but the open space was so small I couldn't see squat. The cable stopped a few feet above me and then came down some more and was

level with me a bit down a steep slope. I couldn't jump because of my ankles and knee, and then it swung toward me, and I let it hit the ground and discharge a huge spark. I unzipped the straps, pulled down on the folding seat, put my legs around the penetrator, really tightened the straps around my body, and yanked on the cable as hard as I could. I was pulled off the ground and up about fifty feet or so. The HH-3E pivoted 180 degrees and started to pull me up and through the tree as it accelerated to his max speed. It was a very wild ride for a while. I broke out of the canopy at top speed for the Jolly as the winch hauled me up. The door gunner was firing his minigun at something, so I whipped out my .38 and shot the jungle. I figured I could get off six rounds and make everything lighter.

I was pulled in the door and hugged by the crew. I thought I would be the happiest man in the world, but the crew of Harry Walker's HH-3E were happier than I was. The whole crew was laughing like mad, so I asked what was funny and was told that Harry had just said, "Tell the SOB not to die until we get him to a hospital. We need a live one for a change." I had problems standing and the Paramedic (PJ) sat me down and started to check me out. The first thing he did was to strap a parachute on me. I sure as hell didn't want to use one of those again for a while. He asked if I was hurt, and I told him I had some small problems. He then put me on a stretcher and gave me a good once-over. It was noisy as all hell in the Jolly, and since I didn't have a headset, I had real problems hearing. He pulled out a morphine styrene case and I said no. He grinned and showed me a miniature of Jack Daniel's Black Label that was in the tube. It was exactly what the doctor ordered.

I guess I was beat up worse than I thought, since I went into shock for a while. The whole crew took off their jackets

and piled them around me to keep me warm. I straightened out in time to watch the Jolly refuel on the way back. The PJ and the flight engineer helped me up to the cockpit, and I sat on the jump seat as the C-130 came over us, stopped just in front, and then let down until the hose was only fifty feet or so in front. We were in Laos with all of the Low Level Fuel Lights on just after sunset. There were layered clouds that were black with a blood-red sun shining from below up through and between them. It was incredible. Harry moved the big HH-3E up to the hose, stuck it, and took gas. It was all very smooth, very easy, and very beautiful. I was the second farthest north rescue in the whole war. The whole crew of very brave men had risked their lives to pull me from the jungle. Henry did understand what "We Band of Brothers" meant.

We went to Nakon Phanom, NKP, aka Naked Fanny, and landed about 2100 hours. I was on a stretcher and really couldn't walk. I was treated like the crown jewels and rushed to the hospital for a checkup. I was on the x-ray machine that was broken when a former Wing commander, now a Brigadier, came in. Willy P. was a very nice and very funny man. He went into a routine about having given me a perfectly good F-105 and I had dumped it! He was not going to give me any more. He also brought a bottle of Old Overshoes Rye Mission Whiskey and a six-pack of warm Miller beer. We both sat on the x-ray and drank the Old Overshoes neat with the warm beer chaser. He also told me that the Great Kahuna had sent the Takhli Gooney Bird for me, and it was inbound.

I was taken from the hospital, never having seen a doctor, and loaded on the C-47 in my stretcher. When we were airborne, the pilot came back and put my going-home ration from Colonel Giraudo on my chest: a bottle of Chivas

Regal, a glass, and a bucket of ice. The Chivas was to get me back to Takhli in good humor. It did a very good job. When we landed, the crew turned the stretcher so I could see what was happening. I was met by the fire suppression helicopter, fire trucks, over one thousand folk, and was treated to a Hundred Mission Parade at near midnight Takhli time.

When we stopped, the doors of the Gooney Bird swung open and the Great Kahuna jumped into the C-47 and hollered, "Throw her up!" A very shapely female came flying through the air and landed in his arms. He came over, dumped her on me, and said, "Welcome home Sparky, look what I brung ya!" The lady had just arrived that day and was the first female on the base. She was his brand-new secretary, very sharp, and she was scared spitless.

I was laughing like a hyena and decided to try to calm her down, since she was actually shaking. I whispered in her ear, "I just fell out of a tree, landed on my jewels, and there isn't a thing I could do to you!"

She looked at me, started to cry, really hugged me, and said, "You poor baby!"

We were placed in the back of Colonels G's pickup—I was still on my stretcher—and given a tour of the base.

I was grounded, and that was my last combat mission. I tried to talk the Boss out of his decision, but I went home. I was the first guy from Takhli that was picked up from North Vietnam in nine months. Frank did a perfect job the first time he ran a RESCAP, and I am the most fortunate person in the world.



BLUE ANCHOR 72 PAPA, WHERE ARE YOU? NORM POWELL

It was a dark and stormy night. The year was 1967, Korat AB, Thailand. My EWO, John Gibbons, and I were flying the last few of our hundred missions. We were scheduled for an “easy counter” night mission to Pack 1 in support of B-52s making teakwood matchsticks in the vicinity of Fingers Lake, between the DMZ and Dong Hoi. We were providing SAM suppression for three different TOTs about an hour apart, exiting between each to the Blue Anchor track for refueling. There had been sporadic SAM activity in the area from a well-shielded site that was detectable only if we were in or near the main radar beam, and the BUFFs were understandably concerned. SAC, in their wisdom, deemed it necessary that we carry some hard ordnance in addition to antiradar missiles. So we leaped off the ground at O-dark-thirty with a 650-gallon belly tank, two 450s, a bomb bay tank, an AGM-45 Shrike, and would you believe, a single M-117 750-pounder on an outboard pylon. What we were supposed to do with that bomb in the dark escapes me.

Being monsoon season, there was a wall of thunderstorms all along the Annamite mountain range between Laos and North Vietnam, spilling over to include

the Blue refueling track. Those of us that were there remember that those T-storms, while perhaps not as violent as in the United States' tornado alley, tended to be huge, high, and long lasting. Brigham Radar gave us vectors to within a mile of the tanker, and judicious manipulation of the antenna tilt and receiver gain of the Thud's marginal air-to-air radar gave me enough confidence to edge up to the tanker's altitude. Finally, through the violet ball of St. Elmo's fire on the pitot and corona streamers across the center windscreen, I discerned a glow of lights in the murk above. But there sure were a lot of lights. It was a KC-135 "Papa" with that short hose and drogue attached to his rigid boom. Flailing unsuccessfully at it was an EB-66! We settled on the right wing to watch and learn. At last, after ricocheting the drogue off his nose, probe and windscreen, the '66 went home, and it was our turn. Maybe not my smartest hookup, but considering the mild turbulence, not bad as we pushed the drogue and hose into the prescribed U-bend and began taking fuel. My eyes were fixed on the tanker, but I could vaguely see in the corner of my eye that there was considerable streaming of something from the hose connection on the boom. All was proceeding normally until I ran out of throttle.

Heavy iron flyers remember the technique of lighting the burner into extended range while simultaneously extending partial speed brakes to hang on to the tanker as we got too heavy for mil power, especially on slower tankers like KB-50s and KC-97s (those with the fans on the front). Well, I performed this valsalva with only a little bobble in the hose when suddenly the clouds flashed bright orange all around. The boomer yelled, "Breakaway, breakaway, breakaway!" and the tanker disappeared into the murk. After a long pause, a tremulous voice on the UHF called, "Did anyone see what happened back there?" Well, yeah,

actually I did. Apparently the previous flailing and banging had produced a tear and a leak in the hose with a stream of fuel flowing into the slipstream over my wing and alongside my fuselage. This continued until it ignited as I lit the burner. Fortunately, the airstream was fast enough to prevent the flame from progressing forward, and I never achieved a position that caused the fuel stream to go down the intake, but the boomer's view must have been spectacular!

The tanker drivers were more than a little nervous during this period, as shortly before this episode, an F-105D with an MER full of radar-fused 750s had joined to refuel when one of the prematurely armed VT fuses blew the Thud and the tanker into the Great Beyond.

By the way, three TOTs, three trips into North Vietnam, and five-and-a-half hours, but only one counter.



CHASING SAMS NORM POWELL

During the summer of 1967, during my tour as a Weasel with the 13th TFS at Korat, it transpired that, in addition to the daily Rolling Thunder gaggles going north, the Weasels were often tasked to provide counter-SAM support to other strike forces conducting raids at night. This usually involved Arc Light B-52s, but there was also other mischief afoot. On this particular night, Bear John Gibbons and I were aloft over RP-6 attempting to distract the radar defenses from a string of A-6 Intruders that were bombing a military barracks area at Hoa Loc, in the bend of the Black River southwest of Hanoi. Formation lights were deemed ill-advised over hostile territory, so we were a lone F-105F with three gas bags, a QRC-160 jamming pod, and a single AGM-45 Shrike. Uncle Ho must have been quivering in his tire-tread sandals!

After a “routine” nighttime heavyweight takeoff and prestrike refueling, we took a radial off Channel 97 to the general area of the target, only to find the entire Red River valley covered by a solid undercast with tops at around 9,000–10,000 feet. This is not good for visually acquiring any SAMs that might need to be maneuvered against, so we

initially penetrated down to about 6,000 feet without breaking out of the bottoms, so back up to “troll” at about 15,000 feet in hopes that this would give us enough time to engage any SAMs that might appear. This was rather too high for good maneuvering energy in the Weasel Thud, though.

The proverbial “Hour upon hour of sheer boredom” wore on as each A-6 came and went, with only a sporadic Fan Song signal appearing to take a look at us from somewhere out in the flats near “downtown.” They never stayed on the air long enough to pose much of a threat or present a good Shrike target. (The “Iron Hand” mission originally strove to kill SAM sites, but soon evolved into threatening them into shutting down, or at least keeping their attention off the strike force.)

Finally, the last bomber departed “feet wet,” and here we were with an unexpended Shrike. It was at this moment that our “playmate” decided to light up our RHAW gear with a steady High PRF tracking signal. Lulled, probably, into a sense of complacency by the lack of activity, or maybe a “manhood-is-at-stake” testosterone insanity, I said to John, “Let’s go get that SOB!” He was rather taken aback and mumbled something like, “Remember, you’ll die 31 inches before I do” but did a great job of lining me up with the ER-142 strobes. One of the great weaknesses of the Weasel electronics back then was the lack of a reliable indication of range to the emitter. Sure, one could home in on the signal until “station passage” like an ADF, but then it was rather late to do anything about it. So, we were reduced to estimating range based upon signal strength or, my favorite, using the Shrike needles to get a “dip” angle. Although the Shrike was range-limited compared to the SA-2, we could “loft” it about twelve-to-fourteen miles by

getting up to speed and pulling up to around 50 degrees before firing. (Never mind that this made us an ideal target for return fire and was a dead giveaway of our intentions.) The operator on the ground cooperated fully by staying on the air (He probably nudged his comrade in the van and said, "Hey, Nguyen, watch this!")

I centered the Shrike needles, lit the AB, pulled up, and fired our lone missile at what we guessed was about twelve miles range. I then floated into a wingover to the left to get the nose back down as John was saying, "He's three rings, he's four rings, he's almost off the f--ing scope, he's moving toward twelve o'clock, valid launch!"

My voice is then heard on the tape saying, "B-S, that's impossible." I'm thinking: "I'm turning left; how can he be moving from the right toward twelve?"

Well, always trust your instruments and your EWO. Turns out that the SAM operators had pulled the classic bait-and-switch. The site that we fired at lured us out into the flats, shut down, and his buddy at 10 o'clock came up and launched. The clouds below lit up like flying over LA at night, and soon a golden fireball emerged, followed shortly by a second. ("That can't be flares, can it?") I continued rolling the wingover to inverted, debated about punching off the empty tanks as chaff, decided I'd take all the armor I could get, even if thin aluminum, told John to "turn the pod on!" and tried to remember what was said about the ideal time to reverse my dive to evade the missile. The tech wizards had determined that the best moment was about one and a half seconds time-of-flight of the missile before impact (thanks a lot, guys), but I waited until I couldn't stand it anymore, plus a half-second, rolled upright and pulled all the Gs the bird could give, causing missile "A" to

overshoot underneath. This, of course, set us up nicely for missile "B," which looked about to come into the cockpit with us. There was time only to shove forward on the stick, floating checklists, cigarette butts, and pencil stubs into the canopy as we were brightly illuminated by the sustainer rocket engine passing overhead. Fortunately, neither missile detonated until self-destruct time. Did the pod save us by denying him range info? I'll never know, but I'd take all the help I could get.

After we played this incident for all it was worth at the club, the squadron had the local Thai tailor craft a new black patch with four big white eyeballs emblazoned with the words, "SAM Examiner, Night Qualified."

Many of us recorded audio of these missions with Panasonic cassette recorders from the BX using the earpiece as a mike tucked into the headphone of our helmet. An amusing characteristic of these recorders was that the capstan drive would slow down dramatically when "G" loaded during evasive maneuvers, causing played-back voices to ascend into the chipmunk/Donald Duck soprano pitch. Or maybe we actually did sound like that.



MY ONE AND ONLY GO AT A MIG-21 IRV LEVINE

This is my tale of my one and only “go” at a MiG-21 over North Vietnam. In my tale, I try to give an idea of how little I knew about fighter tactics going in.

I volunteered for 'Nam and felt lucky when I was given a Thud assignment to McConnell AFB. Seems they were short of Thud pilots, and I was put in somewhat of a fast track and soon found myself at Korat RTAFB, Thailand, and winging my way into and out of North Vietnam.

On the day I “almost” got a MiG, we came in from feet wet heading for a strike near Hanoi. We were inbound toward the target when we got word that it was to be a “weather abort.” The flight lead turned us away from a wall of clouds in a right turn into clear skies with miles of visibility toward the Gulf. I lagged behind and to the right. Several thousand feet below was a solid undercast. There was no chatter coming over the headphones. Anyone who has been there knows of the almost incessant “chatter” once flights were in the combat area over the North. There were no RHAW gear warnings or calls from Deep Sea or Harbor Master, and in cleaning up my cockpit I fell back a

good ways and to the right of the others. The situation was calm and quiet.

Then, off to my right and coming up through the clouds was a rather small aircraft in a lazy, indifferent manner. I saw no aggressiveness as it angled slowly upward. That it wasn't one of ours never occurred to me until it suddenly snapped up and fired a missile. At that point I realized it was a MiG. The missile went behind the flight lead's wing and struck the tail cone of his right wing tank, and some seventy feet of flame shot backward. I went to guns air, got my seat down, dumped my bombs, and went to burner. All the MiGs I had seen since I had been flying over the North always made a single pass and then climbed for altitude and headed for China. I thought this guy would do the same. I got my nose up in anticipation of a tail-on shot with my gun, all the while trying to check on my leader and the other two Thuds on his wing, while keeping an eye on the bad guy.

The MiG turned lazily left toward me as he continued to climb. He was moving fast now, and I realized he wasn't going to China and was passing directly in front of and below me. I shoved my stick forward and only had a moment to see him pass in front of me, and we seemed to be on a collision course. As he streaked in front, he was in a 90-degree bank, and I only got a glimpse of his cockpit and fuselage before I pulled the trigger. My heart was in my mouth as I thought my bird was going to meld with his, but he shot more to my left and did a graceful pull up a thousand feet above me going away on almost a parallel path to mine.

The MiG seemed more interested in the flight lead's situation, and I still wonder if he ever saw me. He was in a good position for me to do a barrel roll in front of, but I also

felt that I should watch my leader's 6. I chose the latter and caught the flight and flew an S-pattern behind lead's bird. The flames had gone out, and he was still flying. I was more concerned that the MiG might try attacking to finish the job, but I never saw him again, and we were looking for tankers. One of the others flew to Da Nang on Doug's wing, and the other jock and I went home.

The film guys analyzed my film. It showed the MiG's right wing as it flitted by. Their guess was that "at best" I may have gotten seven to nine bullets into the MiG. I suspected I had missed and that my bullets passed over him without doing any damage.

I have had dreams that are now just starting to fade, but it is mostly frustration with my inexperience that keeps them coming. I have always hoped that I did the right thing as far as protecting lead, but I never got another opportunity at another MiG.



FIRST PAK VI MISSION CECIL PRENTIS

On my first mission to RP-6, I had the jitters. I was pulled off Mobile Control duty and informed, on the way to the briefing room that we were going downtown. We briefed, broke into our individual flights for further briefing, and suited up.

I finally was going to get to see what the strike force looked like. We taxied in order and went to the arming area, and the safety pins were pulled. Fully armed and ready, we took the runway with the usual “Pins, Canopy, Lanyard, Ram.”

The takeoff was routine, if you consider 192 knots routine, and the join up perfect. Radio silence was observed throughout. The tanker was next, and as I looked around there were six or seven KC-135s and twenty-seven Thuds (two spares). “Drop Off” was on time, and we were on our way to some obscure bridge or footpath west of Hanoi. Then the force leader called the switch to “Strike Primary.” I had either missed it in briefing, or it wasn’t covered. Anyway, I found the formation and looked at the wide open flats around Hanoi.

Just then, two MiG-21s rolled under my nose, and that got my attention. As they darted away, a SAM came up between me and number three. Didn't explode. This was with total radio silence with only the briefest of commands, like "burners now" and "Green 'em up" as we approached the target. Most professional airmanship I had ever seen.

We got ready for the roll-in and I was "Blue 16" in the lineup. As I rolled in, my ECM pods went off-line and I lost my radio. Pulling off I had a "three ringer" at my six and lost my flight. I lit the burner and was cooking. I spotted a flight in front of me and thought it would protect me with their ECM coverage. As I got closer, I noticed it was the Weasel flight, no ECM.

I signaled with hand signals that I had no radio, so they sent me to the tanker first. The rest was routine. When I got on the ground, I was informed that I had been reported as MIA, and that when I joined the flight they said they found me. I thanked them and debriefed. That was enough for one day.



LOW THREAT AL ALLISON

In February 1966, I was flying Thuds out of Korat. On this particular mission, I was three in a flight of four, and our target was an underwater ford and a pontoon bridge on a river near Vinh, North Vietnam. We were also tasked to do armed reconnaissance along the highway going south toward the DMZ.

Arriving at my aircraft, I noticed immediately, as I entered the cockpit, that there was a big hole where the SAM warning scope was supposed to be. After a few choice words, I called the Crew Chief up on the ladder and asked where in the heck was the scope? Turns out that the aircraft had just been ferried in to Korat, and of course, the scope was on back order. But Operations had cleared the aircraft for low-threat missions like RP-1. I got on the radio and confirmed that Ops indeed had cleared the aircraft. After we fired up, I informed lead of my situation and got the customary, "Roger."

We took off, tapped the tanker, and proceeded toward beautiful downtown Vinh. We arrived in the target area, and in about one minute, lead called a SAM launch and to "take

it down.” I broke hard left toward lead, and as I was heading down, I rolled a little to the right and saw a SAM. From the fireball and smoke trail, it was heading down toward me. I was too high to get below radar coverage, so I rolled wings level and made a 5-6G pull up to about a 45-50 degree climb. As I was in the zoom, I felt a sharp bump from under the airplane and figured I’d been hit. About the same time I heard number four call to lead that three had been hit. By this time, I had rolled into about a 40-degree dive to gain some air speed. A quick check of the master caution and engine gauges indicated everything was okay.

As I started a pull out of my dive, I noticed a couple of 37mm puffs ahead and a little left, so I stoked the burner and jinked out of the area. When I could pry my lips apart to talk, I called lead and told him I was okay. We rejoined the flight off the coast south of Vinh. Four came up to inspect my airplane and reported that it looked okay, except for a couple of black scratches along the bottom of the tail section. He also informed me that I still had bombs on the MER rack.

Lucky that they were lady fingers (500 pounds).

The flight then headed back toward the 37mm site. One and two made a high-speed pass over the area, the 37mm came up, and I proceeded to present them with six lady fingers. Think that I hit the SOB, but no confirmation. I’m sure glad that RP-1 was an easy mission, otherwise I’d have been in real trouble.



MIG ENGAGEMENT JOE LATHAM

On the morning of November 5, 1966, we briefed a four-ship mission to escort two EB-66 Douglas Destroyers. The EB-66s were tasked to provide electronic countermeasures and electronic jamming support for a large JCS strike in the Hanoi area. EB-66s were unarmed twin-engine light bombers modified with ECM equipment, chaff dispensers, and jammers. Four electronic warfare officers in a separate compartment of the aircraft operated the ECM equipment. The aircraft flew an in-trail formation to keep one aircraft in level flight at all times, since the jamming effect was degraded while the aircraft was banking. The EB-66s were essentially defenseless against fighters and were very limited in their ability to see and evade surface-to-air missiles. If attacked, their only defense was a high G turn, which could be sustained only by full power while in a high-speed descent. Two F-4Cs were to cover each EB-66.

During the intelligence briefing, we were advised that the previous day an F-4 flight from the 389th, our sister squadron, had tangled with two MiG-21s. We had seen MiGs from time to time in the Thud Ridge and Hanoi areas, but had not engaged MiGs during the prior three months. These

MiGs were identified as 21Ds, the new, all-weather version of the Russian-made Fishbed. The D had a larger nose cone than the C model, but most importantly, it did not have a gun or cannon. It was likely equipped with AA-1 Alkali radar guided missiles and AA-2 Atoll heat-seeking missiles, copies of our Sidewinders. If we were attacked by MiG-21Ds, it would be an all-missile engagement. Apparently the Russian aircraft designers had also, erroneously, determined that radar guided and heat-seeking air-to-air missiles made guns obsolete.

We assumed that the North Vietnamese were listening to our radio calls. Our planners made it easy for them, because our missions seemed to always be on the same frequencies, using many of the same call signs, day after day. We decided that our “Bingo” call that day would be made when the first F-4 reached 9,500 pounds of fuel remaining, instead of the usual 6,500 pounds. This would give us an additional 3,000 pounds of fighting fuel if the North Vietnamese timed their attack to our Bingo fuel call.

My regular GIB had completed his hundred missions, and I had been crewed with a new pilot, First Lieutenant Klaus Klaue, just nine days before. Klaus had impressed me with his flying and radar skills and his excellent eyesight. An extra set of eyeballs was priceless on combat missions, because we had no RHAW gear to alert us to the presence of MiGs, SAMs, or enemy radar. If we didn’t visually acquire the SAMs in flight, and then outmaneuver them, they would either hit us or malfunction. Only occasionally would we hear a radio call alerting us of MiG activity within a quadrant marked on our maps.

We were both excited that morning about our mission as we donned survival vests and ejection seat harnesses. It

was my seventy-eighth mission in North Vietnam, and it was the first time that I heard that MiGs were again active. I hadn't been to Package VI for almost two months. I told the crew chief of 64-7535, my F-4C that morning, that if there was ever a day that I might get a MiG, this could be the day. We had the usual MiGCAP configuration with four Sparrow missiles and four Sidewinders. As Opal 02, I was still the perpetual wingman on missions to RP-6.

We joined up with the EB-66, Newark 01, as we entered North Vietnamese airspace and learned that his wingman had air aborted. Opal lead directed Opal 03 and 04 to fly a MiGCAP position behind us, about 5,000 feet higher.

After we had crossed the Red River and turned eastward into the orbit area, the EB-66 slowed to about 300 knots, much slower than we were comfortable with. We flew in an equilateral triangle formation, about a mile on each side, with the EB-66 at the forward point of our triangle; Jim was on the north side, and I was a mile off his right wing to the south. We did not expect a head-on attack, and MiGs would then have to come up the middle between the two F-4s or cut in front of the F-4s in order to attack Newark 01. Everything went smoothly until we were eastbound on the final orbit, when I noticed 9,500 pounds on my fuel gauge and called, "Bingo." Very shortly thereafter, while commencing a left turn back to the west, lead's GIB radioed that he had a target dead ahead at about twelve miles. A moment later, Klaus locked onto the same target. The target was moving down and to the right on our radar, and was at six miles and 60 degrees right when he went off the scope. I had pushed my throttles to 100 percent to pick up some speed, intending to start weaving back and forth so as not to close on Newark 01. I should have jettisoned my tanks but was too busy looking around. As I rolled out of my turn

to a 270 degree heading, I was looking back to my left when I heard a MiG call over the UHF radio. I looked to my right to see a silver MiG-21 pass by approximately a quarter mile off my right wing. He had a high rate of overtake and launched a missile, which I believed to be a radar guided AA-1 toward Newark 01. A split second later, lead yelled, "B-66, break right, break right." I pushed my throttles to select full afterburner on both engines, reached down to push the jettison button to blow all three external fuel tanks, and flipped down the missile toggle switch from "Radar" to "Heat" to select the Sidewinders. As I looked back up, a second silver MiG-21 passed by, again off my right wing, trailing his leader. I was soon tracking the second MiG, wondering why I didn't have a tone in my headset from the heat-seeking missile. I glanced down to the missile switches just above my left knee and saw I had inadvertently flipped the wrong switch. In my haste I had switched from ARM to SAFE, rather than from RADAR to HEAT. I hurriedly pushed the arming switch back up and the missile switch down and then looked back up to reacquire the MiG, who was still at my twelve o'clock but now in the shadows and close behind my flight lead. I shouted a warning, but at this point we were in a big daisy chain. Newark 01 was in a 0.9 Mach, right descending high G turn, as tight as he could make it, followed by the lead MiG, who had slowed and turned to reattack the EB-66 rather than to continue straight through after his missile narrowly missed to the left, followed by Opal 01, who had the second MiG on his tail, and then me. I had no idea if anyone was on my tail.

Although I now had a growling tone in my headset indicating my Sidewinder was tracking a strong heat source, I couldn't launch because the second MiG was close behind my lead. My missile could have been tracking either aircraft. The second MiG was inside his minimum missile range, too

close to fire. About the time of my warning call to Opal 01, the lead MiG slid to the outside of the EB-66's turn, and my leader called the EB-66 to reverse to the left. A few seconds later Opal 01 also reversed from a right descending turn to a left descending turn, and the second MiG did exactly what he should do: he continued his right turn but pulled into a steep climb for a moment to gain spacing. As he passed from the shadows into the sunlight, a beautiful bright silver planform of a MiG-21, with a red star on the right wing, appeared in front of me. He began rolling back to his left so that he could lower his nose and launch a missile but, unfortunately for him, this all happened directly in front of me, and I was not at minimum missile range. There was still a strong aural tracking tone in my headset, and as I squeezed the trigger, he was still in a slight climbing attitude at my twelve-thirty position, in about a 45-degree left bank, perhaps 30 degrees above me, and in the process of pulling his nose back down. I was at his 8 o'clock low position, outside of the Sidewinder's 20-degree angle off limit. I fired only one Sidewinder. But he was not in an extremely hard turn, and the missile tracked with small, jerky, side-to-side movements like a snake and detonated at his tailpipe, blowing off pieces of the tail. The pilot ejected, and his chute opened immediately. He was hanging in his chute and I could also see the aircraft canopy tumbling below him. I then went into a hard right turn to check my own 6 o'clock, came out of afterburner, and saw that I was now below the real Bingo fuel level of 6,500 pounds. I was separated from everyone else by several miles, and was down to around 10,000 feet, so I began a climb in Opal 01's direction.

Long story short: Opal 01 was unable to launch a Sidewinder because he had also mistakenly switched from Arm to Safe when intending to go from Radar to Heat.

Thinking that the Sidewinders were not working, he pushed the switch back up and fired three or four Sparrows at the lead MiG. The MiG pilot ejected shortly after the last missile launched. Newark 01 had spiraled in a tight turn down to 9,000 feet and ducked into a small puffy white cloud, the only low-altitude cloud in the area. Opal 03 and 04 had stayed above the fight, looking for other MiGs, so they had ample fuel to escort the EB-66 back to the safety of Thailand. The lead and I were both very low on fuel, and about ten nautical miles apart, as we both climbed toward 40,000 feet while nervously scanning for MiGs. Due to low fuel, I didn't attempt to join up with him, but we knew where each other was. We had a long way to go to get to Laos and have any chance of being rescued if we ran out of fuel. Once into Laos I determined that I could make it to Udorn RTAB in northern Thailand if I remained at a reduced power setting at 40,000 feet and then a long, gliding descent at idle power. Opal 01 agreed, and decided to head for Udorn also. At 80 nautical miles from Udorn, I pulled my throttles to idle, set up an optimum glide speed, and began computing my progress. I landed with about 800 pounds on the gauge, about eight minutes of fuel, 200 pounds below emergency fuel. We debriefed at Udorn and then flew back Da Nang. We had been no-shows at our own celebration party.

We were extremely fortunate to return safe and sound. If the North Vietnamese tactics had been better, eleven of us, Opal 01 and 02, and the seven men in Newark 01, would have been either killed or captured. My flight was a sitting duck at the time of the perfectly timed MiG attack, and I've never figured out why they didn't first launch when they had ideal shots from a 6 o'clock position. Either their radar guided missiles or heat seekers should have taken us out. They could have then attacked Newark 01. Or, why didn't the MiG leader, who came through at a very high speed, just

continue straight through after his missile narrowly missed Newark 01 instead of slowing down and trying to turn with the much slower EB-66, and placing himself in front of Opal 01? Even after both MiG pilots ejected, we were still approximately 40nm north of Hanoi and at least 100 nautical miles from the northern end of Laos, where we might possibly have obtained an air refueling. If other MiGs had intercepted us at any time in the next twenty-to-twenty-five minutes while we were climbing and heading for Laos, they could have either shot us down or run us out of fuel.

I've often wondered how the engagement would have ended if we had been attacked by MiG-21Cs rather than the newer MiG-21Ds. The primary armament of the C model was the Atoll; however, the MiG-21C was also armed with a 30mm cannon, which had a maximum range of 3,000 feet. The MiG-21 wingman was in an ideal position to fire at Opal 01 if he'd had a 30mm cannon, but he had to reposition to gain spacing because he was too close to launch a missile.

It was an exciting flight that ended well, and the four of us attained the dream of downing a MiG-21 in air-to-air combat. It has always been my assumption that mine was likely the first MiG-21D kill and perhaps the first air-to-air kill in an all-missile environment—where neither combatant had a gun or cannon.

Postscript: In 2012, I received correspondence from an employee of the US Department of Defense containing the identities and photos of the two MiG-21 pilots that attacked us on November 5. The flight leader was Senior Captain Bui Dinh Kinh, who had two aerial victories. He was credited with an A1E on April 21, 1966, while flying a MiG-17 and F-4C on October 5, 1966, while flying a MiG-21. He survived

his November 5 ejection but didn't survive when shot down on August 10, 1967, by Navy F-4Bs.

The wingman was Senior Lieutenant Dong Van Song. He flew wing for a number of North Vietnamese future aces and squadron commanders and was credited with three aerial victories. He was credited with an F-105D on July 11, 1966, an F-105D on May 12, 1967, and an EB-66C on January 14, 1968. He survived the war, although he was shot down two more times.

A note in the same correspondence indicated that there indeed was a second element of MiG-21s, but their controllers had misdirected them. Had they not been misdirected, we might not have returned to Da Nang that evening.



F-105 PALM SPRINGS UNVEIL SPEECH GORDIE JENKINS

What you see behind me is still the world's largest single-seat, single-engine fighter. It was truly an honor to be selected to fly such a wonderful machine. I was in the last class of First Lieutenants to check out in the aircraft at Nellis AFB and in December 1966; we went directly to Takhli RTAFB in Thailand. When we arrived, there were more Lieutenant Colonels flying the aircraft than First Lieutenants.

All eight Lieutenants were young and rambunctious, perfectly fitting the definition of a Fighter Pilot: "Cold, steely-eyed, pilots who kill bad people and break things." However, they can be also very charming and personable. The average Fighter Pilot, despite sometimes having a swaggering exterior, is very much capable of such feelings as love, affection, intimacy, and caring. The only problem is, these emotions don't involve anyone else.

John Morrissey, a hundred-mission pilot and friend of mine, advised that 495D models were available at the start of the war. There were 397 shot down over North Vietnam during the period 1965 to 1969—an 80 percent loss rate! I

remember arriving at Base Operations with the other seven Lieutenants waiting to be “divvied” up by the three squadrons. While waiting we noticed two four-by-eight plywood boards on the wall. One was labeled “100 missions” and the other “MIA/POW/Missing in Action.” Each had about the same number of nametags. This was the first time we came to grips with the proposition that there was a 50/50 chance of making it to the magic number of one hundred missions. There is a story of a newly arrived Major who was shot down—and recovered—on his very first mission. When asked how he felt, he observed sagely, “I don’t know if I can stand another ninety-nine of these!” A really optimistic Thud pilot actually stopped smoking because it was hazardous to his health.

The F-105 was originally intended to be a supersonic, low-altitude penetration system designed to carry an internal nuclear weapon. It was fitted with a large Pratt and Whitney J-75 engine, which generated 24,500 pounds of thrust, and a relatively small wing with high wing loading for a stable ride at low altitude and less drag at supersonic speeds. Traditional fighter attributes such as maneuverability were a secondary consideration.

The Thud was known for some of the longest takeoff rolls in history. Fully loaded, we could eat up eight thousand feet of runway before nose-wheel liftoff. Takeoff and landing speeds were the same as the SR-71—230 miles per hour. Someone once said that if you built a runway all the way around the world, Republic would build an aircraft that would use every inch of it to take off.

At altitude the aircraft could reach Mach 2.08, or 1,372 miles per hour. Its low-altitude dash capability was noted by Captain Dick Jonas, when as an F-4 backseater while

egressing from a target near Hanoi, he said, “Our flight was beating feet eastbound with the speedometer reading something in excess of nine miles a minute when I looked back over my left shoulder and see a lizard-colored machine creeping up from seven o’clock. I yell over the UHF, ‘Bogey—left seven o’clock—closing!’ Five seconds later I key the mike again, ‘Disregard, it’s a Thud.’ This lonely bastard is all by himself, smoking along with the throttle locked high and tight in the far northwest corner of the cockpit. They say the Thud will do eight hundred knots on the deck. This guy drives right past us and leaves us behind in the North Vietnam smog.”

F-105Ds spent their early years sitting nuclear alert at places like Bitburg and Spangdahlem in Germany, Yakota in Japan, and Kadena, Okinawa. The need for an aircraft to carry large bomb loads to the North Vietnamese enemy resulted in the movement of the D models to two bases in Thailand, Takhli and Korat, from where more than twenty-thousand F-105D and F-105G Wild Weasel sorties were launched from March 1965 to December 1972.

Early D models had an infrequent but really nasty habit of blowing up in flight, thus earning the nickname “Thud.” Caused by poor airflow around the engine, this problem was corrected by the addition of the “dog ears” on the sides of the rear fuselage. Legend has it that some inventive MiG pilots simply followed Thuds around until they blew up so they could log a kill.

The Thud had an internal M61 Gatling gun, which had 1,028 rounds of 20mm ammunition it could fire at a rate of six thousand rounds per minute. That gun allowed the Thud to kill twenty-four MiG 17s, mostly while egressing the target area. Firing that gun made a constant noise that

shook the whole airframe. Three MiGs were killed using the AIM-9 Sidewinder.

The Thud's conventional bomb load capability of up to 15,400 pounds was three times heavier than those of World War II's four-engine heavy bombers such as the B-17 and B-24.

A typical mission from Thailand involved pre- and poststrike refueling en route to the Hanoi area—700 nautical miles north. We carried six 750-pound bombs on a centerline Multiple Ejector Rack (MER), and two 450-gallon fuel tanks under the wings, plus a 390-gallon tank in the bomb bay. On some sorties, when MiGs were anticipated, we carried two Sidewinders, one on each wing outboard of the tanks.

Once in the target area, labeled "Route Pack VI" on our maps, we encountered what has been described as the most heavily defended area in the history of aerial warfare. The enemy had MiGs, SAMs, and dense anti-aircraft fire ready to send up to us. Two F-105 Wild Weasel pilots earned the Medal of Honor—Major Merle Dethlefsen and Major Leo Thorsness. Both were squadron mates of mine and flew out of the 357th TFS, which the museum has chosen to commemorate with the tail marking on this aircraft.

On May 1, 1967, the day after Leo Thorsness had been shot down, we were loaded with Sidewinders. Approaching Hanoi, a MiG-17 pulled directly in front of our four-ship, and I sat on the left wing waiting for the leader to fire. Nothing. My Sidewinder was giving the loud "growl" over the headset, indicating it had a heat source to track. I fired the missile and the MiG made a hard turn just before impact,

avoiding his fate. On another mission my gun camera film verified the MiG kill by my Flight Commander, Major Hank Higgins. He had the habit of hanging around in the target area after we had dropped our ordnance so he could get a shot at a MiG. On that day it worked. My last chance for a MiG was coming off a target northwest of Hanoi. I was number four in the flight and my element lead, a newly arrived Major, pulled off and was heading north for China. That was not a good idea. I called out "Head east," and he turned. I was about a mile behind him and saw a flight of two MiGs in formation for approach to the airfield at Kep. Time stood still as I considered my options: go for an easy gunshot on the MiGs or lead my obviously disoriented flight leader back to the poststrike tankers. I chose the latter.

I'll close with a 1969 poem written Gene Cirillo, a Takhli Thud pilot:

When time passes on, and we have reached the
twilight of our lives,
I shall harken back to 100 flights in those war torn
Asian skies.

And once again I'll hear that roar of burner, blast of
cannon, and screech of tires.
Through weak and misty eyes, in vain will I look and
search the skies for those wingmen no longer here.

And always, my heart, my soul, and my memory,
will take me back, perhaps to Quang Khe, or maybe
Dong Hoi, but always, I know, to those wingmen
from Takhli.



THE RESCUE OF R. E. STONE—THE FLIGHT LEAD
PERSPECTIVE
GORDIE JENKINS

My most challenging mission was flown on July 2, 1967. This was my ninety-sixth mission and flown the day after my thirty-seventh one to the Hanoi area (Route Pack VI). This was my first flight as lead, having been approved for this status by Colonel Bob White of X-15 fame, the Wing Director of Operations. Bob Lodge and I were the first lieutenants to be placed on flight lead orders at Takhli, as the Wing Commander thought only senior officers could be trusted with this position.

On this date I was Barracuda One, with Major Bob Stone as Two. This was a mission to Route Pack II, with our fragged target being a river crossing on the “Black Route,” the designation of a fifty-mile stretch of river leading from the Laotian border to the Gulf of Tonkin. We had an uneventful refueling and, as I had learned from some really fine fighter pilots, flew the entire length of Black Route hoping to see some “movers” so we could drop our six 750-pound bombs on a visual target of opportunity. Nothing was moving that day as we wove back and forth at 8,000 feet eastbound over the river. We reached the coast, and I determined that

the best we could do that day was to hit the fragged river crossing, which was about thirty miles inland.

We headed back west and approached the target from the northeast. I pulled up to 12,000 to dive-bomb the river crossing, with Major Stone taking spacing outside my climbing turn. I released bombs at the standard 5,000 feet AGL in a 45-degree dive and 540 knots. Pulling up and turning left, I saw my bombs hit just on the south side of the river at the underwater crossing point and observed a new “cloud” appear below me at about 6,000 feet. This was 37mm antiaircraft fire that had been fused to explode at that altitude. Unfortunately, Bob flew directly into the metal overcast and suffered major damage. His aircraft was shedding parts and burning. I transmitted, “Head west” because I didn’t think he could make it to the Gulf with that much damage—and heading west would take him into mountainous terrain from which a rescue would be possible. He leveled off at 8,000 feet, heading west, going fast. I saw more and more of his aircraft falling away and told him to bail out, which he did. Unfortunately, he was doing 500 knots and the windblast from an ejection at that airspeed can cause major whiplash to neck, arms, and legs. I watched as his chute landed in a tree-covered hillside. The chute appeared to hang up in the topmost branches of a tree canopy that I estimated to be a hundred feet above the ground. I tried to reach him on Guard, but had no response. I immediately contacted Red Crown, the controlling agency for search and rescue, advising them that, “Barracuda Two is down” and transmitted the Doppler latitude and longitude position to aid in the rescue. They asked if I had a visual of his location and if I had radio contact with him. I lied. I said I had a visual and had spoken to him on the radio, so, “Send a chopper to get him out.” They said a rescue force was on the way.

After doing a “fix” on my Doppler navigation system, I headed for the nearest tanker. Folks were most helpful in arranging for my much-needed poststrike refueling. I then returned to the area of Bob’s chute and contacted Red Crown to determine the rescue status. They replied that the chopper was inbound over the coast and taking heavy fire from the ground—and was about to abort the rescue. This wouldn’t do! I had just lost my wingman on the first mission I had been trusted to lead, and I wasn’t about to let them turn back. The chopper pilot gave me a “hold down” so I could use my UHF radio direction-finding feature to locate him. I flew out to them, circled the chopper, now about 2,000 feet above the flats east of the mountains. I said, “Follow me,” lowered half flaps, slowed to 250 knots to stay within sight of the slow moving chopper, then S-turned southwest bound over the flats of North Vietnam just south of Vinh to lead him to the parachute hanging in the trees. I don’t know to this day why I didn’t get shot down during this highly risky maneuver at 2,500 feet over a highly defended area of North Vietnam. I was just above traffic pattern altitude! Someone was watching out for me.

We made it to the hills and his chute, and they said that he was not responding to the tree penetrator they had dropped near him. I said, “Send a PJ down to help him,” and they did. The chopper was hovering for some minutes just above the chute, and they moved to a clearing, where the PJ was able to descend and get Bob secured and lifted aboard. The chopper pilot advised that he was unconscious and had multiple broken bones. They returned to their ship in the Gulf of Tonkin and I returned to Takhli logging three hours and twenty minutes of combat.



REMARKABLE MISSION LEW CHESLEY

On April 19, 1967, a strike force of twenty-four F-105Ds and four F-105Fs took off from Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base early in the morning to attack North Vietnam Army barracks at Xuan Mai (JCS 22), thirty miles southwest of Hanoi. There were no problems, and everything was on schedule, until we approached the target area. We discovered that a solid low overcast spread over a broad area, including the target. The mission was aborted and all aircraft were returned to base. After the Thuds were serviced and refueled, we again launched at 1400 hours toward the original target. I have wondered if this rapid return to the same target set up the vigorous defense that awaited us. Captain Arnie Dolejsi, pilot, and I, the EWO, were flying in an F-105F as Kingfish 4, a "Wild Weasel" SAM suppression aircraft.

The protocol for the Wild Weasels was to be the first aircraft into the target area three minutes before the strike force and be the last flight out of the target area. Their job was to suppress the SAMs before and during the strike. MiGs were to be avoided if possible and engaged only when necessary for self-protection.

Many remarkable things happened on this mission. Major Leo Thorsness, Kingfish 1, was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his actions during this mission. His EWO, Captain Harold H. Johnson, was awarded the Air Force Cross. Major Thomas Madison, Kingfish 2, and his EWO, Major Thomas Sterling, were shot down by MiGs on their ingress to the target area and became POWs. Arnie and I in Kingfish 4, after our afterburner failed to light, were attacked by eight MiG-17s, and we escaped without damage. Major John Hamilton, piloting an A-1E, Sandy, was posthumously awarded the Air Force Cross. Later in this mission, Major Hamilton was shot down by MiGs and killed. Major Thorsness shot down two MiGs. Captain Harold Johnson, Major Frederick Tolman, Major Jack Hunt, and Captain William Askew were each credited with one MiG kill.

At the start of our second mission of the day, the weather in the area was mostly clear with scattered clouds with bases about 4,000 feet AGL, visibility seven to ten miles. The attack began about 1530 hours. Kingfish 3 and 4 were preparing to fire Shrike missiles toward an active SA-2 radar at our 12 o'clock, about fifteen miles northeast of Hoa Binh.

The Wild Weasel flight split into two elements. The first element, Kingfish 1 and 2, flew low, south of Hoa Binh, and approached the target from the southwest using the sharp ragged ridges of karst for cover. The second element, Kingfish 3 and 4, crossed the Black River north of Hoa Binh and flew low toward the 3,383-foot peak located eight miles northwest of the target area. They turned southeast toward Xuan Mai while remaining in the radar ground clutter. They intended Kingfish 1 and 2 would attract the primary attention of the North Vietnamese defense systems, and Kingfish 3 and 4 would attack about one minute later from

the northwest, hopefully overcoming the North Vietnamese defense efforts. Unfortunately, the tacticians did not consider that twenty-eight MiG-17s would be airborne, guided by ground control radars to attack the US forces. This was the highest number of MiGs ever launched by the North Vietnamese Air Force at that time.

Shortly after reaching 2,000 feet on a course leading to the 3,383-foot peak, Kingfish 3 radioed that his Wild Weasel equipment had just failed and that Kingfish 4 should take the lead. About thirty seconds later, we saw and reported two flights of four MiGs attacking from our 10 and 2 o'clock positions. The first flight of MiGs fired air-to-air rockets at us from a range of about 4,000 feet. Their rockets were unstable and tumbled about 1,500 feet in front of the MiGs. During these few seconds, Kingfish 3 and 4 each selected afterburner. Kingfish 3's lit, and he accelerated straight ahead. Our afterburner failed to light, slowing us down, causing the two Thuds to separate for the rest of the mission. The burner would not light from either seat, and the afterburner petals went to the open position, further reducing thrust and further slowing down the aircraft. Arnie set throttles to the full military power position and left them there. After the initial skirmish, the MiGs regrouped behind us in two flights of four. We turned right and put the nose down to exchange altitude for airspeed. One of the MiGs flew directly in front of us, crossing our flight path and we fired fifty-six rounds from the 20mm cannon. The bullets missed, but the gun camera caught a beautiful picture of the MiG.

By this time we were heading west above Route 6, five miles east of the Black River with the eight MiGs at our 6 o'clock calmly lining up for gun-firing passes. We turned south at the Black River, knowing it would turn toward more

rugged terrain, which would make MiG gun attacks more difficult. Our calls for help or assistance were heard by some of the strike force, but nobody knew where we were. We later determined the sporadic nature of our calls was a result of being low, surrounded by steep hills, and a lot of radio chatter regarding Kingfish 2 being shot down. Passing the town of Hoa Binh, 37mm AAA started firing at us. They didn't lead properly, and the flak burst in the middle of the MiGs following us, scattering them, giving us a ten-second respite and a nervous laugh.

The eight MiGs got into their attack formation again to shoot us down. We couldn't outrun them nor outturn them without an afterburner. They fell into training-type firing passes one after another. Using the rearview mirrors, I was watching the MiGs while Arnie was flying knap of the earth to eliminate any attacks except from the rear and above. I was expecting to see the MiG's guns twinkle when they were fired, but only a burst of smoke came from the MiG's belly. Just over one second elapsed from smoke-burst to tracer bullets passing by the cockpit.

A masculine voice using perfect English said to me, "You just sat there and did nothing. What are you going to do when the rest of the MiGs take turns shooting at you?"

I answered, "I don't know; I'm not the pilot."

The voice asked, "Do you remember a story that you read as a teenager about a P-51 pilot that attacked a formation of seventeen Messerschmitts during World War II, shot down five, and managed to escape?"

I answered, "Yes."

The voice asked, "Do you remember a tactic he used?"

I answered, "No."

The voice continued, "By using his rearview mirrors, the P-51 pilot watched for the flash of the German's guns then stepped hard on a rudder pedal to slip the P-51 sideways, avoiding the burst of gunfire."

I replied, "Oh."

The imperative voice directed me, "Tell your pilot to slip with vigor when and in which direction you tell him when you see the puff of smoke from the MiG."

I passed the message to Arnie and he replied, "OK." Seconds later, while watching the MiG behind us, I told Arnie to slip; he did.

Arnie said, "Damn."

I asked, "Why?"

Arnie said, "We just lost forty knots."

I pointed out that all the tracers from the cannon fire passed beyond the wing tip. Arnie agreed. We used this tactic to successfully avoid cannon fire from the remaining MiGs. After the last attack, a MiG pulled up along our left side, and the pilot stared at Arnie. Arnie saw a sharp turn in the river ahead of him and had no choice but to break left into the MiG. The MiG deftly broke left, pulled up, and reversed course. The eight-MiG attack lasted about five

minutes, and we traveled about thirty-five miles during the attack.

Arnie continued to fly low in the Black River valley several more minutes, then started a slow climb out of the valley while both of us watched carefully for the return of the MiGs. They didn't return. Turning west, Arnie slowly climbed above the hills and set a course for the tankers.

We heard a desperate call. "Mayday, Mayday; this is Sandy 2; Sandy 1 is down. I have four MiGs circling above me. I'm trapped in a small valley and can't escape."

Arnie returned his call and turned toward him, using his radio direction finder. After obtaining an approximate location of the Sandy, Arnie called Crown, described the situation, and requested RESCAP, then turned back toward the tankers. Crown called the tankers and requested the RESCAP. Leo Thorseness, on the tanker, immediately turned back toward the Sandy and led the RESCAP force. The strike force arrived over Sandy 2, shot down three MiGs, and escorted Sandy 2 to safety. Captain Howard Bodenhamer, one of the rescuers, needed assistance from the tankers because he was critically low on fuel. The tanker broke lots of rules, went well north of where he should have been, off-loaded fuel to "Bodey," and brought him home.

When we arrived at the tanker rendezvous, no one was there. Crown said they had returned to base because all the fuel was used in the RESCAP. Arnie changed direction and headed for Korat, the only runway within range. About twenty minutes before landing, the air turbine unit, which provided electrical and hydraulic power, started to fail. There were periods of time when the radio and intercom

were inoperative; however, intermittently Arnie could use the radio to call Korat and declare an emergency before landing.

After landing, we were debriefed by a young Lieutenant. His decorum was understandable, but not professional. He kept giggling when we described the 37mm cannon fire from the MiGs as fifteen-inch fireballs going by the cockpit. Arnie and I would talk over each other, speaking very rapidly. Our eyes were wide-open, like Little Orphan Annie, and our feet barely touched the ground. Years later, I saw the Lieutenant and he told me that we were the most wired flight crewmembers he'd ever met.

I pondered the MIG encounter long after the 1967 engagement. What was the origin of the slipping tactics and who was the voice? I discovered the derivation of the slipping tactics in 2010 on a DVD in Volume 3, Complete Session Two, of "Dogfights," P-51 Mustang, published by the History Channel. I called and talked at length with the P-51 pilot, Colonel (Retired) Richard G. Candelaria, and thanked him for saving three USAF crewmembers: Arnie, me, and Sandy 2, Captain Henry J. Cochran.

Arnie and I thank God for success in this remarkable mission and for our remaining missions to enable us to wear our hundred-mission patches.



SKIP BOMBING WITH LIVE 750S T. PAASCHT

The zeal of fighter pilots often gets out of control and enters the realm of foolishness. I often wonder how many aircraft and crews were lost because of bad decisions by overzealous pilots. I was leading a two ship carrying a load of 750s into Laos on a day mission with lousy weather.

We met up with a FAC (think it was a slow mover, maybe a Raven) somewhere in Laos. Anyway, it probably wasn't one of the "usual target areas" like Mugia Pass, but I seem to think it was a bit northeast of there. The FAC had found a big cave the bad guys were using and wanted to see if we could find a way to get it. Here is where we should've called the Bullpup kids from the 357th, as that was what they did best.

But, I was a First Lieutenant with my hair on fire and figured we could find a way. Fortunately for us, there were some holes in the low cloud deck near the target, and we were able to see the FAC's smoke, so down we went. I know it was really dumb but I lined up with the cave at the bottom of a karst flying fast and level just under the clouds (really, really dumb) toward the cave. When the cave got pretty big

in the windscreen, I pickled and pulled. Two did the same right behind me, and the FAC was yelling over the radio that the bombs went into the cave! I doubt it was that spectacular, but six 750s hitting the side of a big rock will make a big bang, and a rockslide that shut the cave. Lucky for us, neither suffered bomb damage from this maneuver (remember the F-100 movie we all saw where he blew himself out of the sky with his own bombs?).

We both survived and headed home feeling good. By the time I landed back at Takhli, I was kicking myself for doing such a stupid thing and taking a good wingman along with me. Thank the Lord we surprised the bad guys that day, as they probably could have downed us with an AK-47 if they had seen us coming.



DOWN THE CHUTE NEELY JOHNSON

When I first got to Takhli in June '67, we were still using flights in trail for Pack 6 attacks. I recall being tail-end-Charlie striking something down near the end of the Ridge and having to look at the AAA for a *real* long time before we finally got to the roll-in point, but I don't recall the problem that repeatedly happened when we went to the mass gaggle attack. This formation consisted of eight aircraft line abreast followed by another flight of eight in trail, also line abreast. The idea was for the force commander to set the roll in point, and it was probably going to be steep. All eight in the front row rolled together and, invariably, were shallow to some degree. The second eight were supposed to truck on up to the roll-in point and also commit together, resulting in sixteen aircraft across the target in minimum time with time for spacing and individual targeting.

Ri-i-ight!

What really happened was the outer members of the front eight began to collapse, spacing somewhat prior to roll-in because they knew they would be shallow. If the force

commander delayed roll-in for some reason (weather, late target acquisition, lost, etc.) or if the rear eight aircraft were getting their butts shot off—which was usually the case (recall that the gunners were usually slightly behind, which made the flak go off right in front of the trailers)—then they would elect to roll early, resulting in sixteen aircraft headed to the same point in space simultaneously. What this meant for me, except for when I got to lead the gaggle, was that when I got the nose pointed down, there was another Thud sitting right *on top* of me with, usually, six 750s about to come off in my face. Tends to get your attention. The cross check was nose position, OTHER AC, pipper placement, OTHER AC, parameters, OTHER AC—*holy mackerel*, here they come! Pickle, wait for the bombs to clear, and break for clear space. I reckon I'm not the only one this happened to.

Then there was the time we were striking a railroad bridge on the northeast railroad and the plan was to split the flights and roll in from opposite directions. In theory, the force commander was first rolling in, then the number two flight rolled in from the opposite direction, the number three flight followed the force commander, and the fourth followed number two. This way the first flight would clear followed by the second—you get the picture. Because of all the things mentioned in the above paragraph, what really happened was sixteen jets going for the same target at the same time, eight and eight head on. I remember thinking, this is going to be some bomb burst. I would love to have seen it from the ground. (*No you wouldn't.*)

Finally there was the airborne spare—a ninety-mission-plus guy who was hoping to not be used and to get a counter in Pack 1—who filled into our flight. I don't recall why, but the force commander did not get us even near to the target area. Way before I expected it, I saw the flight

lead banking to roll in, and I followed number two (the spare fill-in). While we are still upside-down, the bombs start coming *up* off number two's jet! I spotted the target way off in the distance and bunted, hoping to get bombs somewhere near, and then follow my flight. When we got back on the ground, I asked number two what in the h-- was going on. He said "When I rolled upside-down and looked for the target, I didn't see it, and I wasn't carrying those damned things another mile."



FOLLOWING SPARKY NEELY JOHNSON

Billy Sparks taught me to go to war. He threw in other things as well—how to buy Bangkok (or try to), how to “flip” for a drink, fighter pilot songs galore...you get the idea. Suffice to say I would have followed the man anywhere—and did.

The target was Kep airfield, and I was leading the force. Prestrike refueling on brown anchor had gone well, and we dropped off on time at the drop-off point. My Doppler was looking good with updates off the last TACAN we could receive, and we were headed toward the island turning point. I never can remember the name of it, but I think it was off Cam Pha mines. Anyway, it was where we made a big sweeping turn to the west, which was always interesting when you had eight aircraft strung out line abreast. Weather was clear except for a low altitude deck. It had the makings of a fine day.

Sparky was leading the Weasels and, as planned, had taken them out in front probably five miles—I could clearly see his engine smoke—but his track reinforced my own navigation, so I was feeling pretty good. My hack at the

drop-off point was good, the Doppler and DR had me where I should have been—I might figure out how to do this yet. And then it happened.

Sparky turned...about two minutes short of where my navigation said we should. Dilemma. Did he intend to turn early (which obviously was his intent to keep the Weasels between the threat and the force)?—he didn't tell me that in the briefing. Is his Doppler better than mine? Does he know something I don't know? What do I do with this sixteen-ship gaggle? Do I follow Sparky?

Well, you know the answer to that last question. Sparky never made a mistake in his life—at least that is what he told me—so when we truck on up to where the smoke makes a turn, I take the sixteen ships and follow Sparky—a practice that has kept me in good stead to this point.

As we go feet dry, the clouds begin to thin and then break up. I have planned the strike for a left roll-in so I am in the front left of the formation, and I'm looking for the Kep runway to show up near and slightly to the left of my nose. Right about then I see a long runway on my *right* at about 1 o'clock. Could that be Kep? It sure as h-- wasn't Gia Lam, and there aren't any other airports on the northeast railroad. I figured it out, it is Kep; I turned too early and now I've got one whale of a mess. Six aircraft spread out to my right, one to my left, and eight more in trail. How in blue perfect h-- am I going to solve this?

Right about then the North Vietnamese contributed significantly to the confusion: AAA and SAMs. Radio traffic picked up to the point that I couldn't get a word in edgewise, and we were trucking on up to the point that

something had to be done. The only thing I could think of was full burner, nose high, roll over the guys to my right and, when clear, down the chute—hoping the rest of the force would do the same. What a Chinese fire drill.

To my complete surprise, I did not see a single shot from the target area, and I don't think the first eight across had any AAA to speak of. By the time the last eight got there, they had woke up but, thankfully, no one was hit. Bombing looked pretty good, so the guys were adjusting for the changed sight picture. Looking at what was happening from the ground, I think the gunners were spooked a bit by my unorthodox screwup and didn't know what to do with it.

Egress and the trip home were uneventful. Needless to say, I took lots of grief when we got back on the ground—and rightfully so. Just before he died, Sparky and I relived the story and got a good laugh out of it. I loved that guy.



OOPS!
NEELY JOHNSON

Many will remember the “force” formation used by us at Takhli in '67, sixteen Thuds in a box; eight line abreast in front with the force commander four ship on the side of intended roll-in, and all others spread at 1,000 feet to 1,500 feet laterally and with vertical stack: number two down 500 feet, element lead up 1,000 feet, and number four down 500 feet from him. The flight to the force commander's right/left was all stacked up 500 feet. About a mile in trail were the second eight, with the flight directly behind the force lead stacked down and the fourth flight stacked level. Good for jamming pod coverage, good for “six” coverage of the forward flights, reasonably good for six coverage of the trailing flights, and as maneuverable as an eighteen-wheeler in a CVS parking lot.

The target on this day was somewhere on the northeast railroad, which required a long trip east from Takhli, coasting out over Hue to one of the water tanker tracks, probably Brown. All had gone well with refueling and form-up; we were all contemplating making Uncle Ho's day really bad. “Green 'em up” was done, but we were far enough out that our buttocks were still reasonably round. My position on the

left side of the trailing flights afforded a wonderful view of this powerful strike formation—one I still picture in my mind's eye.

Completely unexpectedly from somewhere to my right, an AIM-9 went speeding forward right through the front flights. It being an early version (I don't remember but probably an "E") there was little probability it would hit anything even if properly aimed and employed. (My squadron commander once got a missile tone on a AAA site and fired at them. Results unknown.) However, it was a real shock to those of us who saw it, but so unexpected that no one said a word. The radio was completely silent. After all, what do you say in that circumstance that could possibly make a difference in the time available? The pause on the radio continued and finally the guilty party said, "I didn't touch anything!" Nobody in the front flights had the faintest idea what he was talking about. The other seven of us in the rear were laughing too hard to see. A little humor goes a long way in a tense situation even if not intended.



BAD DAY AT THAI NGUYEN SAM MORGAN

December 17, 1967, an afternoon strike on a small bridge on the east side of the Thai Nguyen Steel Mill. The target was just east of the southern tip of Thud Ridge. The F-105s were from Korat RTAFB, Thailand, and the F-4s were from Ubon.

The strike package consisted of sixteen F-105 strike aircraft with twelve of the aircraft carrying six 750-pound bombs and four of the aircraft carrying five cluster bombs (CBU) each. I was the Strike Force Commander, and my number two was the new wing commander's first Pack 6 mission. The two previous commanders had been shot down. The MiG cap was eight F-4s. There were four Wild Weasels, two F-105F models, and two F-105D models.

It was customary for the Strike Force Commander and his number two to plan the mission the night before, and two was generally designated the Deputy Strike Commander to take the lead if necessary. Since my number two was the wing commander, I did the planning alone. I planned it as a normal strike with the strike aircraft going to the target at 18,000 feet in Pod Formation. The eight F-4s

would be behind to deal with the MiGs, and the four Weasels would be out front and low to deal with the SAM threat.

On the day of the mission, the morning strikes went over the Gulf of Tonkin and came into the Hanoi area from the east. They had multiple SA-2 missiles fired at them. This led me to believe we were going to have to deal with the MiGs. Usually it was either a MiG day or a missile day, and, if they fired a lot of missiles in the morning, the afternoon guys were going to have to deal with the MiGs.

I was thinking of the threat for the mission when the Wing DO walked in. I asked him if I could change the plan. I wanted to send off the F-4s for a MiG patrol, send the Weasels out well ahead, east of the target, and I wanted to break the strike force into four independent flights of four. I was informed the tactics were written in blood, and I could not change them. I had a bad feeling about this.

I called the F-4 flight lead and told him I thought we were going to get hit hard by the MiGs and that I wanted him to leave us and go find the MiGs. He said he had been told that he couldn't do that. He had been told he had to stay with the Thuds. I told the Weasel Lead that I expected the MiGs to hit hard, and he should stay out front and not come back. At the same time I knew that he was going to come back because he was a fighter pilot and that is what fighter pilots do.

On time and on course, we crossed the border into North Vietnam and turned toward the southern tip of Thud Ridge. Shortly after we stabilized on the track to the target, one of the F-4s called that something had glinted at 10 o'clock high. Seconds later another F-4 called MiG- 21s

coming down fast. The MiG-21s dove supersonic out of the Chinese Buffer Zone.

We were only three minutes from the target, so I called for burners and take it down; we were going to race them to the target. In the descent at Mach 1.2, the call came that one of the F-4s had been hit by a missile and was going down. A second or two later an F-105 to my left was hit by a missile, and it went down.

I didn't know the crew in the F-4 but I knew the F-105 pilot. I think we all had the sense this was going to be a tough mission. We expected the MiGs to come out of the Chinese Buffer Zone at very high speed with heat-seeker missiles, so we knew we were going to take some losses.

At the premission briefing, there were twenty F-105 pilots and two EWOs. I have wondered if any of them thought that in a few hours at least two of us would not be back. I know I had the sense that this was not going to be a good day.

We were still in the dive when I heard the lead Weasel calling that something had hit his plane, and the backseat EWO looked dead. He and his flight headed for Udorn.

By now I was on the deck and didn't know if I had anyone with me or not. I was running at 760 KCAS at max power, close to 900 miles per hour, with tanks, bombs, and pods. No other aircraft could have managed that speed with that load. I almost passed the target when I saw the bridge about a mile to my left. I was low enough that I could see under the bridge.

Still in max power, I pulled up hard into a vertical climb. With such enormous energy I was going through 23,000 feet rolling inverted and pulling down to the target. I rolled out steep, about 60 degrees, and was back through the Mach quickly. I was approaching 6,000 feet at close to 700 KCAS with the aircraft surrounded by tracers. It looked like sparks off a welder when I pickled the bombs and pulled back as hard as I could, still in max burner. I could see the wings bending way up in a smooth curve as the nose was slowly coming up. Then something hit the left wing hard.

The bird rolled to the right so violently that the gyros tumbled, the attitude indicator froze, and now I was in a hard right turn, still running with maximum burner. I discovered I wasn't alone. Number two and I crossed very close. On his first mission up North my number two was there all the way, and we both had hit the target, as planned.

The gyros reset, and the bird seemed okay, so the two of us went back into Laos for refueling and then we returned to Thud Ridge. It was getting dark, so we could clearly see two aircraft burning on the ground, one on the east side of Thud Ridge and one on the west side. We orbited Thud Ridge at 4,000 for about a half hour, until it was dark and it became clear that no one was coming north to get the guys on the ground. While we orbited we heard no radio transmissions from the ground. We returned to Korat with no further incident.

When we landed it was close to nine or ten o'clock at night. The flight line was quiet, and when I got to ops, no one was there. I went to the Intelligence Debrief, and no one was there either. I waited around for a little while, and no one came around, not even my number two. I was thinking

then that they must think I really screwed things up badly. I thought four guys were likely dead, and we had lost two and maybe three aircraft. So I just quietly went to the club and didn't say anything. To this day, no one associated with that mission or anyone from the wing staff has said anything to me about it.

I didn't walk around the aircraft in the dark after landing as I thought I needed to hustle to the debrief with the Wing Commander. Later the maintenance officer brought me some metal they had taken out of the wing where it had been hit by a cannon shell. Fortunately, the shell didn't explode when it hit, but it sure rolled the aircraft, rolling fast enough to tumble the Central Air Data Computer.

A few days later the Wing DO came to me and showed me a small bottle of black BBs. He said that Bob Beale's aircraft had hit a CBU in flight and that these BBs had killed the EWO. I don't know whether someone pickled the bombs in the dive or whether we tore them apart at the supersonic speeds. We must have been close to 900 miles per hour in the dive. Again, no discussion of the mission or anything that had happened.

A few weeks later I heard that the wing commander had died of natural causes. We never met after this mission and never discussed any part of it. I knew the mission was scary, especially for the first mission up north, and I would have liked to have heard his thoughts. The Thud driver survived and was in the Hanoi jails for years. Well after the war ended, I heard that the two guys in the F-4 also survived and spent the rest of the war in Hanoi.

For me, I hit the target. But one guy died and three guys spent years in jail. We left an F-105 and an F-4 on the ground. Only two aircraft dropped on the target. It was not a good mission.



I WAS RUN OUT OF TOWN BY A MIG-21 AL ALLISON

I n March '67, I was number three in a flight of four Thuds out of Korat. Our target was, if I remember correctly, the Tai Nguyen rail yards near Hanoi. We briefed at o'dark early as normal, took off, joined up, tapped the tanker, and proceeded north to RP-6.

We "greened them up" (armed the bombs and gun) as we crossed into North Vietnam and proceeded to the target. As we got near the target, the Wild Weasels were working the SAM sites, and we got two or three courtesy SAMs, which turned out to be no threat to us. When the first flight of four rolled in on target, all heck broke loose with 37/57mm fire. My flight rolled in second, and I dropped my bombs on what looked like a locomotive and nearby boxcars that were on fire. I pulled off the target, stoked the burner, and jinked out of the area.

As my air speed bled off, I was in a left turn and about to level off and look for my flight. About that time, I saw a MiG-21 in a dive about fifty yards from my aircraft. The MiG was in a right diving turn, and we were almost canopy to canopy. Then my cardinal survival rule for dealing with MiGs

kicked in, which was, if I'm in a favorable attack position, then, "one pass and haul a--." This rule evolved for me, a new Thud driver, from the two air-to-air tactics missions against F-4s at Nellis AFB.

Back to the MiG, since I was about to trap a MiG at my 6 o'clock, I turned into him, punched in the burner, and hit the "senior panic button," which worked as advertised and cleaned all the external stores from the underside of the airplane. I pointed the nose about 60 degrees down and went roaring supersonic across part of Hanoi. I made a couple of jink turns to see if my six was clear, and then pulled it out of 'burner and started a climb to cruising altitude.

I was low on fuel and started calling for a tanker. Fortunately, the tanker heard me and met me just south of north station. The Thud's fuel low level warning light was flickering when I made the best hookup of my life.



THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE THUD
MAINTAINER
MIKE KEENUM

In 1968 I was assigned to Air Training Command (ATC) at Moody AFB, crewing T-38s as a two-striper. After about six months of this, I was *bored*. Looking to be in the fighter world, I wanted to join those vaunted men of TAC. Low and behold, a crusty Southeast Asia vet (three stripes) joined our squadron and began telling my roommate and me stories of combat maintenance in far-off places—Takhli, Thailand. Now I had never even heard of a Thud, let alone seen one, but after about a week of his stories, I was sold!

Now the only way out of ATC in those days was to volunteer for Southeast Asia. No problem—my roommate and I ran, not walked, to personnel to sign up. After about four months, orders came through for TDY at Wichita, Kansas. Well, it was a start, a training base in TAC. Kansas in the summer is a location to behold, but, man, the place was busy: training pilots to fly the mighty Thud along with teaching the maintainers. It was like trying to drink from a fire hose.

In training we got a lot of ground school covering systems. On the flight line we were exposed to the routine of day-to-day servicing that goes on at any training base. Learned where to plug in the fuel hose, service oxygen, drag chute replacement, major look items for post- and preflight as well as cockpit setup. I found out later they left a lot of stuff off.

I was reassigned to the 44th TFS crewing an F105D. We lived in a hooch, walked almost everywhere, worked twelve hours, six days a week, 6:00 p.m. to 6 a.m. Nights took some getting used to. Sleeping in open bay barracks with no air conditioning in Thailand during the day is an art form. Thais can't, or won't, whisper. The Thud is not stealthy noisewise, or any other "wise" for that matter; consequently, we were all slightly sleep deprived. The solution was to take a combat nap during the night when things calmed down on the ramp. This typically occurred after major maintenance had been completed but before the weapons troops arrived to load bombs for the AM frag.

We all had our favorite sleeping positions and conditions, but for humans there is no accounting for taste. Some slept on the wing, a long fall to the ground if you rolled off. Others preferred the slab, still a good drop to the ground. The cockpit was not very comfortable; most pilots could attest to that. Ground sleeping was not an option. Snakes and being run over were prime considerations. Sleep in the intake or exhaust—well, that is where things got interesting. Most maintenance performed on the ramp could be handled with ground power. However, the radar seemed to dislike that form of electricity for the fine-tuning required because electrons the Thud produced were required to fine-tune the radar. So, often engine run was required, and it was the crew chief's job to run the engine while the radar troops

did whatever they do. This was often the last item of the day prior to weapons load—that is, during sleepytime.

I only saw the aftermath, but this incident seems to have gone down something like this. A Thud needed a ground run, but no one could find the Crew Chief. Time was running out because this needs to get done to bring the plane online for the frag. A generous neighbor offers to run plane, jumps in, and decides to cart-start the jet. A cart start gets the engine turning and starting in a rapid manner. Sitting in the maintenance shack, we hear the cart fire off and the engine begin to start when suddenly the line shack door bursts open and a very excited young airmen runs in. He was slightly sooty-looking, explaining in a rapid manner how some SOB had started his airplane as he was sleeping in the tailpipe, and he just beat the fireball out!

I believe he stopped using that location for his naps, and I still smile when I think about it.



FEAR OR ANGER
JIM MIHOLICK

On one of my first missions, I was number two in a four-ship flight of F-105s fragged to fire rockets at a “troop concentration” in one of the lower Route Packs of North Vietnam. Our squadron operations officer was leading the flight.

As we rolled in to fire our rockets on a barracks area, a 37/57mm antiaircraft gun that was in a doughnut-shaped bunker in front of one of the barracks buildings opened fire on my leader. I could clearly see the bad guys trying to hit him as he came down the slide ahead of me. At this point, I became furious that they were actually trying to hit him, and I started to strafe the gun emplacement, which made the bad guys stop shooting and run from their gun. As I got closer to the ground, I realized that recovery might become a problem, and I pulled back on the stick as hard as I dared. The bad guys must have thought I was going to crash into them, for I could clearly see them now running away to either side of my projected flight path.

At the last second I just barely cleared the building, but managed to remember why I had started down initially, and

fired my rockets. The ensuing explosion shook the airplane as they hit the building at point-blank range right under me, but apparently didn't damage the airplane at all. In any case, our ops officer wasn't hit, and neither was I, but it was on this particular mission that I learned that I apparently displayed fear as anger when under stress. On later missions, I remembered that and used it to my advantage.



MY FIRST THUD MISSION JOHN PIOWATY

After eight years enlisted, as a Survival Instructor at Stead and Personal Equipment in Rescue Squadrons, I made it through OCS and UPT on an age waiver. Ironically, I retired at the end of 2010 at age 75, having most recently flown surveillance in an O-2 over Iraq.

After three years as a First Assignment Instructor Pilot (FAIP) in T-37s and T-41s, I went from the smallest (except for the Bird Dog) single-engine plane in the inventory to the largest. Following great and fun flying at McConnell, I arrived at Takhli on a Gooney Bird in May '67. As I got off, I met a guy getting on. "How was it?" I asked.

"We lost about thirty-five percent," came the answer as the guy with a hundred mission patch climbed up into the Goon.

When I walked into the hooch, two guys were sitting on bunks at the end. "Are you a pilot or a Bear?"

"I'm a pilot."

“Oh, shit. Hope you’re not going to be like the last one!”

“Why’s that?”

One of them pointed to some large letters, scratched out in pencil some eight inches high—Yossarian Lives! “Guy was probably getting on the C-47 when you got off. After a bad SAM day, he’d come in the hooch late at night and toss firecrackers under our bunks.”

One of the Bears asked, “Ever see a SAM?” He was holding a stack of 35mm slides. “Here, take a look.”

He showed me several tricolor bursts. “Where’d you get these?”

“I took them.”

“I thought you were supposed to be listening to noises and watching a little screen to determine what signals meant a SAM coming up.”

“Yeah, normally. But that day, they were all coming up! Arnie finally called out, “Everything’s a valid launch,” and I started taking pictures.”

A few days later I got my first mission. It was to be armed recce to RP-1 with a ranking guy from Wing. Our spare was a pilot sitting on ninety-nine missions. The three of us repaired to the 354th and a small briefing room. The briefing was short but professional. Then Lead stood up and said, “I’m going to get a smoke, Billy. Brief him on what you want to do for your hundred mission fly-by if I drop out.” (No

mention of *him* wanting to know Billy's hundred-mission profile if I dropped out.)

As soon as the door closed, Billy leaned across the table, looked me directly in the eye and began: "First, fly your own airplane. Don't try to hang on his wing. He'll get you low and slow and drag you through the weeds. And, call 'Bingo' a thousand pounds before you get it, because he'll never bring you home until you are on fumes!" Then he briefed his fly-by.

All went well to the Blue Anchor basket refueling, which I handled as well as the old pro. We hit the coast, where he went into a turn, with me on the inside. That afternoon, I saw the slowest airspeed ever outside of takeoff and turning final—225 knots with a full bag of gas and six 750s. We finally got some airspeed back when, to lead's credit, he put me in front as we steered around Pack I, so I could better pick up landmarks.

Then we met up with a FAC. He gave us the regular litany of winds, altimeter, best bailout, his holding position, and the like. "Okay, the first target is a cluster of buildings on the east side of a north-south running ridge." He put in a smoke. "Lead, you're cleared in."

I rolled over, got my pipper rising up to the huts, and tapped the pickle button and started to pull, when I realized I had been carrying six 750s that had to *all* come off. Shit! I hit the pickle button again as the FAC called, "Two, on the other side of the ridge is another ridge with a cave opening. Hey, Lead, only two of your bombs...never mind [with scorn and derision], here come the rest of them." Then (now excited), "Never mind, Two! Lead got the cave also!"

Dumb beginner's luck. I don't remember how the hits were scored—fifty over two hundred or two hundred over fifty.

Lead, the real one, found something else to drop his bombs on. New guys, on their first mission, needed to be reminded to hold the pickle button down for the five 120-millisecond intervals between the bombs. Later, a holding relay was put on the MERs to stop goofs like mine.

Then, we went over to Route One, where Lead called out a convoy on the road. I looked, and all I saw were neat, geometrically shaped dump-truck loads of dirt on the edge of the road. Lead rolled in and sent up a long streak of flying dirt. "Roll-in, Two. Get 'em!" I gave a very short burst and sent some more dirt flying. He later reported to intel that we had strafed possible road-grading equipment.

Next, he sent me down to strafe a small wooden bridge. I did a great job of shooting and turned the bridge into a cloud of big and small splinters. As I pulled off, I climbed through scattered gray-white puffs of clouds I had not seen earlier. When we debriefed later he asked, "Did you see those dirty puffs after you hit that little bridge." I nodded. "That was thirty-seven millimeter. Never do that again; it's a flak trap!"

Well, when I got about a thou' below bingo, I called it out, and we started west. After some time he nosed over and I felt a moment of relief—we can throttle back...*not!* We just went faster as my fuel gauge kept dropping. We got on the deck and raced across the lake at Nakhon Sawon, twenty-five nautical north of Takhli. After being sprayed by the rooster tails he was kicking up off the water, he finally

called, “Head on home, Two. I’m going to wring this bird out a bit.”

“Home?” Where the hell was home? At ten feet off the lake, my TACAN was spinning. I climbed until I got a lock and did a 180 and made it back to Takhli. A great introduction, but I guess even negative information and negative learning is still learning.

I got to fly a lot with the guy—two-ship on Bravo Frags, and in gaggles on the Alpha Frag. I don’t know whether it was because the guy liked me or didn’t like me.



900 KCAS
JIM MIHOLICK

Flying an F-105D over North Vietnam, and suddenly the whole world went berserk, the sky suddenly was full of SA-2 missiles. Since we couldn't keep track of where all the threats were coming from, we all punched off everything, and the bad guys scored one for their side. We humped over, lit the burners, and dove for the deck. Since we had started at about 18,000 feet or so, we accelerated pretty quickly with now clean airplanes. At about 700KCAS, the canopy turned white with the low pressure airflow over it, and all we could see was forward through the windscreen and quarter panels unless we humped over to reduce the low pressure area behind the canopy bow.

At about 2,500 feet, I started my dive recovery while still in burner, and thanked God that I hadn't been hit by a SAM. I leveled out over the rice paddies and undoubtedly left a rooster tail from the supersonic shock wave I was making. Temporal distortion set in, and what followed seemed to take hours, although I now know it took only seconds. I clearly remember coming out of burner (the deceleration was fierce), humping over to look for my wingman through the canopy, and finding that he was still

right with me. I finally looked inside at the instrument panel. It was only after decelerating severely for what probably was three-to-five seconds that I noticed that the airspeed tape read 870 KCAS. Above that airspeed it was solid black, and I was still decelerating rapidly. The canopy was certified to only about 820 KCAS, which was the limit airspeed, but we had all clearly exceeded that by a bunch. How fast I had actually gone, I'll never know, but I'd be willing to bet it was well over 900 KCAS.



A KILL'S A KILL
JIM MIHOLICK

This is one I heard from the other pilots, as I wasn't there personally, but I think it bears repeating.

Four Thuds were jumped by a pair of MiG-17s somewhere over North Vietnam. They all punched off their tanks, lit their burners, turned into the attack, and started for the deck. If you remember, empty 450-gallon drop tanks would probably climb up over and outside the wing, especially if we were pulling Gs, so if we were behind the guy dropping his tanks, it was considered pretty safe to be below his airplane.

Apparently the MiG-17 drivers didn't know this, so they were behind and above the F-105s when their tanks were jettisoned. At that point, number four decided to jink left to see where the MiGs were, and he reportedly saw one of his 450-gal fuel tanks still spinning through the air, and one big fireball where the lead MiG-17 had been. Needless to say, the number two MiG-17 immediately went somewhere else.

We all figured the MiG “ate” the other 450 and blew up, but the powers that be wouldn’t award a MiG kill to number four because his gun camera wasn’t used. Most of us always thought this was completely bogus, because after all, “a kill’s a kill,” and that was at least one more MiG pilot that wouldn’t be shooting at any of ours.



F-105F
JIM MIHOLICK

During one of the numerous “bombing halts,” the squadron flight surgeon declared one of the Wild Weasel crews “unfit to fly” combat, so they were sent back to the States. Of course, that left us with an extra two-seat F-105F that we could use however we wanted. We immediately put bombs on it and used it as a D model with the backseat buttoned up.

On missions to a target in a lower Route Pack in North Vietnam we would routinely put the F model in the lead position, since it was heavier than the three D models that made up the rest of the four-ship. On this flight, the F model was hit by flak short of the target. The bird was flyable, so number two escorted him home. We decided that it was bad luck to fly an F model anymore, and so we parked the airplane permanently.

Oddly enough, the F didn’t turn a wheel again until a replacement Wild Weasel aircrew arrived to fly it on the missions it was designed for.

The karma was right again, and we all survived.



HIT AT YEN BAI JIM MIHOLICK

On a “first-light” combat mission in an F-105D over Yen Bai, northwest of Hanoi, I rolled in with nothing on the RHAW scope. I figured we had caught the bad guys shaving in the bathroom that morning. There was absolutely no indication of any resistance to our being there at all. As I rolled out and started down the slide to drop my bombs, the very first round (either a 37/57mm or possibly an 85/105mm) hit my airplane right where the right drop tank joins with the wing. I immediately lost control of the airplane, punched off the bombs, and apparently (according to number four) tumbled end-over-end following the hit. All I know is that I couldn’t get to either ejection handle because I was being thrown about the cockpit. All I could see was dark-green jungle, then gray sky, then dark-green jungle through the windshield.

I had started down the slide at about 400 KCAS from 18,000 feet, but suddenly found myself at 250 KCAS with hills on both sides and bad guys right below me. I immediately selected the burner, pulled up over the hills to the west for cover, and began to assess the damage. The right leading edge flap was bent up, washing out the air flow

over the wing, so I selected full LE flaps, which put the right LE flap about level. The right 450 tank was bent up at 90 degrees in front of the wing, and the right wing tip was "missing." I punched off the tanks, which helped a bit, but since my wingman had stayed with me and had kept all his pylons and tanks, we went all the way across Laos to Udorn AB, Thailand, from peak to peak. I could get only about 300 KCAS at full mil thrust with a "clean machine," while my wingman was at about 89-90 percent with all his stuff still on the airplane.

We had already called Brigham and had them scramble the Jolly Greens and Sandys. We made it all the way back to Udorn, where I landed successfully, then hitched a ride back to Korat on the C-130 "Klong."

At no time did any "panic panel" light come on, and as far as I knew, everything else in the airplane still worked, even though I used all the rudder trim that I could get on the way home. The "board" later declared the airplane destroyed due to the total damage inflicted by the hit. That was the only time I was seriously hit during my hundred missions over North Vietnam during my first tour.



J-75
JIM MIHOLICK

On the ground at Udorn to pick up a battle-damaged airplane for a one-time flight back to Korat, I noticed a dolly with a pretty well beat up F-105 J-75 engine. I asked the ground crew what the story was on that engine. It looked like it been taken from an airplane destroyed in a crash. The ground crew told me that it was from a Thud, which landed at Udorn.

At the time, feelings about firing the gun while on a bomb delivery were split in the squadron. About half of us argued that firing the gun while coming “down the slide” on a bomb run kept some of the bad guys from shooting at us. The other half of us argued just as vehemently that it wasted bullets. I belonged to the second group.

The pilot of the Thud who landed at Udorn with the “engine” was among those in the first group. The Thud Gatling gun had exploded while being fired while he was coming “down the slide” on his bomb run. The engine ingested bullets, parts of the gun, and panels from the left side of the airplane, but it continued to run all the way back to Udorn. It wasn’t until then that I realized just how tough

the J-75 engine really was, and I immediately became one of its biggest fans.



NEAR MISS WITH A SAM JIM MIHOLICK

On another combat mission, I was number two of four F-105s, and the weather in the target area was marginal at best. My leader had flown down Thud Ridge with me in fighting wing formation when we ran out of ridge, and we hadn't yet found the target. Turning back to the north, we were right on the deck (50 feet or less), and I saw a SAM being erected in front of me. I instinctively raised my left wing to avoid hitting the thing as we flew over the site. I told lead what I had seen, and we proceeded north back up Thud Ridge until we located the target, popped up, and dropped our bombs on it. We then proceeded west along 22 degrees, north to the Red River, then south back to Thailand.

This was the only time I almost hit a SAM while it still on the launcher rather than being hit by one in the air.



NOSE ON FIRE
JIM MIHOLICK

Over North Vietnam, I was flying an F-105D as number three in a four-ship Wild Weasel flight. The lead airplane was an F-105G, and the rest of us were in F-105Ds, each with a pair of Shrike missiles. Our job was to shut down the SAM sites and protect the strike force, which followed us into the target area.

At some point during the flight just north of Hanoi, I saw four airplanes about a mile in front of me in a left descending turn in trail formation. Number one and three were long, pointy airplanes, the lead Thud element. Numbers two and four were short, fat, stubby airplanes, MiG-17s. Number two's nose was "on fire," which meant he was shooting at our leader, an F-105G. The number three airplane in this gaggle, an F-105D, was shooting at the "nose on fire" MiG. The number four airplane, the second MiG-17, had either forgotten a switch or his gun had jammed. In any case, he wasn't firing at the number three, at least not yet.

I clearly remember wondering if I should open fire "out of range" and alert the second MiG that I was there and

closing fast, or if I should wait until I couldn't miss to pull the trigger. Suddenly, the MiG either saw me closing or decided this wasn't the place to be, at least without a gun. He reversed his turn to the right and departed the fight. In the time it took me to even roll to the right, the MiG flew by me under my right wing; I'd never seen an airplane that could turn like that. Afraid of what the MiG might do next, I lit the burner and reversed my turn back to the left. By that time the second airplane in the formation had also left, and we resumed our mission, since the lead airplane hadn't been hit.

I'll never forget how fast that MiG turned, though. It clearly taught me not to even try to turn with one, but to make only high-speed passes.



TERRAIN AVOIDANCE RADAR JIM MIHOLICK

On a morning combat mission over North Vietnam, I was leading a flight of four F-105Ds when the weather recce flight called and told us our primary target was “socked in.” We were off the tanker, but still in the clouds at about 18,000 feet at the time. Since we had already turned to the east and were approaching the SAM rings, we had plotted on our maps for the day, I decided to try to descend below the clouds so we might at least see the SAMs as they were fired at us.

Descending through about 5,000 feet, I decided that it wasn’t worth our lives to continue. Still in the clouds, I ordered the flight to proceed back toward the southwest. We became visually unaware of each other’s location during the turn, and I told the flight to fly a heading and use the terrain avoidance radar to proceed back toward clearer skies. The peaks on either side of our projected flight path were higher than we were at the time, and we had already penetrated the SAM rings. So we had little choice.

We rejoined over Laos in the clear and proceeded to our alternate target. This was the only time I actually needed to

use the terrain avoidance feature of the radar in combat. It did seem to work, however. Although our RHAW gear indicated SAMs had been launched, none of us was hit.



THAN HOA BRIDGE JIM MIHOLICK

This event occurred during an F-105D combat mission; we were to bomb the Than Hoa bridge in Vietnam (again). After what appeared to be a direct hit, the bridge was still standing. So I went down the river toward the coast, then returned up the river on the deck to try to figure out why the bridge was still apparently intact. At about 100 feet (or less), I could hear the gunfire from the banks of the river on either side of me, and I guessed that it was the actual gunfire I was hearing through my canopy and helmet, since I wasn't getting any indication of being hit.

As I flew over the bridge, I realized that it was nothing but a tangled mess of prestressed concrete blocks, which would be fairly tough to cross with a vehicle of any kind. I pulled up, rejoined my flight, and went home. I told intelligence during the debriefing that in spite of the RF-101 photos showing the bridge was still standing, it was virtually unusable by trucks or even bicycles.

On the way home I noticed that the cockpit pressurization wasn't working. Even though I had it selected, the cockpit altitude was the same as my true

altitude. I proceeded back to Thailand at about 25,000 feet without further incident, and in fact, I even wrote up the glitch in the 781 on the way home.

Once I was back in the chocks, I noticed the crew chief put the ladder against the side of the airplane instead of over the canopy rail. He scrambled up the ladder and asked me to lower the canopy all the way. Only then did I notice a hole completely through the canopy right behind my head, in one side and out the other. Apparently I had been hit in the canopy by small arms fire while roaring up the river. Since I was hunched over, I wasn't personally hit, but the round went through the canopy between my head and the headrest. Obviously this was why the pressurization didn't work.

Once more I lucked out.



TOOTHPICKS AND 2.75S JIM MIHOLICK

One afternoon I was leading a two-ship flight of F-105Ds into one of the lower Route Packs of North Vietnam to drop a couple of bombs and fire our rockets at suspected troop concentrations. A ho-hum mission, but a counter in any case. My wingman and I topped off on the tanker and proceeded to look for something to bomb.

We found a suspected missile transporter on Route 1 on the coast, just north of Dong Hoi, and lined up to drop our bombs on it. There was little resistance except for some small arms fire from the ground; no MiGs and no SAMs, so it was going to be pretty routine. We dropped our bombs, circled above the target, and seeing no secondary explosions, figured the missiles were either unfueled, or we had been mistaken. I told my wingman to orbit high while I went down to check. I discovered that we had just created a million toothpicks. We had just blown to smithereens a couple of trucks carrying logs that were apparently destined to repair bridges we had blown up earlier.

Flying toward Than Hoa to the north, we saw a Swatow proceeding down the river toward the coast. A Swatow was

an armored North Vietnamese patrol boat with anti-aircraft guns fore and aft that could shoot back if provoked. I decided we should empty our rocket pods on it and hopefully at least get something for our efforts. I rolled in and completely covered the boat with my rockets, all thirty-eight of them. The Swatow kept on chugging out of the white water toward the coast. I then asked my wingman to roll in, and he also covered the boat with his thirty-eight rockets, but, again, it continued on toward the coast. At this point, I decided that firing a 20mm gun against a couple of 37-57mm guns was an exercise in futility, so we proceeded back to Thailand and never saw the boat again. I did learn to hate 2.75-inch rockets that day, however.



TRAPPED JIM MIHOLICK

On this mission I was flying an F-105D, and we had just dropped our bombs on the target for the day and were on our way up Thud Ridge, north of Hanoi. We were going to fly up to 22 degrees north, then westerly to the Red River, then south back to Thailand. Following yet another break for the deck to avoid being hit by SAMs, I found myself alone. My flight was nowhere to be found. Although I had radio contact, I couldn't visually find any other friendly to fly back with.

There was a line of thunderstorms across northern Laos with tops up to 80,000 feet, much higher than we could fly, so we had to go through it. I continued north by myself to 22 degrees latitude, where I turned to the west to proceed toward the Red River as planned. The line of thunderstorms was now blocking my return to Thailand, so after crossing the Red, I continued to the northwest and started my climb. I was pretty low on fuel, but at the time thought I could make it at least to Udorn.

I continued to climb, looking for a break in the thunderstorms on radar so I could start heading south until I

was low enough on fuel to try anyway. Although at the time I had climbed to only 35,000 feet or so, I decided to gut it out and press. Continuing my climb, I finally topped out at close to 44,000 feet, was spit out on the south side of the thunderstorms, and called Brigham radar for a tanker since I was now down to emergency fuel and didn't even have enough to make it to Udorn. Brigham asked me at least three times what kind of tanker I needed, and I responded over and over by saying it didn't make any difference, I could take on fuel from either a basket or a boom tanker.

I finally switched to Guard channel and called for a tanker directly, and one on green track answered and said he was headed north to meet me. I told the tanker commander that I was at 40,000 feet and down to emergency fuel, and that if we didn't find each other, I was going to run out of gas before reaching Thailand. I ultimately saw a silver KC-135 against the dark jungle well below me, and told the tanker to immediately do a 180 back to the south. I did a modified split-S maneuver and pulled up behind him, hooked up, and got about 2,500 pounds, which was all I needed to get home. After escorting him back to his track, I flew on to Korat.

During this mission I discovered two things. First, the J-75 engine continues to run even after the fuel gauge on the F-105 reads zero. Second, when I returned to my room and plotted where I'd been for that day, I discovered that I had flown into China prior to turning southbound to penetrate the thunderstorms. This was also against the rules, so I never mentioned it to anyone.

I also made a vow that no tanker driver could ever buy another drink at a bar if I knew he was there. The tanker had actually come well north of his scheduled track to meet

me and give me the fuel I needed. I also decided the whole tanker crew should get a counter, having flown over the border into North Vietnam.



J. J.'S BACKSEAT TOUR J. J. WINTERS

My story is not much different from those of lots of other USAF fighter pilots serving in Southeast Asia during the late 1960s and early 1970s. As luck would have it, I ended up logging combat time (over eight hundred hours) in the venerable F-4 Phantom some time during every calendar year beginning midyear 1968 until the very end in August 1973 I flew a total of 481 missions, including more than 200 at night, which dramatically increased my overall flying skills.

Prior to graduating from pilot training, Class 67-H, Reese AFB, Lubbock, Texas, I was excited to learn that I would be going to George AFB, Victorville, California, to train as an F-4 backseater, my first choice. Later, I was even more thrilled to find out that I would be assigned to the highly respected 8th TFW “Wolfpack” at Ubon AB, Thailand—noted for their MiG-killing prowess. Of course, this also entailed reluctantly leaving my lovely wife, Pat, and our three precious daughters for an extended period. However, the “old heads” assured me that I would rapidly get one hundred missions over North Vietnam in four to five months, return to the

States to upgrade to the Phantom's front seat, and by that time the war would probably be over. Boy, were they wrong!

Following survival school at Fairchild and a short leave to settle our little tribe in hometown Muncie, Indiana, I showed up on time at Travis AFB for my June 30 port call. Ominously, at the passenger terminal I was immediately informed that my port call had been cancelled. However, after some frantic phone calls, I feared being reassigned "in-country" to one of the South Vietnam locations where MiG-hunting opportunities decreased considerably, I finally determined that I would still be going to Ubon, but not until the following day, July 1, 1968.

So, courtesy of the airlifters, I proceeded to Clark AB, P.I. for jungle survival training en route to Thailand. I had a grand time, met up with some college classmates, enjoyed all the Clark Air Base Officer's Open Mess (CABOOM) had to offer, and even took to heart the lessons provided by the school. Since I basically grew up on the farm and spent a lot of time in the woods hunting small game, it was especially gratifying to have all of my rice bags left after spending a night successfully eluding the Negritos (very jungle savvy little guys who served as pseudoenemy forces). Lying on the ground, all night, under a bush, in the middle of a thicket full of big jungle rats is not my idea of fun. But, it convinced me that I might have a fighting chance should I ever be shot down.

When I did finally arrive at Ubon, the personnel pukes wasted no time in giving me the "bad news." The conversations went something like this, and occurred more than once, "So you're the one, Lieutenant?" To which I naively responded, "What one?" They then announced, "The 'First One' who gets to stay here a year like us, instead of

heading home after a hundred missions!” It seems the hundred-mission policy had suddenly changed, and it was yours truly that got to be the first victim.

And now, the rest of the story. My most important meeting during check-in was one-on-one with my new commander, the Squadron Commander of the 433rd TFS, Satan’s Angels, and he was bigger than life, a living legend. As most everyone knew, he was an Ace in Korea, commanded the Thunderbirds, and eventually amassed more than ten thousand flying hours, all in fighters. I could not have been more impressed, then or now. He is on my short list (only five) of warrior leaders I have been privileged to know. And yes, Brigadier General Robin Olds and Colonel Erich Hartmann are also on it.

Anyway, I will never forget the moment when, after patiently reviewing my records folder, he looked up at me and said, “James Jay—JJ. I like that!”

Up until that time I had always been Jim or Jimmy, but if he liked “JJ,” I liked it. Even if my mom thought it stood for James Jay, Hoot and I would really always know it stands for “Jet Jock.”

My first mission to North Vietnam turned out to be rather ho-hum. It was a four-ship strike on a military storage area in Route Package 1 during the day with only a few scattered clouds around. I vividly remember the two delivery passes, one for the 750s (M-117s) and the other for the rockets (2 x LAU-3s). There was no enemy reaction that anyone could detect, but I was more startled by what the target area looked like. The cratered landscape looked very similar to pictures I’d seen of the face of the moon. I could

not imagine any living creature being anywhere nearby. Boy, was I to be proven wrong. Again!

Incredibly, I went back to that same vicinity, sixty-seven night missions in a row! And, as I recall, during that same period, 7th Air Force lost twelve F-4s in thirteen weeks, recovering only a few of the crews. Primary reason: at the time we were directed to attack truck convoys at night, as long as we had a “visible horizon.”

Since we usually carried CBU-2s and unfinned napalm, it was necessary to get down to 200 feet AGL to be effective—especially for the CBUs, which were essentially little parachute-fitted grenades that streamed out of the SUU-7 dispenser and were greatly affected by the prevailing wind over the target. Although ground fire can never be ruled out, I am convinced that most of the guys we lost were hitting the ground. We called it the “Big Black Gun.” I can’t explain it scientifically, but what essentially happens is there are times when you can clearly observe the target through the combining glass, but end up smacking the trees or foreground immediately in front of the aircraft. When this happens at around 500 miles per hour the results are not pretty. The next time a raccoon crosses the road in front of you at night, you’ll realize what I am describing. When he disappears below the hood of your car, you can’t see him... but you still hit him. To me, the entire concept of what we were attempting was sheer madness. I did not consider trading a multimillion-dollar F-4 and two pink bodies for a couple of Soviet-built trucks to be a fair trade.

But, at the time, disobeying orders never occurred to me. As a new guy, I assumed the powers that be knew what they were doing. I definitely remember thinking, “If this keeps up, odds are, I won’t make it ’til Christmas!”

Fortunately, the higher-ups must have reached the same conclusion, and for a time we changed tactics. It would be nice to know that idiotic ideas get buried forever, but due to the very nature of revolving leadership, bad ideas were modified or reinvented. One specific incident, involving ridiculous guidance, comes immediately to mind. Although, later in the war, probably due to a shortage of bomb fuses, we were actually given obsolete World War II VT-188 radar proximity fuses and directed to use them. Fortunately, by then I was a little more seasoned flight leader, possessing at least some credibility, and I actually refused to carry them when they showed up on the frag order. My reasoning was based on the simple fact that if the fuse inadvertently shed its retaining clip in flight, it could spin arm itself. Then it could possibly “ring-in” on the separation distance provided by your wingman. The predictable result of that happening would not be remotely pretty. Apparently this had already happened to a Navy crew, so the geniuses at HQ advised us, should such a situation arise, meaning you detected one that had spun up, you should maintain formation and everyone should eject simultaneously. I am not kidding! Well, no thanks, I did not get paid to do something stupid on purpose. And I didn’t.

Now that I am too old to die young, it is important to recognize that due to some “close calls” in the past, every day is a gift. More importantly, if it were not for the outstanding Airmen, both officer and enlisted, that guided and groomed me along the way, I would not be here at all. First and foremost was John, my first front-seater. We were crewed together at George and, very fortunately, again at Ubon. He was without a doubt the most humble, God-fearing, wise-beyond-his-years, and dedicated Air Force Academy graduate I ever knew. Most importantly, John was a first-class pilot. He taught me that you could fly the manly

F-4 “smoothly.” It was not necessary to hamfist or jerk it around the sky in order to achieve the desired parameters for bomb delivery. And believe me, I witnessed the opposite technique tried on far too many occasion, most often by SAC and ADC “Retreads.” More on that later.

Anyway, John and I were first teamed with a Major “Delmar,” if memory serves, a former All-American quarterback in college, and his pilot backseater, Ross, a fearless officer and gentleman. We became dedicated “Sewer Rats,” chosen to fly predominately at night, and proudly wore solid black circular patches high on the left arm of our flight suits. We spent countless hours mission planning, mostly poring over recent photo coverage of the intricate trail system known even then as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We tried our best to identify active AAA/SAM sites and truck parks. After a time, we really didn’t need maps. We knew the entire area like the back of our hands and could detect subtle changes in the landscape’s road and trail structure, even with the shadowy terrain features our airborne flares unveiled.

In addition to coping with the enemy’s defenses, we routinely faced absolutely miserable weather conditions. The adverse effects of this seemed to multiply at night. Trust me, dodging towering thunderstorms during the monsoon season or trying to deal with the “milk bowl” effect during rice field burning time could really get your adrenaline pumping. Sometimes targets were so obscured they were unworkable visually, so we resorted to radar bombing. Most of the targets were known choke points on the Trail. But leave it to the Air Force to make this category of bombing a “graded” event, even though there was no possible way to precisely determine the actual impact points. I do recognize that over time we managed to create some monumental

sand piles, and it must have hurt the bad guys' logistics effort. But there is a little more to the story. After each one of these missions we GIBs would turn in our radar film to be evaluated by the "scope dopes" (senior radar experts in Wing HQ). They would "grade" it by assessing how close we placed the radar cursors over the offset aim point (usually a well-known mountain peak) at the moment we froze and inserted the data for the onboard weapons release computer. If that was done perfectly, we were awarded a "Shack" (Bullseye), and the individual's results were recorded. Since I was kind of new to all of this, it came as somewhat of a surprise when I learned that I was leading the pack with 18 Shacks in a row! Then when a press clipping identified me with the dubious distinction of being the Wing's top "Radar Bombardier," I was even more taken aback. Soon thereafter, General John P. McConnell, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, visited Ubon. Front-seater John and I were selected to meet him and somehow managed to be positioned on each side of him during the group picture, which gives me a chuckle each time I see it in the old scrapbook. But, here is what I think is much more amusing. Although I'm convinced the radar bombing was truly hurting the enemy, there is no way in hell anyone could ever know what offset range numbers we had actually fat-fingered into the weapons panel prior to release. Sooooo...let's say for some reason we were not happy with the assigned target. Especially if we happened to believe some numb nut in Washington was in on the tasking, we could put in the offset coordinates of a different target, one that we deemed to be more important to the war effort. I'm not suggesting that we ever did that...just that we easily could have. Honest Injun (As a direct descendant of the Miami Indian Tribe, I can say that without fear of P.C. police retribution).

Over the years, folks have often asked if I was ever shot down. Simple answer—no. I am aware, however, that I've certainly come close. Three single-engine landings spring to mind, which is undoubtedly why I am such a fan of two engines for fighters. And most assuredly I've come "closer" in situations I simply don't know about. In fact, I've never met anyone who saw what hit them (AAA or SAMs). My philosophy has always been to basically be unafraid of what I can see. Conversely, it terrifies me to contemplate what I can't see or am unaware of. That applies to groundfire as well as rattlesnakes. It becomes a little unnerving to acknowledge the likely presence of deadly threats that are outside your field of view.

On the positive side, the bad guys I encountered always used tracers in their high-caliber guns, .50 caliber and above. At night this is definitely a bonus to the defender, because you can become very adept at analyzing which inbound rounds have the greatest potential of actually hitting you. Quite simply, if a tracer is observed moving on your canopy, it is not on a collision course with you. If on the other hand it appears to be stationary, you need to do something different with the aircraft and fast, like split-second fast. After a few encounters, this reaction becomes almost second nature, and you can actually get comfortable doing it. It would be nice if that were all you needed to know. Unfortunately, the bad guys have a way of figuring this out too, and they would frequently set up "flak traps." If, for example, you were busy trying to evade one or two gun sites, the third could suddenly open up from an unobserved quadrant and totally ruin your sought-out advantage.

Just about everyone acknowledges that flying fighters is a risky business, and flying at night tends to complicate

things. It follows that when things go wrong, they tend to go that way in a hurry. On one occasion, after dark on January 5, 1968, to be exact, I was saddled up with Captain Rosie. Rosie wore astronaut wings in addition to those of a Senior Pilot and was very "cool" under fire, pun intended as you shall soon see. On that particular night, the target areas were completely unworkable due to weather, so we were soon sent back home by ABCCC with our full load of unexpended ordnance. With that news, Rosie graciously gave me the stick for the Ground Controlled Approach (GCA) and landing. Everything proceeded normally until we came in over the overrun and, even though I was in idle with the speed brake extended and touching down, the bird would simply not slow down. I commented on the obvious to Rosie and he calmly said, "No problem, I've got it, we'll just go around," and added, "Your checklist is probably jammed behind the throttles." Sadly, to make a long story short, that was not the case, because no matter what we did with the left throttle, the rpm indicator was pegged at about 92 percent. By then we were approaching the base turn for a visual landing with an extended final approach, and Rosie announced to the tower that we would be engaging the approach end barrier, something we routinely did during wet runway conditions. However, since we couldn't slow down as much as we wanted, this caused considerably more "recoil" when the cable fully stretched out. That's when I noticed a bright orange glow in my mirrors, and matter-of-factly asked Rosie if he was using AB to counter our rearward motion. When he answered, "No," I not so calmly said, "Shit, we're on fire. Get out!" I don't have any way to know how long it took to unstrap, open the canopy, and jump from the fuselage to the wing, to the 370-gallon fuel tank, and finally to the pavement, but I would guess that it was well under ten seconds. When I glanced at the flames and heard popping noises in addition to a lot of smoke, I was very tempted to start running away from it all as fast as

possible. But, I also faintly heard Rosie muttering about something, so I headed back to check on him. For some strange reason, when he exited via the step-down ladder, his harness/oxygen hose became tangled on the ladder rail. I helped him get loose and was again preparing to overspeed my boots, when he happened to notice a fire extinguisher nearby on the C-130 ramp and unexpectedly announced, "Let's get it." And, to make matters even more exciting, there was an Air Policeman with a leashed German shepherd on sentry duty between us and the fire bottle. And yes, the dog was baring his fangs! The Airman also had his mouth agape and was naturally unprepared for what was taking place in front of him. He quickly got out of our way, and we headed back to the jet, pulling along the large fire extinguisher. It was the typical flight-line type mounted on wheels with a panel door in front, behind which is the release valve. When we got close enough, I tried to find the valve while Rosie stood beside me trying to unroll the hose. When I finally located it and turned it on, he was simultaneously attempting to open the nozzle, which he managed to do—and shot me full in the face with dichlorobromomethane! I thought I was going to die! No really, I thought I was going to die! As luck would have it, I carried not one, but two baby bottles of water in my G-suit pocket. The P.E. folks provided them to us filled and frozen before each mission. I think most guys drank theirs during flight, but I never did, figuring it would be one more thing I might need in the jungle. Somehow I reached down, got them, and managed to douche my eyes and throat. Again, this all happened in seconds, and despite choking, coughing, and sputtering—Rosie was also affected by the overspray—we proceeded to beat back the fire. About that time the first fire truck rolled up. Even though there was considerable smoke, the firemen seemed a little confused. And, probably given the fact that we were yelling and cussing at them to hurry and spray foam into the intake and

exhaust of the left engine, we caused them to hesitate. And maybe they were just exercising their professional authority. But all of a sudden, the fire reignited. With that, they flew into action and successfully put it out for good. I don't remember much that happened next except that we were both kind of hurting, so we were rushed by ambulance to the base clinic. Once there, the flight surgeon informed me that if it were not for the baby bottles, I would probably have lost my eyesight permanently.

After an hour or so we felt better and headed back to the squadron. Although we were not looking for any recognition, we just did what we thought needed to be done and were pleased that things worked out.

Not so fast. As soon as we strolled up to the duty desk, we were met by the Ops Officer, and he was not smiling. He advised us to stow our gear and report back to him immediately. On our return he handed each of us a writing tablet and directed us to sit down and record exactly what had just happened. As it turned out, totally unbeknownst to us, soon after we took the barrier, two other aircraft with emergencies landed in the opposite direction on our single runway and effectively closed it. When that occurred, things really started to snowball because returning jets had only two choices: divert or find a tanker. Tragically, when one of them headed for Cherry tanker track, he delayed jettisoning his stores and flamed out a few hundred yards in trail of the KC-135 somewhere above 15,000 feet AGL. The crew was forced to bail out. As an aside, a good friend of mine was the backseater. After ejecting, he concluded that the automatic chute deployment was not happening soon enough (the ground looks closer at night) and successfully accomplished a manual seat separation then pulled his own

D-ring, probably the only time that was ever done at night, or ever.

Anyway, to make things worse, someone in the control tower, having noticed our “flames,” had reported that we were doing burner go-arounds! And the fire department got their undies in a knot because we had cussed them out. So naturally when the Wing D/O was trying to piece things together, he was fixing to have our asses on a platter, and based on the info he had, I couldn’t blame him. However, the next day things started to clear up when the engine troops tried to troubleshoot the engine on the test stand. I’m told it nearly shook itself loose and caught fire again. Reason—catastrophic failure of the fuel control mechanism. Soon after, Rosie and I were “invited” to see the Wing Vice Commander. I had never flown with the Colonel, but was aware of his reputation. Let’s just say he was not warrior material. He was more likely to be placed in the “perfumed prince” category. When we reported in a military manner, he did not ask us to have a seat but abruptly announced that after investigating our incident, he was considering recommending us for the Airman’s Medal! Without any hesitation, Rosie said, “Sir, I can’t speak for JJ, but after the way we have been treated, the next time something like this happens. I’m jumping out of the aircraft!” I was as surprised by Rosie’s comment as the Colonel obviously was, but when he shifted his gaze to me, I nodded my head in the affirmative and managed to clearly say, “Sir, that goes for me too.” The Colonel took only a moment to digest that and remarked that he was sorry we felt that way and finished by saying, “You’re dismissed.”

I can’t begin to find the right words to describe how proud I felt as we walked back down the covered wooden walkway to the squadron. Interestingly, like it always does,

the story about the entire episode got around, and we didn't have to pay for our drinks at the club that night. Funny how things work out sometimes, since I have never been much into medals and ribbons because they can't come close to matching the personal satisfaction you get from knowing you did the best you could do. In fact, although I've received several "Gongs" along the way, including twenty-eight Air Medals, my most precious ribbon is the Longevity Ribbon. Too many good buddies were never able to enjoy theirs. It is kind of ironic that about the time the engine incident took place, my additional duty in the squadron was upgraded from "snacko" to being an assistant in the Awards and Decorations shop. I gave it my best shot, but it wasn't too long before I found myself in a sticky situation. The Major in charge of the effort pulled open his bottom desk drawer to show me four folders that he expected me to process when he PCS'd in a couple weeks. I almost fell over when I realized they were his personal decoration packages that he had obviously prepared himself, including the Silver Star, a Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC), a Bronze Star and Meritorious Service Medal (MSM). (Side note: To appreciate my built-in bias about decorations, it is necessary to understand that my Dad, my all-time hero, set the standard for me when he was a Lieutenant with Merrill's Marauders in Burma during World War II. He was awarded the Bronze Star for leading a team that erected a radio transmitter behind Japanese lines that aided in the bombing of Japan. He was initially nominated for the Legion of Merit by none other than General Hap Arnold. I still have a copy of the paperwork. But, back to the story.) The Major made it perfectly clear that I was to do as instructed, or else. Lieutenants have a way of magnifying things and/or imagining some very dire consequences implied in the "or else" part. So after the good Major departed for good, I stewed over what to do for about five seconds. I had to admit that his writing and typing skills were exemplary. The

perfectly assembled award packages were deserving of some recognition. I modified the wording on the MSM and turned it into a Commendation Medal nomination and “lost” the other folders in the nearest trash can.

I would never question the heroic actions witnessed and reported by others. But, for someone to arrange his or her own decorations goes way over the line. It makes me sick every time I hear the name John Kerry for the same reason. How in the hell can someone get three Purple Hearts and never spend a day in the hospital? More than disgusting because I have way too many friends who got theirs by paying the ultimate price.

About midway through my first tour, I was paired with a senior Major during his initial night checkout. He was a very likable person, but he was very new to the F-4, causing my caution flag to rise. This was during a time when the RTUs were churning out lots of “retreads” from TAC’s sister commands, and although many adjusted and performed admirably, the opposite result should not have surprised anyone. As the old saying goes, “You can teach a monkey to fly fighters,” but basic flying is one thing; doing all that is required to become fully “mission ready” is quite another, and not everyone is able to hack it.

On the night of February 25, 1969, the Major and I were paired up, flying wing on an AC-130 Gunship escort mission. The target area was near Ban LaBoy in Laos. We were carrying flares and CBU-24 cluster bombs for attacking any AAA that attempted to shoot down the gunship—call sign, Spectre. When we arrived on the scene, Spectre had already located several trucks and was being harassed by at least one very pesky 37mm gun position. He had also dropped “logs,” essentially ground flares, to keep track of and

bracket the targets. Cloud cover was not an issue, but it was extremely dark and the “milk-bowl” effect was as bad as any I had previously seen. We spent a fair amount of time trying to precisely locate the offending gun site, by which time we were approaching Bingo fuel. The flight leader was very experienced and made the first delivery, which looked to be right on target, and for a while the gun “shut up.” When it was our turn, the airborne flares were near burnout, but the Major assured me he had the target location identified. I assumed he was estimating the location by judging the distance of Lead’s hits relative to the nearest log. We rolled in at about 20,000 feet and 350 KCAS, with the intention of attaining 40-45 degree dive angle and release high enough to clear the surrounding terrain and small arms fire by a wide margin, usually 4,000-5000 feet AGL, partially because the weapons needed time to achieve the desired effect.

So far, so good. I looked back in at the gauges to begin my job of providing a running commentary regarding passing altitudes, dive angle, and airspeed for a proper release. My comfort level was such that at first I didn’t realize anything was going wrong. The Major, relying mostly on what he was seeing through the combining glass, had inadvertently continued to roll the aircraft. We were well into the dive when he suddenly blurted “Uhhhhh?” a typical response to being spatially disoriented. Almost simultaneously, I noticed the horizon line on my radar didn’t match the somewhat unreliable standby attitude indicator, and I knew instinctively what was wrong. I grabbed and shook the stick while saying “I got it” as I rolled and pulled for all I was worth. It is important to know that we had essentially been screaming at Mother Earth in excess of 500 KIAS, upside down! During the pull I braced myself for the imminent contact with the ground and distinctly remember

seeing the altimeter bottom out “below” the briefed elevation of the target. The moment I realized we were beginning an upward vector, I asked him to give me afterburner, which could not be selected from the backseat. I’m sure the bad guys had never seen a show like this before, but several big guns opened up almost at once as if they had been waiting a long time for such an inviting target. The Major was pretty much captivated by the fireworks display and was calmly saying things like, “Oooh, look at that one!” I on the other hand, was doing my best to get my heartbeat back to normal, fly the jet, and try to locate our leader on the radar for rejoin. I had already noticed that the tracers were all going well below our flight path, no doubt because the gunners didn’t expect us to be going almost straight up. After I did get locked-on to Lead and radioed, “two’s tied,” and before I could go over the armament safety check, I casually asked the Major, “You didn’t drop the CBUs, did you?” But as he answered, “No,” I felt and heard two distinctive “thunks” as our CBUs released. What flashed through my mind instantly was “My God, I hope there aren’t any friendly road watch teams nearby!” Without belaboring the point, my friend up front was clueless as to the near tragic events that had just occurred, and that became even more apparent during the debriefing—which left me no choice but to report the basic problem to our Ops Officer, a true warrior who later became a Brigadier General. Bottom line, the Major was immediately transferred to the command post in Saigon, and I felt good about possibly having saved his life and whoever might have flown with him on a future mission.

During the course of the war, several new air-deliverable weapons were introduced. One of the most impressive was the Laser Guided Bomb (LGB), a huge advance in precision delivery. My squadron was chosen to

use them “operationally” for the first time. Unlike today’s versions, we were not able to “self-designate” targets. Therefore we used buddy lasing tactics, which essentially meant that the aircraft with the laser would set up an orbit nearly overhead the target at medium altitude while the other F-4 rolled-in for a high-angle delivery to drop the bomb in “the basket” containing the reflected laser energy. For us, this provided an amazing leap in technology, as the bombs hit exactly where we intended. But I also had to compliment the resourcefulness of the bad guys and their continual efforts to counter anything different. On one occasion we were working with a Wolf Fast FAC to take out a fuel pipeline in Mu Gia pass. Our first 2,000-pound LGB was a perfect shack, and we could actually see flames coming out of both ends of the huge crater. We left to hit the tanker, planning to soon return in search of additional targets. When we checked back in with ABCCC, they sent us straight back to the same target! We were more than astonished to see that the Gomers had actually replaced the pipeline across the very same crater! To me this highlighted, one more time, how crazily the air campaign was being prosecuted. In essence, we were reduced to expending an enormous effort attacking single trucks and small pipelines when we could just as easily have taken out the entire shipload of munitions or fuel that was “artificially” off-limits in Haiphong Harbor. Fighting with one hand behind our backs was a constant source of frustration for every one of us involved in trying to stop the flow of supplies to the South. As an analogy, you wouldn’t go to the dentist to get your appendix removed, and history continues to prove politicians should never be allowed to dictate military strategy and tactics. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that thousands of lives on both sides could have been saved if only our political leaders had charged the military with the simple objective of “winning” the war, then got the hell out of the way. I can only speak for the Air Force

contribution, but let there be no doubt we had the capability to end things in a hurry, weeks not months, if only the leash from Washington had been loosened. Monday morning quarterbacking is a wonderful thing. But the basic principles of war have remained constant over time, and nothing is more obvious than the necessity of attacking the enemy's center of gravity. We were simply not allowed to do that until very late in the war during Linebacker II. It is very important to realize by the time Desert Storm took place, those lessons were finally appreciated, because those junior officers experienced in Vietnam had now risen to the highest positions of responsibility and authority. The result was both impressive and entirely predictable.

Near the end of my first tour, on May 17, 1969, I flew with "Mags" during his initial checkout. We were fragged to deliver "seeds," delayed-action Mk-82s, on a choke point in Mu Gia pass about fifty miles northwest of Dong Hoi. A Lieutenant Colonel and his Lieutenant backseater, Jeb, led the flight. Our TOT was midmorning, and the weather forecast heavy broken clouds with bases around 800 feet AGL. After careful target study, Jeb and I elected to make our one pass, haul ass run-in from north to south below the clouds. Mags and I planned to follow the leader in a one mile extended trail position at 500 KIAS plus. Everything proceeded as expected. We made a sweeping hook into North Vietnam then descended through a slight hole in the cloud cover a little more than five miles from the target. No one needed to remind us about the risk involved. Although we were in min-burner to reduce the smoke trail, we were still perfectly illuminated against the near white backdrop of the cloud undercast. We hoped to have some element of surprise because previous flights had made their run-ins from the opposite direction. I was amazed by the number of tracers in front of us, but even more so because they were

mostly coming “down” at us from the mountainsides. Believe me, the “pucker factor” was intense. It was a partial relief when Mags hit the pickle button to ripple off the bombs, which I judged to be smack on our aim point.

After release, he immediately commenced a climb back up through the clouds. At that very moment we both heard a Mayday call on Guard channel. I was busy trying to radar lock the flight lead for rejoin, so it never occurred to me that our lead had made the call! When we got close enough to figure things out, our hearts sank. The rear canopy was missing, and so was the backseater, Jeb. By then our leader had his hands full. His telelight panel looked like a Christmas tree, and his jet was streaming fuel. So we diverted to NKP, the closest runway. After we were safely on the ground we were able to examine the stricken aircraft and learned exactly what had happened. A 23mm round had penetrated the fuselage and buckled the backseat floorboard enough to cause Jeb’s ejection seat to fire on its own. We hustled to the command post and were treated to the most gut-wrenching sequence of events I’ve ever experienced. By then the SAR forces were at the scene and communicating with Jeb via his survival radio on the ground. We listened anxiously as he calmly directed the A-1H Skyraiders, call sign Sandy, to the exact locations of the surrounding gun positions. Tragically, due to flailing and impact with the side of a cliff, his injuries were grave. Later, that evening, I personally talked to the PJ that heroically managed to get to him, but by then Jeb was already dead, and retrieving his body was simply not possible. When one of the Sandy pilots suggested he have a drink of water, he answered: “I don’t have any; sorry about that!” He was actually apologizing because they were having trouble understanding him due to his weakened condition. We soon found out that the bad guys were using Jeb for bait in hopes of knocking down

some of the rescuers. And they nearly succeeded. When I met one of the returning Sandys on the flight line, I couldn't believe the battle damage his bird had sustained. I was literally able to stand in the hole in one of the wings. We thanked them profusely for their incredible courage. They actually slowed down over the target in order to draw gunfire in their effort to rescue Jeb.

The next day, a flight of four Satan's Angels went back to the scene. Jeb's chute was still visible dangling from a ledge on the cliff. The flight dropped a bouquet of flowers out of a speed brake in tribute to Jeb and then commenced hammering every living thing nearby with CBUs.

Mags and I were so moved by Jeb's performance that we stayed up most of the night writing his nomination for the Air Force Cross. When I took the package up to that "same" Colonel, he looked it over, then said, "I think you are too close to the situation and this write-up is a little strong."

To which I responded, "No problem, sir. I will change the wording to a Silver Star."

Then he said something that left me almost speechless. "No, change it to a DFC for heroism and write it up for all four of you!" I could not have been more stunned, but I managed to tell him that I couldn't possibly do that since Jeb died and none of us were even scratched. He wasted no time in answering, "Well, we'll get someone else to do it. You're dismissed!"

A few minutes later, our ops officer intercepted me. He was more than aware about what had just transpired, having obviously received a phone call from the Colonel. He

told me with a sly grin that he was going to have to “fire” me as an awards and decs guy, but he was moving me to the weapons shop. This kind of news would normally be greeted with handsprings, and I am now forever grateful, but I was still fuming from my meeting with the Colonel, and I am still not over that part—although, it is some comfort to understand that God is very aware of Jeb’s courageous actions that day and that means more than any medal.

On Friday the thirteenth of June, we checked in with Firefly 20, a flight of two A-1Hs, from NKP that had cornered a convoy of trucks under a “scud bank,” low fog-type clouds, and had requested more firepower. We were anxious to oblige, but it was midmorning and the cloud cover had not yet had a chance to burn off. We were near Ban Ban in northern Laos, and the trucks were in a narrow ravine with steep karst formations on each side. After we arrived on the scene and relayed our playtime and ordnance load to the leader, he began describing the situation, having already made several passes to keep them boxed in. He was very excited to report that the trucks were basically trapped between two peaks sticking up through the clouds and that he could see them intermittently. With that, and after a couple more orbits, he announced that he thought he would be able to mark them for us. We watched as he rolled in well below us through a tiny gap in the clouds to shoot a W.P. rocket. What happened next, only God knows for sure, but he never reemerged back on top. Needless to say, we were shocked, but when some barely visible smoke and vapor started rising up through the clouds, our worst fears were essentially confirmed. His wingman was understandably shook up, but professionally initiated a SAR with ABCCC. We remained on station for a few minutes, straining to hear a beeper or see something encouraging, but to no avail. Since there wasn’t anything more we could do to help, we

diverted to the alternate target. Those truck drivers have no idea how lucky they were that day, and our team suffered yet another tragic loss.

On July 1, I flew my 245th mission, my champagne flight, up front with Tex in the backseat. It was a wing record at the time. Then I was off to MacDill AFB, Florida, to upgrade in the front seat. It was great to reunite with Pat and the girls. We found time during the weekends to comb the beaches at St. Petersburg in search of the perfect seashell or enjoy the best steak on earth at Bern's steakhouse. Bern's was in my personal competition with the Columbia Club in downtown Tampa for the world's best prime rib.



ON THE ROAD TO SATAN'S ANGELS STEVE MOSIER

In August of 1968 the Walleye Team, comprised of five F-4D crews, boarded a TIA “Stretch 8” (The Stretch 8 made the worst economy class of today seem comfortable and made most of us look forward to the canvas straps of the C-130 flying with the call sign Klong across Thailand) at Travis AFB. Along with two-hundred-plus soldiers and airmen, we had what seemed like an endless flight, with several stops en route, to Clark AFB, PI, where we would experience Jungle Survival School.

Several bottles of San Miguel and a few nights in the jungle later, we again boarded a World Airways plane—this time en route to Bangkok and onward to Ubon RTAFB. Joining us on this flight were “Scotty” and “Lefty” Friezell. Lefty and Scotty stood out because, unlike the other passengers, they were wearing the brightest red Party Suits and the bush hats that marked them as not only combat vets, but as a F-105 Wild Weasel crew out of Korat. They were awesome. A quiet swagger indicated they had been there—many times—and done that in the face of SAMs. MiGs. and Triple A. They had been to the real survival school and survived to do it again, and again. Scotty and Lefty

parted ways with us when the World 727 arrived at Don Muang International Airport. They were picked up and taken to Korat by squadron mates. To us they represented immortality.

Sad postscript—about a month later while on a RP-1 mission I heard a Mayday on Guard from a Thud with the call sign Bison Two, and then watched as the bird headed feet wet, trailing flames. What seemed like a long time—at least thirty seconds—passed before the aircraft exploded. There were no beepers and no chutes. In spite of that, a full Combat SAR was launched in hopes that there would be a call on Guard and a successful pickup (In those days the US military made every attempt to rescue an airman, marine, sailor, or soldier taking on whatever risk arose—until there was no hope of a successful rescue; guess you could time stamp it as BB: Before Benghazi. Well, in this case there was no rescue. Missions went on, and the war was waged in the South and North, in Laos, and even other parts of the area where covert operations were routinely conducted (I think of a U-2 call sign Roy 18 that gave its escort flight of four Satan's Angels a com check as he headed northwest of Dien Ben Phu before checking back in around forty-five minutes later, southbound, with the same squeaky pressure-breathing voice). It was a couple of days later we learned that the crew of Bison Two was Scotty and Lefty—those guys in the red flight suits were gone. We all lost friends during combat tours—but for me the loss of those two immortals was the eye opener, and “informed” me that immortality was for the gods, and not for combat aircrews.

Back to arrival at Ubon. We were met by our respective squadron sponsors—I was one of the fortunate few to be taken to the 433rd Tactical Fighter Squadron, Satan's Angels.

Backstory: While at the Clark Officers Club late at night after Jungle Survival, our SRO, a Lieutenant Colonel with Pentagon experience, “asked” me to call Ubon and let them know that the crews with Walleye training were inbound and ready to deploy the weapons immediately! Now I was a very new first lieutenant, and I don’t think I had ever made an AUTOVON call before. I was pretty sure the info he asked me to convey was at some level classified. Fully fueled with San Miguel and with the background of “Jello Riber” and slot machines, I managed to connect to the 8th TFW command post and a captain duty officer. I was cautious about the information and decided that the use of Walleye or AGM-62 terminology would be a breach of security—so I improvised and informed the captain that five crews with “Special Weapons” qualification were inbound, ready for immediate deployment of this capability at Ubon. There was a prolonged silence on the line, and then the captain said I’d need to talk to someone higher in the wing leadership—which I promptly did. The conversation was clipped, and I signed off with a feeling of accomplishment. Later that night, when the SRO asked if I’d made the call, I confidently informed him yes, and elaborated on my protection of sensitive information on an open line. He got very red-faced and breathless. Suffice it to say part of our greeting at Ubon had a *special* sensitivity! I guess I either missed the Special Weapons briefings at MacDill or they were omitted for those on a fast track to SEA. Coincidentally, there was a bombing halt shortly after our arrival. I like to think that a Special AUTOVON call may have created a situation where there was some consternation in the North Vietnamese leadership about what those crazy Yankee Air Pirates might do to end the conflict—but probably not!

Back to Satan’s Angels. It was several years later that I realized what I had experienced with the 433rd was more

than special; it was rare and one I count myself lucky to have had. We had seven members of the Satan's Angels of my era make one star or more. I met most of them later in my career, and we didn't speak of rank or station, but of the time we had in the skies of SEA, and on the ground (sometimes s--t faced in a sockeye match) at the Ubon Ratchathani Officers Club.

Hoot Gibson, Dick O'Leary, Bill Strand, and Jack Bennett set the stage that few, if any, of my other squadron commanders could climb on. Phineas Fogg, Evil Pecker, Horny Billy, Higgy, Goldy, Hal, Three Finger Dick, Uncle Huge, the Grape, Killer Dave, Mr. Earl, Al the Wop, King Mills, Hoss, Ghost, Gentle Ben, Papa Wolf, Fast Eddy, JJ, and many other members of Satan's Angels, the Sewer Doers, and Wolf FACs are embossed on my memory. They traveled with me for my entire career and remain part of memories that make me smile to myself. I hope that today's fighter pilots can enjoy what I experienced and appreciate the heritage they are responsible for carrying forward in a different time and, in many ways, a different Air Force.



THE NIGHT THE LIGHTS WENT OUT IN ROUTE
PACK II
LT STEVE MOSIER
UBON RTAFB 1968-69
SATAN'S ANGEL AND WOLF FAC

We had four fighter squadrons at Ubon in '68-'69. The 497th, the Night Owls, flew almost exclusively after dark. The bellies of their Phantoms were painted black, and their cockpits were taped over in a unique way to protect night vision, requiring a very close collaboration between the AC and the GIB for spatial orientation. The 25th Assam Dragons had the Igloo White mission for the main, taking off before sunrise, delivering their sensors from unique dispensers and pods with the precision their LORAN-equipped D models allowed. The 433rd Satan's Angels had mostly day missions and were the pioneer of LGB operations with the Zot system, also having four-to-eight sorties on the early night schedule. Then there was the 435th. No one knew what they really did, and no one really cared.

For a period of several months in 1968, I flew night missions in the 433rd. We were a pretty small group working this mission. We called ourselves the "Sewer Doers" and

had a special patch showing a scrawny rat peeking out of a sewer main, graphically depicting what we felt about mucking about in bad weather, after dark, in Laos and North Vietnam. Our weapons loads consisted of CBU-24/49s, MK82s with and without fuse extenders, and in most cases, one bird in a two ship had SUU-25 flare dispensers. We worked with O-2 Nail FACs and AC-130 Blind Bats that used starlight scopes to pick out “lucrative targets” along the trails. Sometimes we had prefragged targets that we sought out and bombed on our own, using visual cues illuminated by the moon or by our own flares. If it was a good night, we hit some trucks, fuel, and POL dumps and aroused the gunners creating other targets of the 23mm, 37mm, 57mm, and sometimes 85mm sort.

Some nights we just moved dirt and trees. DJ, one of the Night Owls, and a pilot training classmate sent a “suggestion” to 7AF that we fill our external tanks and all of the napalm cans with wet concrete and drop them in the choke points at Mu Gia and Ban Kari, noting that concrete was harder to move than bomb craters were to fill, and at the end of the day we’d have some neat pedestals to install war memorials on—funny, we never heard back. I remember one special evening. Hal, one of the Sewer Doers, had contacts in 7th AF and a penchant for doing his own target assessment. Using these two factors, he divined that there was an area on the Ho Chi Min Trail just north of Mu Gia Pass in RP-2, one of the areas allocated to the Navy, but beyond the combat radius of their strike force on the carriers in Yankee station. It was Hal’s bet that the North Vietnamese were using this sanctuary to marshal supplies before the push into Laos and through Steel Tiger on to South Vietnam.

I was never sure whether we had permission to go into RP-2, but we checked in with Moonbeam and pressed on to

the area we were going to check out. We made low passes with varying angles and offsets, and were pretty sure we saw supplies, including POL pipes along the road. At first we drew no reaction from the North Vietnamese. So the flare bird dropped a string across the road—holy s--t—there was s--t everywhere! I vaguely remember that one of our Phantoms had CBU-2 on this sortie, but maybe I am mistaken. In any case, we dropped everything we had on several passes, and the fires we started were massive. So was the AAA in response. Winchester, we climbed out and checked back to see blazes at least a couple of hundred feet high, secondaries, and lots of visual AAA. We called Moonbeam and informed them that there were some *real* lucrative targets and gave coordinates. There was a pause to check the coordinates of the location (“set Elizabeth over Richard”) on the location again—it was maybe, just maybe, somewhere we should not have been. Regardless, ‘Beam diverted the night’s action to where we had just departed, and they kept the pot stirred for the day go, which continued to pound the area with great success for another twelve hours or so. Checking out with Bruce on Moonbeam, he congratulated us on “good work.” (If you’d have flown in Laos in ‘68-’69 you’d know who Bruce was—a distinctive and familiar voice for the night fighters). It was good work—and we were proud of Hal for being the best intel/targeteer we knew, and happy the A-4s from the carriers left us a sweet spot for that one night. Beer at 22:30, chili cheese omelets in the Club dining room, in the rack by 0130 and out till the next afternoon and another trip to the Sewer.



UNCLAIMED MIG JIM MIHOLICK

Three MiG kills that I know of cannot be claimed due to the Rules of Engagement in force at the time Rolling Thunder was taking place. And of course one of them was mine.

We were doing another SAM break down toward the deck and looking behind us at the SAMs when I realized it was about time to start my dive recovery. As I diverted my attention forward and started my pullout, I suddenly realized there was a MiG-17 right in front of me. I squeezed the trigger, pulled even harder to miss the thing, passed right over him with at least 500 knots overtake, and jinked right and then back to the left to see what the MiG was doing. I looked back just in time to see it hit the ground and explode.

Whether I hit it with my bullets or I flat blew it out of the sky with the jet wash, I'll never know. But, like we've always said, "A kill's a kill." I was thankful at the time that I had fired my gun and activated the gun camera.

On the way back to Thailand at 37,000 feet, I replayed the incident numerous times in my mind's eye. I started to realize that the MiG's gear and flaps were down, or at least I thought they had been. Maybe that's why I had so stinking much overtake. On further reflection, I realized that in the background there had been a runway, and since it had all happened just west of Phuc Yen airfield, that was probably where the runway was. I decided not to tell Intelligence about the MiG, since we weren't supposed to even fly within a 30 nautical mile radius of their airfields at the time. I unsnapped the glare shield cover over the gun camera, took out the film cartridge, opened it and exposed the film to bright sunlight, destroying the only evidence I had. The film was later reported as overexposed by the photo lab.

At least I know that I got one, even if I "blew it out of the sky." And although it will never be claimed, at least I know the MiG pilot never got to shoot down one of ours.



WEATHER RECCE JIM MIHOLICK

I was leading a first light two-ship weather recce mission over North Vietnam, just on the western side of Thud Ridge. The weather was overcast at 4,000 feet, and I was about to call back and tell the strike force to divert to their alternate target when I discovered a railroad car coming down the northwest railroad, just south of Yen Bai. I asked my wingman what he thought it might be, and he responded that he didn't know what it was either. Considering that there were no "good guys" in the area, I decided to shoot it. At the time we were carrying mixed ammunition. Every other round was High Explosive Incendiary (HEI), and the rounds in between were Armor Piercing Incendiary (API). I pulled back around and lined up for a strafe pass, and I caught the railroad car right in front of a row of buildings. The secondary explosion lit up the whole area, and we both figured the bad guys must have used the buildings behind the railroad car for ammo storage because they continued to explode and burn long after my strafe pass.

After our return to Thailand, I asked Intel during the debriefing whether or not we were allowed to expend ordnance on a weather recce mission, and their answer was

a pretty clear “no.” We told them we didn’t see anything except the bad weather, which we reported.



WHEN THE HEAVIES WENT INTO THE PENALTY BOX

LT STEVE MOSIER
UBON RTAFB 1968-69
SATAN'S ANGEL AND WOLF FAC

I mentioned in another discussion how lucky I felt to have been amongst the men of the 433rd and how much I enjoyed the great leadership. I would say the same was true of the O-6s—most of the time. But, over about a three-week period we learned they were mortals through actions that took the pressure off company graders. It started when the Wing DO assured his GIB that all switches were safe and then proceeded to fire a LAU-3 with its nineteen 2.75 rockets at lead during the rejoin off target. Two lessons here:

1. Unguided rockets will never hit a target on a pure pursuit course.
2. The whole thing will be recorded by the KB-18 in the forward Sparrow well of the shooter.

The high-quality film was a prized possession in the Satan's Angels weapons safe. Some would say it made a nice insurance policy!

Not much later the Wing Vice was on an Owl mission escorting an AC-130 gun-chasing trucks on the trail. Back on the tanker on a recycle he was taking gas nicely. At the time to disconnect he hit the button to release the boom from his phantom—his backseater—who had confirmed switches safe precontact and felt a sickening thunk and only hoped for the best. Only a short time later the O-6 made the radio call, “Lion, I think someone dropped a CBU in Thailand” (they were in Red Anchor). After an extended pause, Lion replied, “Owl, the bad news is that you are the only aircraft airborne in Thailand!” By the way, a CBU-24 doughnut is really big when dropped from twenty-two thousand feet—it is *really* big! The BD was only a few wounded water buffalos that got a local farmer some generous compensation. The Vice departed shortly for duty at a Korean base. We assumed it was in the south, but maybe not.

Finally the Trifecta was completed only days later when the Wing Commander walked into the TOC just as the duty officer was taking a call from 7th Air Force asking for the flight lead of Pintail flight. The duty officer handed the phone to the Wingco, and he replied with his well-known nickname. Seventh AF replied, “Buck, is that you?” and the answer was in the affirmative. The frustrated reply was reportedly, “Aw s--t, Buck, do you know you were bombing in Cambodia?” Oh, we weren’t doing that then.

So, all’s well that ends well. We went two for three, and the good guys survived and prospered. And all of the squadron crews operated on an athletic scholarship for a few weeks!



THE BOMBING HALT



THE DEVIL MADE ME DO IT EV PRATT

In the second half of 1969 and early 1970, I flew with the Stormy Fast FACs out of Da Nang. In late October '69, I launched one morning as Stormy 2, the second go of the day. After an hour or so on the trail, I heard beepers going off. A few minutes later, Hillsboro told me there was a Misty down, and to head south and be prepared to help if needed. So we went south, found a tanker, and spent the next couple of hours letting my WSO hone his refueling skills.

The rescue forces showed up led by the Sandys, and the Jolly Greens were not far behind. I could hear the Misty(s) trying to talk to the Sandys, but for some reason still unknown to me, Misty could not talk to Sandy low lead, but I could hear them both loud and clear. I told King and the Sandys that, and the Sandy low lead asked if (1) I had any Willy Petes and (2) could I come down and help out? Of course, I said yes and yes. So, me in a fully loaded Double Ugly (just off the tanker) went down and for about forty-five minutes, talked to Misty, and controlled the Sandys as they tried to suppress the bad guys shooting at everybody in sight. I had never tried to roll in to mark at 225 knots before, and it was tough to keep from running over the A1s! But it

all worked out and eventually, another flight of Sandys arrived and relieved me.

After an all-day SAR where all the Jolly Greens got shot up and one got shot down, they eventually got everybody out (both Mistys, the Jolly Green crew, and a PJ who ended up on the ground with one of the Mistys when the Jolly Green's hoist got shot off). Lots of folks had a lot to do with getting those guys out.

Fast forward about a year or so, and I was sitting in the Poly Bar at Davis-Monthan. I was regaling a newfound friend with my war story about controlling A-1s from an F-4, and a voice rang out from behind me. "That was me on the ground!" So I met Don "Devil" Mueller, Misty 119, for the first time. Devil and I became great friends and beat around the F-4 world together for years. After retirement, he was a simulator instructor at Tyndall in the F-15 schoolhouse. Unfortunately, he "flew west" in 2010. I will never forget that sortie or my friend Don "Devil" Mueller.



EVER FELT LIKE A TARGET? CURT JAMES

During my first tour at Takhli late 1969 to October 1970, we were in a bombing pause to keep things peaceful, except the bad guys then moved all the guns and seven-level shooters to Ban Ban, Nong Het, Mu Gia, and Tchepone. My few Weasel missions in the North were Buff and recce support in Pack One. Never saw a SAM, never saw a Fan Song strobe.

PACAF, in their unmatched wisdom, sent a bunch of us Weasel crews to Kadena after Takhli shut down. They, of course, never equipped the 12th TFS with any weasel birds. We had roughly twelve pilots, twelve F105Ds, and a bunch of mad Bears. As a really good deal, they were sent often to Korat TDY. In late '71 or early '72 the 17th at Korat needed help with pilots, so we started to cycle TDY also.

One day about in March we were sitting around the Korat pool about 1700 when someone ordered us to get set up and report to a briefing. Turns out the North Vietnam AF had moved some MIGs to a dirt field called Bai Thoug, near Vinh. Someone conceived a plan to have F-4s drop chaff, Weasels to follow, and the B-52s would hide behind the

chaff and bomb the strip. My Bear, Jerry, and I flew as number four across North Vietnam without incident, the F-4s filling the airwaves with "Get back in position" and other usual F-4 noise.

I moved out away from my leader's bird and promptly lost him in the dark. No big deal, Weasels always flew solo in the target area at night. Then it got interesting. We got a three-ringer and launch light from a site south of the target, and a visual on a launch.

Jerry calmly said, "We have a launch, thirty seconds to go." "

I put the missile at 3 o'clock (thank you, Billy Sparks, for the training) and started down.

Jerry soon said (calmly), "Ten seconds, time to pull."

I delayed briefly and pulled, and the missile went behind us.

He then said, "Launch, thirty seconds," so I went inverted and down again.

He then, again calmly, called out, "Ten seconds," and I pulled with the same result.

We did this six times until the site ran out of missiles and turned off the signal. Frustrated, still loaded with two Shrikes and a Standard ARM, we milled around and then went feet wet, got fuel from Purple Anchor, and went home.

Two things impressed me. One, the tactics taught at Nellis worked. Two, a guy who had spent his whole career straight and level in a B-52 could sit through all these gyrations at night being shot at and calmly do a superb job of keeping us alive. Weasel Bears are a special breed of men.



FIRST FLIGHT—SEA SCUD YATES

My first ride in SEA was on the of September 28, 1969, and was a last-minute jump into a two-ship “confidence fight” for some aircraft issue on one of the birds. The flight was to get me over the border so September would count as a combat month for pay, and I would go to new guy’s school the day after. We did some sort of burner climb and then a high speed FCF “like” run toward the northeast corner of Thailand. We flashed into Laos and straight up to Dien Bien Phu to show me what happened to the French. We did a high-speed pass down main street and, bingo fuel, started back into Laos. Before we climbed back out we passed the battleship rock where a TACAN had recently been overrun. On that pass, the whole side of the karst started blinking as us as the tracers went by us on all sides, top and bottom. The 550 knots were turned into altitude and we did a minimum fuel recovery to home plate. I thought the whole thing was pretty neat and that I might enjoy the tour even if the north was not open. I volunteered for Tiger FAC when I got back to the squadron. It took me a month or two to prove I was good enough to get in.

The point of this was the story of the last time I saw Ted Dowd. It was at breakfast the last day Dowd and Mike PC Carns were on the base. They were pretty loaded and were standing on the table tossing French fries with catsup on them at the Batcat (EC121) guys to show them what tracers looked like. Break, break. In about 1980, Colonel Michael PC Carns showed up at Nellis as the Commander. He scheduled every officer to meet him one-on-one in his office. My turn came, and I reported, as I should have. In our short discussion, it came out that we had both been at Korat at the same time, but before I became a Tiger. I related my last vision of him and Dowd. He listened straight-faced, making me think I had shit in the pool, not a new act for me. I related it as best I could, and he slipped a little smile and went back to his stone faced saying, "We do not do that stuff anymore." I understood, without having to be told, that I probably would not be relating that story again.

The rules Dowd mentioned about being hit were modified while I was there to three hits, forty missions, or a shutdown to end your tour as a Tiger. I got my third hit and shot down on my thirty-seventh mission. The area was pretty small compared to the Wolf program's area to be covered, so I was completely current in all areas in both programs. But in Wolfs it took about forty missions to be released with another crewmember with the same number of missions. When I flew with them I got about twelve hits in my 140 missions from August 1971 to July 1972. The biggest difference in the programs was that the 388th was proud of their FACs and the 8th did their damndest to get rid of theirs and shit all over them every chance they could.



THE ADMIRAL AND (THE DEMISE OF) DILDO EAST EV PRATT

(Bill Nelson and I roomed together when we were college freshman. I don't know where and when he picked up "Admiral," but he was the Admiral to all who knew him in the fighter world. Bill was a great fighter pilot and my best friend. He bought the farm in the back seat of an F-4 in the fall of 1972 at Nellis. He was in the 414th and was instructing on a night tactics ride. May he continue to rest in peace.)

When the 366th TFW was first deployed to Da Nang, we all stayed at the north end of the base in the old French compound. This compound included the infamous "DOOM" Club (Da Nang Officer's Open Mess). Sometime between when I left from my first tour at Da Nang in the summer of '67 and I returned in the spring of '69, the wing had migrated south to "Gunfighter Village." All the Ops facilities and billets for the fighter squadrons were now on the south end of the base, a couple of miles from their previous home. That obviously made it a pain in the ass to get to (and mostly from) the club.

The fix was to “slightly modify” one of the Modulux (i.e., plastic) BOQs. Some enterprising fighter pilots/GIBs knocked out and rearranged a few walls, added a bar, some furniture, and put in a sound system. As I remember, we all pooled our ration cards to buy the booze, and somebody always volunteered to tend bar. So the “Dildo East” was born, no idea where the name came from. As you might expect, the wing “leadership,” who all still lived up north, did not visit, nor were they invited to visit, the Dildo East. Well, one fateful night, the Wing Weapons Officer was in the DOOM club with his boss, the Wing DO, who was a true hardass nicknamed Willie Pete, and decided to impress him with a visit to the Dildo. It got kind of quiet, and everyone was on their best behavior. That lasted a few minutes until the Admiral showed up. I don’t think the Admiral knew Willie Pete was there because if he knew, he surely would not have worn his gas mask and he surely would have had something else on besides his gas mask. So the Admiral walks up to the bar, orders a scotch, lifts his gas mask to take a sip, and turns around. There sat Willie Pete staring at a completely naked Admiral.

The rest is history. The Dildo East closed that night and it was back to the long trek back and forth the DOOM club. But boy, did we enjoy it while it lasted!



TRIPLE BANGER BUFF DROP SUPPORT
"MIG 21 AT FIVE O'CLOCK!"
BANE LYLE

We were fragged for a triple banger BUFF drop support mission with one exception: the mission was during the day with great visibility and a clear sky. Usually these missions were scheduled for 0-dark-thirty. Support missions were a two ship of Weasels fragged for a total of 40,000 pounds of offload from a tanker to support three separate BUFF drops with three BUFFs per drop. TOTs were normally 45 min to 1.5 hours apart. Between drops, we would troll Laos and RP-1/2 for SAMs prior to refueling and supporting the next drop.

When the BUFFs were inbound to the target, around five minutes or so from TOT, the flight lead would get a time "check" from them. The word "Hack" was not used because that was the word the bombardier would use to release the bombs. "Hack" may cause him to wake up and release.

Each flight member would set up to be in position to employ our Shrike or Standard Arm on suspected and or known SAM sites (chances are they had moved). We

planned to be positioned between the SAM sites and where the B-52s were most vulnerable, after bomb release in the turn. To insure we would not be in the bomb fall line (five miles long) we drew a five-nautical-mile radius circle around the target and used our Doppler and/or TACAN radial/DME (no GPS!) to position ourselves on or near the circle pointing toward the threat. We stayed out of that circle to insure we would not be under the 324 bombs released from the three BUFFs.

Navigation in the dark with an unreliable Doppler was a challenge. Keeping the Doppler updated by using the TACAN was necessary, and the Bears did outstanding work constantly updating it. The Doppler had only two position points (low memory), and with one point for the TACAN position for update and the other on our employment/target point. The Bear had a lot of work changing coordinates for navigation. Once we were out of TACAN range we only had the Doppler for nav. Around five minutes or so prior to the TOT, a GCI site would broadcast on Guard a “heavy artillery warning” using UTM coordinates. This call was to warn the monkeys to get out of Dodge.

On this day, as we were positioning ourselves for the run in, we started receiving numerous Blue Bandit (MiG-21) Calls from *Red Crown* (the Navy destroyer in the South China Sea). The calls were off Squid (the Fish’s Mouth) 080/80 nautical miles, about 180 nautical miles northwest and were no threat. It looked like they were in a holding pattern near Bai Thuong.

As we started the run-in to our SAM target point, both of us obtained a visual on the BUFFs. They were at 36,000 feet or so and we were around 13,000 to 16,000 thousand. My lead lit the burner and started a climb up to the BUFFs’

altitude. He was off to the side at five miles, and a little behind the Buff about 5,000 feet low when we heard a call: "Red 3 has a MiG-21 at five o'clock!" At that time, I looked over and saw Carl roll inverted pull down and return back to our altitude. I guess the rear gunner spooked on the Bull's-Eye calls and we learned right there to not trust their aircraft recognition.

Our release time was usually six minutes after TOT, and we would head out to a preplanned route to begin trolling the area we briefed. At a specific time we would return to the tanker and do it again. After the third drop we would RTB. Sometimes the tankers would request a poststrike refuel so they could RTB. After drop off we would RTB in burner and boards.



HELL YES, I WAS BOUGHT!
LT STEVE MOSIER
UBON RTAFB
1968–69
SATAN'S ANGEL & WOLF FAC

This is not an Ubon story, but in many ways it was a prologue of days to come at Ubon, Bitburg, George, Osan, and Seymour Johnson—along with a string of short stops and nasty TDYs for twenty years! We had wrapped up our RTU and the Walleye course at MacDill and were awaiting the series of survival schools for the pipeline to SEA—Sea, Basic, and Jungle for most of us. In a casual status we were sort of left on our own—when all of a sudden there was a request for crews that could go to St. Louis and pick up some new Phantoms. Easy answer—where do we get the airline tickets—that’s really a question, isn’t it?

A few days later we packed our gear and hopped commercial air to Lambert Field. When we landed, McAir guys met us at the terminal, handed us the keys to a rental car, gave us our reservations at a downtown hotel—actually not a hotel—the hotel, “the” Chase, and tickets to a Cardinals game. Wow—this was special! We got up the next

day, drove to the field and were escorted to the executive dining room in Building 1 for a breakfast with the VP of the Phantom program. Fresh strawberries—another wow in 1967!

After a short brief on the new E models and local area ops, we stepped to the jets and headed back to MacDill. Interestingly, the aircraft had no radar—lead in the nose for ballast instead. But on the radar panel there was a unique light—the CORDs light. CORDs was Coherent On Receive Doppler, a very early attempt to get a look down radar. Well, even when they took the lead out and put in the APQ-120, the CORDs light didn't work. It never worked; however, the gun in the nose was welcome—if a bit late for Ubon.

Now, in today's toxic environment, the car, hotel, and ball tickets would have gotten us an IG inspection and probably dismissal from the USAF. In those days, it was, "Standard Operating Procedure" - SOP. Think it is better today? Not me. The impression I got from McAir was that they cared about guys flying their Phantoms and wanted us to know it. No doubt some high rollers took more—sort of like our politicians do today. For the Phantom drivers, what bought us was performance—in my case a tour at Ubon, where I never took a wire except for a wet runway when every recovery did the same—all five barriers cycling to bring a force home in the midst of a Thai thunderstorm. Once we had an oil pressure anomaly—parked that GE J-79 at 80 percent throttle and brought it home. I saw Papa Wolf bring one back with the full radar package blown off by a big golden BB, the back seat empty and the bird clean except for the tanks—which he landed on, and slid to a stop, then deplaned without using the drop-down ladder—no need, as you can imagine. The tech reps at the base—actually at all of the Phantom bases—were pervasive: 24/7 with the

telephone to the experts to fix a problem (and maybe even snag a rare part through the back-channel supply system). That started at Ubon. I ran a parallel path with Dave Minnear, Field Rep extraordinaire, for the next nearly twenty years. Mark Bass (whose dad was a World War II fighter pilot and served with Robin Olds at Bentwaters) skirmished against the Boeing Navy to keep today's Eagles still fantastic machines. Jim Means collaborated with his Raytheon (really Hughes) cohorts so the three-foot radar dish does magic in the twenty-first century, with no moving parts. Or Gordon Graham, a World War II ace, retired Lieutenant General and McAir VP, who always dropped by the F-15 desk at Langley to back brief us on his discussions with the four star, and spend more than a few minutes listening to our issues before heading back to WDC. That's what bought me—not cars, tickets, and hotel reservations.

Disclaimer: Later in my career, I worked closely with the then McAir folks as the requirements guy for the F-15 at TAC DR and later flew the F-15. During those days, the fresh strawberries came with a price, the tickets were paid for by me, and we stayed at per diem hotels—certainly not the Chase! But the same attitude prevailed about caring for the operators. When we were building the briefs for the DRF (later the Strike Eagle) we got the tech data and engineering drawings we needed to tell our story overnight—no FEDEX then (how'd they do that?). Cost data was pretty square—usually! Later in life I worked for McDonnell Douglas and then Boeing. Times had changed—the cadre of test pilots (no more Jack Krings in his snow-white flight suit or Pete Garrison with his savvy articles in the *Product Digest*) we dealt with were gone—the shoe clerks were working both sides of the equation—but at the heart, the desire to provide combat capability remained. And it was good.



ALL EXPENSES PAID TRIP TO NAKED FANNY
STEVE MOSIER
UBON RTAFB 1968-69
SATAN'S ANGEL AND WOLF FAC

S ometime in the spring of 1969, I found the Wolf staffing full up. The same was true in the 433rd, so I took the opportunity to catch the base Goon to Nakon Phenom (NKP) for a week of “liaison” with the 56th Special Ops Wing. The idea was to get a broader look at the war in Laos and occasionally North Vietnam through the eyes of the guys flying a much different set of missions, in much different equipment than the 8th Wing and the other fast movers in the AOR. Having already logged several missions with the Nail FACs in their O-2s and the Snorts in the OV-10 Broncos out of Ubon, NKP offered up a whole new set of opportunities—A-1s, A-26s, HH and CH-53s, an assortment of C-47s with specific missions, and a collection of Porters and STOL aircraft operated by guys in jeans and bush shirts. It was a trip to another time and another era of aviation that turned out to be special. (It was also a chance to see the Igloo White operation—it was lots of computers and tapes of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops captured from the sensors dropped by the 25th TFS.)

I took a flight in an A-1E on a Zorro mission in Steel Tiger—my first exposure to torque and the need for a strong right leg on takeoff and other stages of the mission. Cruising to the area at 180 knots provided a whole new vista of the karst cliffs, jungle plateaus, river- and streambeds, road networks, and villages of hooches. It made me think a lot more about safe areas and the real challenges of a SAR operation—more about that later. The pilot was a crafty old dude and made great use of his knowledge of the area from up-close-and-personal experiences, sniffing out some supply caches that he worked over with his 20mm quite nicely, getting some secondaries and fires that widened with follow-up rocket passes. I never saw the AAA, but our wingman reported active ZPU response to our passes and provided an excellent narrative of which way to go to avoid the gunners as he used his 20mm to suppress them. We did the same for him. The big cockpit was much different than the Phantom's, and took some different search tactics for VR due to the altitude and speed of the A-1 and the visibility constraints of side-by-side seating. A little over three hours after takeoff we returned to NKP and its PSP runway in a typical SEA shower.

Regarding SAR, while I was at NKP, an in-country Hun pilot was picked up after being shot down in the vicinity of Tchepone. He was in good shape and hustled back to NKP by the Jolly that executed the pickup. The A-1 guys that had the SAR mission—Sandys—had their own hooch, called the "Sandy Box." Tradition was that a rescued aircrew, if he was in good enough shape, got a quick look by the docs, a debrief, and then was taken to their Sandy Box for some Sing Ha or Mekong, then taken to the O'Club, where the Jolly Green pickup crew painted his feet green and made footprints on the wall and ceiling to a spot where his name, call sign, and aircraft type was painted by the ending prints

memorializing the event. On this particular occasion the rescuee and the rescuers were in fine form, but a nurse in her version of 1505s took great umbrage at their highjinks and complained loudly that she had come to the club for a quiet dinner, not to be bothered by this celebration, regardless of its significance. The celebrators endured her intense carping until they could endure it no longer. As an amused spectator, I could see the plot building and anticipated some response, but not what happened! On some silent cue six or eight Sandy and Jolly crewmembers charged the nurse, turned her upside-down, dropped her drawers, slapped the green paint, previously used for painting footprints, on her ample derriere, and smacked it on the ceiling. Some would say a buttprint would look out of place amongst the footprints. It didn't. And in case you are wondering, no, they didn't add her name and rank to the location. Finished with the job, they gently sat her down on the floor and went back to celebrating the successful SAR. The sounds Nurse Duckett made—the term *wails of a banshee* strikes a chord—continued for a minute or more then subsided as she exited the room with no fanfare or comforting actions. After all, it was a war zone, and the warriors were celebrating the return of one of their own!

Around midweek I sniveled a ride with Nimrod 28, an A-26K relic of the Korean War, for sure. Maybe even World War II. It was a night flight on a typical Laotian eve—mist, rain, and lots of layers of clouds. Before we took off, I was fitted for a backpack parachute and given a plane-side egress brief by the pilot and his Nav, Larry. By the way, between the two Lieutenant Colonels, there was only the pilot's T-33 time as a student that was in jets. They had great disdain for modern technology, even referring to the C-130 Blind Bat we worked with later in the evening, as a pigf--er. My crew position was on a bench seat behind Larry. The egress

brief went sort of like this: “Well, we have two engines so the chance of us having to bail out are slim, but if we do, here’s the drill, Larry will jettison the right side canopy, unstrap, turn around. and push off the canopy rail and get out of the plane—you count to three, look back—if Larry’s on the tail, try something else.” Swell, glad I volunteered for this trip, I guess. Actually, the flight was a lifetime experience. We cruised up toward Mu Gia Pass and rendezvoused with a Blind Bat, which was our flare ship and our “target acquisition” support with the Starlight scope used to scan the trail. Nimrod had eight .50-caliber guns in the nose, four funny bombs (no kidding, relics of WWII) in the bomb bay, and finned napalm and Mk82s on the wing stations. Base was around 11K at roughly two hundred knots. Delivery airspeed was in the neighborhood of 280 knots, and pullout at 4,000 AGL, of course, because that’s what 7th AF said it was. The crew was smoking cigars through the mission, even on final, cursing “Bat” for being in their way, and firing the .50s and delivering the ordnance on not suspected, but no kidding. trucks weaving the road through the pass. When you can smell the cordite from your own guns, and where the pilot calls the nav to open the bomb bay doors, you are in a different time zone than when flying a fast mover. I still don’t really know what the funny bombs were, but they looked like very large beer barrels with fins, seemed to be incendiary in nature, and were something the truck drivers did not like at all. I know that because their brother gunners let us know with their responses. Fortunately, what we saw was a lot of 14.7mm manually aimed fire, and there was no 23mm in the area that night. It was a fantastic 2.7 hours added to my log book!

I had a ride in a Knife helicopter on a LIMA site resupply, a trip in a Blind Bat staging into NKP out of Naha, and an EC-

47 loaded with spooks. Also, a ride in an OV-10, and the Lieutenant Colonel pilot let me shoot rockets from the backseat, no trim button on that stick, and I learned why it was a great bird but unsuited for night work due to the interference from the propellers when using any kind of night vision scope. Those five days added a great appreciation for the folks flying into significant threats doing necessary work in some equipment that was adapted for jobs never intended—and the price of the education was right!



J.J.'S FRONT SEAT TOUR J. J. WINTERS

The flying training was just plain fun. You can really concentrate on perfecting your techniques when no one is shooting at you. I was assigned to the 46th Squadron and was among thirty-two separate crews in our training class, most of whom were upgrading backseat pilots like me. Consequently, the competition for the class "Top Gun" was fierce, and none of us could match the eventual winner, Major Ted Laudise. Ted had a previous tour as an F-100 Misty FAC and was virtually untouchable in the Dive-Bomb and Dive Toss events. We wound up together at Da Nang, and I soon placed him on my top five warrior leaders that I have been privileged to know; he is still there. Anyway, I took it as a personal point of pride when I managed to beat him in the overall tally of rockets, skip bomb, and strafe events, and tied him four for four in combat dart. So I ended up finishing second, but could not have done so without the able assistance of my trusty backseater Captain Bill "Willy" Carpenter. Bill was a previous C-124 Navigator but had all of the instincts needed for flying fighters. (It was a great honor to attend his pilot training class graduation a couple of years later, where he not surprisingly finished number one)

After MacDill, Bill and I received orders for the 366th TFW, Gunfighters at Da Nang by the sea. We were excited to find out we would be going to the 4th TFS equipped with the latest variant of the Phantom, the F-4E with an internal M-61 Gatling gun. It was like winning the lottery.

Much has been written about "Rocket City," but for me it is hard to forget my very first day in new guy school. Major Gene Burris, whom I had known previously at Ubon, was the Wing Weapons officer and was in the middle of his briefing at midday in the bowels of the wing headquarters when we heard and felt a large "whump," the unmistakable result of a nearby large explosion. Thinking the building had been hit by an enemy 122mm rocket (a frequent occurrence at night, but rarely during daylight hours), we raced outside to witness a terrible scene at the nearby baseball park. It took a moment to realize that we were looking at what was left of an RC-121 electronic combat aircraft, a version of the same twin-tailed, four-engine plane that President Eisenhower used named the Columbine. There was lots of smoke and dust, and the fuselage was completely broken in half; it looked like two split ends of giant cigar. Those unfortunate enough to be in the front end did not make it, and the survivors in the back were alive but in very bad shape. What basically had happened was attributed to simple pilot error. Apparently, he lost power to the two portside engines during final approach, and instead of gliding on in, he clobbered the throttles on the right side. The result was totally predictable: the aircraft rolled hard left and pancaked into the ground. We shook our heads in disbelief, but since there was really no more we could do, headed back to the classroom.

Back to the war. On July 24, 1970, I was the leader of Gunfighter 01 flight scrambled off of the alert pad with the

standard close air support weapons load “snake and nape” (retarded Mk-82s and Napalm plus 639 rounds of 20mm). In the quick check area, the command post called with our target coordinates, and we immediately requested clarification because the plot was further than our available range. Their answer was coded but included the news that we would be provided a tanker and the mission was to be “Top Secret,” which was unusual, but consistent with the fact that we would be going deep into Cambodia near Siem Reap. The weather could not have been better and as soon as we arrived at the tanker track, I contacted our FAC (OV-10), call sign Mike 10. I was taken aback when he announced that he already had a visual on us and continued to describe the situation, which could be compared only to the most excited sports announcer you have ever heard covering a championship game. He proceeded to tell me that he was working below us with two Thai T-28s in order to create a diversion a few miles from the real target, which was 1,000 troops in the open! (We learned later that some Khmer Rouge Generals were having a powwow in a religious sanctuary that was supposedly completely off-limits to both sides of the conflict. In fact, the place I am referring to is silhouetted on the Cambodian Flag). In short, there was no way to mistake the target area, which was partially encompassed by a huge moat and stood out like a sore thumb from miles away. As soon as we dropped off of the tanker, the FAC put a smoke rocket on one end of the perimeter and directed me to put my first bomb smack on it, which I did (I don’t think it is bragging when you can do something perfectly, and at the time, my proficiency was really something. I could literally put a can of napalm or high drag through your front door, every time, especially if the ground fire was not too much of a hindrance). Since we had plenty of playtime and were assured that poststrike gas was available, we commenced to methodically do our job. Mike did not need to do any more than advise aim point

adjustments from preceding impacts. I will never forget the essence of his running commentary. He told us not to worry about ground fire, the enemy soldiers were in full panic mode, and running around like a kicked-over hill of ants. I remember him getting especially excited when we got around to the napalm (It was a commonly held belief that our enemy was extremely fearful of dying by fire, because their spirits would be forced to walk the earth forever). By the time we started employing the guns, I was finally able to see individual targets (people running). Mike cautioned me to aim beyond (12 o'clock to my last napalm hit) but to not hit the large building (temple). He repeated, "Do not hit the building!" Well, that was simply impossible because my last pass landed on the steps leading to the huge stone structure. But I know a target when I see one, and there were plenty going up the steps, and I let 'em have it. It did dawn on me that according to some rules, we were probably not ever supposed to damage a building like this one, but when Mike immediately informed me that my last gun pass was outstanding, I figured that he was really signaling me to continue to do what I was doing. So we each made three more passes until we were Winchester. Incredibly, by that time there were already six more Gunfighters eagerly hanging on the tanker and watching our show (Gunfighters 03 through 08), including our DO, Triple V himself. More about him later.

Our return to Da Nang was uneventful until after I shut down. Someone told me to go up to the command post right away because a three-star general in Saigon wanted to talk to me! Uh-oh! I instinctively reflected back on the potential for an ROE violation regarding "don't hit the building!" But when I got on the phone and identified myself, the General seemed as excited as our FAC had been. He was very complimentary about what a great job we had done and

said that we were credited with 800 KBA and that we would learn more later. Regrettably, for me that memory of a one-of-a-kind mission will be permanently tarnished, because my wingman that day happened to be among the four who perished on August 17, my squadron's double aircraft loss.

More specifically, on the night this happened, I was finishing up my SOF tour of duty and was walking into the command post when I noticed a huge flash of light on a very distant hilltop. We were used to seeing artillery and rocket impacts at Da Nang, but this was way bigger. I didn't begin to put two and two together (no pun intended) until an hour or so later while standing by the controller's desk when we began to realize that our last flight was way overdue. It didn't take much time before the incoming phone calls confirmed our worst fears. A few hours later a Marine patrol located the crash site and ruled out the possibility of any survivors. Due to the location, in the middle of bad guy country, a thorough accident investigation was deemed to be too risky.

For all of us, this loss was tough to accept. The Squadron lost four of our very best, all academy graduates, including my flight commander, who most people were convinced was destined to become the first black on the Thunderbirds. Another friend ended up getting the assignment and eventually made four stars.

Later that morning, I was summoned up to the Wing DO's office: Colonel Triple V, one of the most likable gentlemen I have ever met. As an aside, after I got to know him better, I actually introduced a new drink in his honor at a wing party—three shots of vodka and a cherry! He loved it even though he was more fond of Jack Daniels. Much later we shared a bottle on the freedom bird back home to the

states. Anyway, he had been directed by higher headquarters to further investigate the crash in order to establish the possibility of declaring it a “combat” loss caused by enemy action rather than accidental. He asked me if I would volunteer to be the investigating officer. Before my better judgment kicked in, I responded to the affirmative, not really considering that there might be some risk involved.

To make a long story short, I took a jeep up to the 1st Marine Division H.Q. and managed to quickly get a “lift” out to the marine outpost nearest the crash site. I took along my survival vest, an extra radio, and my .38-caliber revolver, along with a couple bottles of water and a yellow legal pad to record my findings. When we arrived overhead, the Chinook pilot circled the crash scene, and I was not surprised to see nothing more than two large burned-out scrapes in the terrain and an accompanying debris field composed mostly of tiny pieces of metal. There was vegetation all around but no trees of any size nearby. We then turned toward a small hill about two miles away, that was the only prominent feature in the entire valley, our destination. We descended rapidly and commenced a brief hover, allowing only the rear wheels to touch down. The pilot then waved for me to jump out the back, and he immediately took off. Waiting for me were two marine lieutenants, who quickly introduced me to their little world. Right away they made it very clear that neither I, nor anyone else, would be able to examine the crash site on foot any time soon. They were correctly assessing the location as being the place perfectly situated to lure someone into a trap.

The top of hill #970 had been bulldozed off to make room for their dugouts, which housed over fifty men.

Everything was heavily sandbagged, and the entire site surrounded by gun pits, barbed wire, and antipersonnel mines (claymores). Try to picture an area about the size of a McDonald's parking lot perched on a pedestal composed of very steep two-hundred-foot cliffs. At the very center of the "fort" there was a twenty-five-foot wooden tower, which housed the primary purpose of the installation: a laser range finder with infrared capability that they used to precisely locate targets for directing artillery fire. They told me that they would not waste a 105mm shell unless there were at least three "Dinks" to shoot at—although at an angle, I was able to peer through the scope and clearly see the crash site.

My job, which took only a couple of hours, was to interview any of the troops who had been on watch the previous evening and might have witnessed anything at all. It didn't take long to discover that not only had some of them seen the two aircraft impact (one tremendous explosion), but that the bad guys were firing .51 cal in their general direction of flight at the time (further evidenced by green tracers). A couple of the men had also participated in the search party earlier that morning and mentioned finding a couple of burnt-up revolvers and academy rings, which had already been forwarded to the Air Force. This was all I really needed to hear, despite the obvious notion that it could have been caused by simple pilot error, indicated by the "scrapes in the earth" being pretty much in "formation." Geometry suggested that they were likely letting down through the broken cloud cover within full visual contact of their intended target and had unintentionally descended below the "safe" terrain clearance altitude of the surrounding terrain. Fully appreciating those things, I also realized that the leader might have been hit by a "golden" BB from the enemy fire, causing him to lose control; it would

not have taken much. But, once again, only God truly knows what actually happened. Reasonable conclusion: combat loss. My recommendation was soon accepted by the Command.

So while I waited to be picked up, the Lieutenants decided to put on a little demonstration for my benefit. You have to realize that their entire source of entertainment was limited to a tetherball, AFN radio, paperbacks, and playing cards. Hot meals and cold beer were flown out to them on occasion; other than that it was water, coffee, and C-rations. They burned all of their waste in fifty-gallon drums, and I do mean all of it. Anyway, one way for them to break the monotony was to daily test-fire their weapons, and for me they turned this into a very loud and colorful “mad minute” that included M-60 machine guns, grenade launchers, M-16s, and flares. For a target, they used what was left of one of the minibulldozers that had slid down the hill during construction. I loved it. It occurred to me that I might be able to repay the favor sometime in the future with a little “show” of my own, and I told them if some F-4s happened to come by sometime, they would know it was me because I would tap the burner three times in succession.

Nearly a month later, on September 13, I got that chance. We were fragged on a close air-support mission that was in-country not too far from Da Nang, so I figured we would have enough gas on the return to provide a little “flyby” for my marine buddies. I explained to my wingman what I had in mind and that it was completely voluntary, since it was pretty much verboten and could result in stiff punishment if the higher-ups found out. More than one guy had spiked himself into the ground attempting similar “shine your ass” stunts. Of course, he readily agreed to participate and promised to keep it between us. Our backseaters were

equally trustworthy and fully appreciated the morale boost we wished to provide the Marines. I briefed in detail what I planned to do and emphasized that I wanted him in close formation but not to stack below me under any circumstance because we would be right on the deck at 500 knots, plus.

Everything proceeded as we hoped. It was a beautiful blue-sky day. I knew our first pass would come as a complete surprise to the marines, so I intended to do a second one in order for them all to watch and have their cameras ready. I started the first run-in about three miles away, and things worked out perfectly. On the second, I tried to provide an added thrill for them by making it look like we might not be able to pull up in time to clear the tower. So I waited a nanosecond longer than before and slid over as close as I could stand. At that same moment, I noticed the other jet in my peripheral vision, and he was actually stacked lower than me! I damned near had a heart attack as I considered how his wing tip might have clipped the tower. Afterward, during the debriefing, he laughed it off, but I was not amused. A week or so later it made my day when I got a thank-you note from the Marine Lieutenant. He said the troops were still talking about our flyby and that on the second pass we blew the canvas top of the tower completely off!

On November 20, 1970, I was sitting on alert at the Zulu facility, ready to be airborne in five minutes with a full complement of air-to-air weapons, four Sparrows, four Sidewinders, and the gun. I got a late-afternoon phone call from Triple V. He hurriedly asked me if I was agreeable to staying on a bit past our duty cycle to be scrambled on a Top Secret Mission! By then he knew me well enough to know that I would leap at any chance to fly with an air

defense weapons load. Fortunately, I was crewed with one of my all-time favorite backseaters, clearly one of the most colorful characters I've ever known. As expected, the bell went off at sundown, and we launched without a hitch. After that, nothing was routine. We were directed, feet wet, way north, and checked in with *Red Crown*, a navy destroyer that basically served as the Navy ABCCC and was assigned a tanker. Much later, after landing, we learned that the Navy carriers had been pulled south as a ruse to facilitate what turned out to be the tragically unsuccessful Son Tay prison raid. Of course, we had no inkling of anything regarding the overall plan when we arrived on station and commenced an ad hoc Mig cap. I can remember distinctly that there were only scattered clouds and Hanoi was lit up like Times Square, which blew my mind. *Red Crown* soon began picking up unidentified bogies on their surveillance radar and vectored us toward them. We soon locked them up ourselves and were immediately given the "hostile cleared to fire" message in the clear. By then, I was already in mid-AB trying to get closure on the closest one in order to achieve RMax 2 for my armed-up Sparrow. But it became quickly apparent that these bogies were not new to this game, as they managed to turn tail and put us in an unwinnable tail chase. We had the added disadvantage of having to respect the Red Chinese border. Fortunately, *Red Crown* was quick to advise us anytime we were approaching too close by transmitting emphatic "Waterloo" calls. We never did fly over land, but were often twenty some miles north of the seaward North Vietnamese border.

My wingman, a pilot training classmate, really had his hands full just trying to hang on and would consequently always hit bingo fuel ahead of me. This necessitated having to turn back for the tanker. I could just picture one of the MiGs being able to follow us out to take a shot at us while

we were hanging on the boom. It wasn't until we got to intel back home during debriefing that we learned we had been engaged with as many as seven Chinese MiG-19s at a time! We actually played cat-and-mouse like this for several hours, and in the middle of it all I was dumbfounded to see an eruption of "fireworks" the likes of which I had never seen before over Hanoi—an incredible number of SAMs and AAA in reaction to the raid. We returned to Da Nang uneventfully and logged 5.2 hours, my longest night mission of the war. During debriefing my wingman casually asked me what my plan had been for attacking the MiGs. Since we had obviously not anticipated anything of the kind, I answered him with a straight face, "Well, I guess you would have had to cover me while I shot five of them down to become an ace."

He did not hesitate and responded, "Well, then I guess I would have had to shoot down an ace!" To which we both started laughing.

Needless to say, I was pretty tuckered out and after a couple of beers I hit the rack. But, I had no sooner dozed off when somebody was shaking me awake to tell me that everyone was to assemble in the Wing briefing room right away. Once there, Triple V eagerly announced that we were launching a large gaggle (thirty-six aircraft) to destroy a large fuel/ammunition storage area near Dong Hoi, North Vietnam. Each squadron was to contribute twelve jets to be led by their respective squadron commanders. The 390th Commander, a good choice, was to be the overall mission commander. Yours truly was picked to lead the "tail end Charlie" four-ship in the third and final wave. All the birds were loaded with wall-to-wall general-purpose bombs in addition fuel tanks and missiles. The plan called for each four-ship leader to drop in dive-toss mode with their

wingmen flying in close aboard formation and pickling in direct mode when the leaders bombs released.

Everything went as planned until we got to the target area. The cloud cover was worse than expected, heavy broken. By the time the leader identified what he thought was the target and rolled in through the only available “hole” in the clouds, the rest of us were flung too far out to achieve anything close to our planned release parameters. But that didn’t stop us from trying. Besides, fuel considerations made repositioning for a reattack pretty much out of the question, not to mention losing any element of surprise. What happened next I will never forget. It looked like an inverted Thunderbird bomb burst taking place in front of me, only it comprised thirty-two Phantoms. Even more unbelievable was the number of tracers coming up at us—definitely the most I ever witnessed in the daytime. It was tough to concentrate on doing everything smoothly so as not to compound the problems for my wingmen during the dive, but when we broke through the undercast, I was absolutely sickened to discover that we were nowhere close to our intended target. I was not alone in figuring this out, but like the rest of the leaders, I tried to find something significant (like a gun position) and went ahead and hit the pickle button.

When we rejoined feet wet, I was seething mad and cussed all the way back to Da Nang. But before that, my Squadron Commander’s number four, a new guy, had trouble catching up. It didn’t take long to realize that he had simply forgotten to arm his weapons, and they were still all aboard. Our Commander, not the sharpest tool in the drawer, failed to have him jettison them in the ocean, which put him in an immediate emergency fuel situation. Miraculously, we didn’t lose anyone and managed to land

safely despite approach control going down, encountering lousy weather, and resorting to onboard radar approaches.

When everyone eventually reassembled in the main briefing room, the real fireworks started. Triple V had already pieced together what a goat rope had taken place; I could plainly tell he was livid. He motioned for the three commanders to join him in his office. In a matter of minutes he was back without them and while looking out at the group, suddenly said: "Ted, Chet, and JJ come with me for a minute!" Ted was the Wing Weapons officer and Chet his assistant. Both were very experienced and able combat leaders and we all hung our hats in the 4th Squadron. When we made it out to the hallway, Triple V wasted no time saying something to the effect: "We are already reloading the jets and I want you guys to lead things. Go back up there this afternoon and finish the job!" Which we did. In all fairness to the morning's leaders, the weather was much better and the ground fire much less. I assume the bad guys had used most of their ammo in the morning. When we rejoined for our return, I was gratified to see smoke rising several thousand feet. Mission accomplished.

On the lighter side, fighter aircrews are well known for their ability to amuse themselves after hours. In addition to alcohol almost always being a factor, it is still a little amazing to think about the degree of effort we would put in to "one-upping" our brother squadrons. The highjinks often took the form of "borrowing" their trophies, like the AK-47s in the 421st or the stuffed boar's head in the 390th. Sometimes this involved spur-of-the-moment forays late at night, but others involved very detailed planning. Such was the case with one of our more elaborate capers.

Someone, I've forgotten who exactly, managed to trade a case of steaks to the marines for a live C.S. grenade. After careful consideration, we elected to target our chief rivals in the 421st "worst" squadron. In a previous outing, I happened to discover the combination to the padlock for their front door. I was standing at their duty counter where it was lying in the open with "0124," 421st backward, plainly visible. A real genius had to have come up with that one! I am still chuckling. Anyway, in order to achieve the maximum effect we decided that H-Hour would occur during their next weekly aircrew meeting. As I recall, it was sometime in midafternoon, and we even took the trouble to make sure I would be flying at the time to remove me from the "obvious" suspects list. My well-known rap sheet from previous events included the time we painted some graffiti aimed at the other squadrons on the Da Nang water tower.

All three squadron ops buildings had a central hallway running the entire length of the building. It was an easy task to post "guards" at the rear, a couple of our guys working on their suntans, who at the appointed time merely pulled the pin and tossed the grenade down the hallway then padlocked the door. Simultaneously, a "passer-by" padlocked the front door. Oh, did I mention, Rick, my flyby cohort, was stationed across the street behind a split wooden fence with his Super-8 movie camera trained on the front door.

What happened next could not have been scripted any better by Hollywood. But first, you need to appreciate the power of C.S. gas, which stands for phenacyl chloride. We are not talking run-of-the-mill tear gas, which most of us had been exposed to in survival training. That stuff is not any fun, but the effects are short-lived. C.S. is in a different league entirely and according to Wikipedia is: "A chemical

that reacts with moisture on the skin and eyes, causing a burning sensation and the immediate forceful and uncontrollable shutting of the eyes. Effects usually include tears streaming from the eyes, profuse coughing, exceptional nasal discharge that is full of mucus, burning in the eyes, eyelids, nose and throat areas, disorientation, dizziness, and restricted breathing.” It goes on to describe even further reaction to “concentrated” exposure, but you undoubtedly get the idea.

Unbelievably, when the front door burst open, it did so from the top down, just like the ramp on the Higgins boats during the Normandy invasion. At first the fresh air did not seem to provide much relief to the victims. Guys were crying, vomiting, and in an obviously high state of discomfort and confusion. As the camera continued to roll, by pure coincidence, a young security policeman pulled up in his jeep. He got out and casually approached the crazy scene in front of him, and he even hitched up his holster belt in an unconscious display of authority. Picture Barney Fife. About that time a whiff of the gas caught him, and he too doubled over. Needless to say, the results of our little prank far exceeded anything we had anticipated.

Through the grapevine, we soon learned that the initial investigation to find those responsible focused on a “disgruntled” airman in their squadron. And due to the physical effects it had on their guys, we would have to cover their flying schedule that night. Aw, shucks. Even the following day, when we walked by their building, it burned our eyes. That was the good news.

The bad news was far more ominous. When the Base Commander got into the act, he immediately directed the cops to send the expended grenade to Saigon to be

examined for fingerprints. That gave us a collective “gulp,” since several of us had “examined” it out of pure curiosity prior to using it. Well that little piece of intel required immediate damage control activity, or things could have gotten real ugly. Let’s just say the cops ended up “losing” the evidence during transit—another case of steaks might have been involved. Just saying. Anyway, the Base Commander was furious about this development until several weeks later, when the guys had the balls to show him the movie at his going-away party...and he reportedly laughed his ass off! Timing is everything.

Countless other stories took place during my wartime involvement, and maybe someday I will get around to sharing them as well. But for now, one thing is sure, I am very fortunate to have lived through some very exciting times. I am more than satisfied to realize that I was able to play a small part in a noble effort in the service of my country. Hopefully my grandkids will appreciate that fact when they are given the opportunity to think about it. In summary, no one can take away the memories and, for me, the great guys, the true warriors, I flew with continue to provide the best ones. Flying fighters, by any standard, is a higher calling and to do so in harm’s way is clearly the ultimate goal. Been there, done that, and would leap at the chance to do it all again.



“HOW DO I GET INTO THE WOLFS?”
SCUD YATES

My first tour with backseat Tiger FAC experience gave me the desire to continue in the FAC mission during my front-seat tour. I arrived at Ubon, Thailand, the middle of July 1971 and reported into the 435th TFS, my new flying unit. It was a great trip over, after being stuck at George AFB for nine months, half of which were in training—another story about the other half. I was among friends the whole trip over, as many of us were going back for second tours. A stop in the Philippines for some fun at jungle survival school added to the list of known or new buddies.

Wartime “bustle” was in full bloom. A squadron like this flew day and night missions and probably about thirty sorties a day or more. This unit was all into bombing and all sorts of missions. Several friends greeted me in the first couple minutes and on the flight scheduling board, there were several others I knew. The ops clerk announced me to the operations officer and ushered me to report in. I did it in a military manner, and he welcomed me and offered a seat in front of him. He had my folder in front of him, and after looking at it, he had probably put me in among the other returning “GIBs” who upgraded to the front seat and

returned for the necessary second tour. In earlier days, a year or two ahead of my year-group, folks who ended up in the “pit” were guys who did not score high enough in pilot training to get a single-seat fighter and ended up in the only fighter seats available, the F-4 rear one. It was a two-seat fighter and only pilots flew in each seat. My pilot training class did not get many fighters at all, and we had only five or six fighter slots. That left more than half of the guys not getting what they wanted, and at fifth in class ranking, I had to take an F-4 backseat to get in the fighter game at all. This operations officer—can’t remember his name but his nickname was “superball,” a new toy out then—figured he had a “50 percent” guy sitting in front of him who really had fewer than one hundred hours F-4 stick time, even with almost nine hundred hours of flight time.

He gave me a detailed description of the squadron and wing mission with each of the four squadrons with their own special missions. I heard about the checkout program they had to keep me alive, and how much I was needed with so many pilots going home in the one year rotation. He asked what my objectives were for the tour. I did the time-honored mentioning of killing the “commies for Christ,” staying alive, and such and such. Then he asked if I had any questions. At this point there had been no mention of the Wolf FACs or their mission. At Korat, where I was a Tiger FAC, this was a prime mission, and one the squadrons had a big part in supporting it. In return they got some especially good flight leaders back after a tour of four months or so. So, I asked the question, “How do I get into the Wolfs?”

The man went rigid. The air got still and, in a tight little squadron area like this where there is really no privacy, someone “snorted” outside the door in the hall. The ops officer’s nickname immediately came to mind as he vaulted

out of his chair, causing me to rise and stumble backward. He started spitting and cursing while his face turned bright red as he fought for words to express his true feelings. He ran around the room, thrashing around, grabbing things he threw against the walls. His wails turned into venom-encrusted words about how much he really liked the Wolfs and what he thought of me wanting to be associated with such criminals. I was a traitor, worse than a cur dog, a blight on the world, and worse. Then he paused to come up with something new to throw out at me, and the world, stating I could leave the squadron this minute, as he would not have me among his guys to “pollute” the unit. I started to back out when he went silent, and I thought he was about to explode from rage, then he yelled, “Get out and never set foot in my line of sight again.” He did not return my hurried but snappy salute. Boy, what a way to start in a new unit.

All eyes were turned away from the leper—me—as I headed to the front door with my flying gear. I passed a door, and a major grabbed me and pulled me in his office. It was Buddy, the weapons officer for the unit and an old head. Buddy closed the door, introduced himself, and then told me what had just happened. It seems the Wolf FAC mission had evolved into a burr in the saddle of the “super ball” because they stole his best flight leads and they never came back to the unit. I assumed some personal insult happened along the way but never had that explained. Buddy said they really needed good pilots right now, and they hoped each new guy would help out by being a good one. He asked why I was interested in the FAC mission, and I was honest with him that I really like doing that stuff but would be addition to the squadron if that was what was needed. Buddy said the Ops Officer was not one to forgive my gaff, and I might do better somewhere else.

I went to the Wing Director of Operations office to see if I could be used somewhere else in the wing. My problems were too small for the lords of the wing to bother with, and I was told that 435th was my unit, and to go back to it. I did, and it was not very comfortable at first. The ops officer would not look at me, let alone talk to me. The assistant ops officer, Jerry Larson, became my point of contact if I needed anything, or Buddy, as I was in his flight. The effort to get me out of the unit continued, but the wing was not into temper tantrums at the squadron level.

The squadron commander was congenial about the conflict, it seemed. He seemed a little aloof but nice enough to challenge me to a racquetball game. I met him on the court and was soundly trounced to include several deep bruises from getting in his way. Instead of calling "hinder" or shooting around me, he hit me full on with the ball or lifted me off my feet with his paddle, then called hinder. I could barely walk the next day. Buddy said, "I see you played with the boss," and then we went on to other things.

I got through my ten-mission checkout with me leading three of the flights home as the leaders either got hit or lost their radios. I was also put in for a medal by a FAC for some particularly great work. I, not the leader, was singled out. Once "combat ready," I was sent on mostly single-ship missions to work with a Raven FAC in southern Laos. He and I worked together so well, dropping single bombs on his bad guys, he called the wing and asked for me by name. The single-ship nature of this fit with the ops officer's desire for me to not "pollute" the unit, and I loved the mission of dropping single bombs and carrying fifteen of them, a couple missions a day. After two months of the uneasy going in the unit, I was told by Buddy a guy wanted to talk to me about going to the Wolfs. The ops officer would be glad to

get rid of me, and the Wolf mission needed pilots. I met with the Papa FAC. He said they looked at me long and hard and usually wanted folks with more time in the theater and more time in the front seat, but I had passed muster, and the mission had just lost two pilots to a mistake on the part of one of them. Jerry was the leader, and he went down with the guy who screwed up. The new pilot had shot rockets in an area we were not allowed to be in, causing a big flap from the Raven FACs I had just spent a month or so working with. The new leader would check me out to make sure I would be able to do the mission.

I left the squadron with muted fanfare, much unlike Korat. No party, and my flying gear was dumped in the Wolf part of Personal Equipment. Buddy did hand me a squadron plaque quietly with my name and dates along with the engraving, "Captain Scud—How do I get into the Wolfs?"

Six months later the FACs were under fire from the wing commander for "independence" issues. Most of the wing's losses were from the Wolf mission, and the office disbanded. I was sent to the 25th TFS instead of back to my original unit. The excuse was they had to put some Wolfs in each unit because the wing king could not cancel the FAC missions 7th Air Force needed so much. I think I was not wanted back in the 435th and I certainly did not want to go back in the pool I had already shit in.



TOM GOLDMAN'S WAR STORY #2
(SUBJECT TO AN OLD FIGHTER PILOT'S MEMORY
OF EVENTS LONG PAST)

After my first tour in Southeast Asia (SEA) at Da Nang on TAC Rote in the 613th TFS, our squadron returned to Alex (England AFB, Louisiana) while the three other squadrons in our wing (401st Wing, Squadrons 612-615) continued their rotations. Our next ROTE was to Europe to pick up a Nuclear Alert Commitment at Aviano AB, Italy, for six months from September 1965 to February 1966. Shortly after our six-month rote at Da Nang, and our return to Alex, we were notified that the whole squadron, along with our Wing Headquarters, was to PCS as a unit move to Torrejon AB, Spain.

The Air Force had decided that the old TAC ROTE peacetime practice of sending stateside units overseas to cover alert commitments was wasteful. It made sense to send PCS one Wing to Europe to cover that Nuke Alert at Aviano and Incirlik Turkey. Our three squadrons (one from Alex, one from Myrtle Beach, and one from Homestead AFBs) were moved to Torrejon along with the 401st TFW Wing Headquarters. In addition to covering Aviano and Incirlik, we were to augment the F-100 wings in England

during command wide alerts and unit ORIs. The airlift requirement to ROTE to Aviano as well as Incirlik became a burden, so Aviano became a commitment for the units in Germany and England, and their second cousins at Torrejon kept the Incirlik Turkey Nuke alert for their very own. We felt the love.

The purpose was to stop all the TAC ROTEs to Europe, since more squadrons were needed in SEA on unit moves with personnel on one-year assignments. Our sister squadrons at Alex departed soon after for South Vietnam, as did squadrons from the 3rd TFW, also based at Alex. At one time, we had eight F-100 squadrons (401st and 3rd TFWs) at Alex busy coming and going on rotations overseas.

The three years (1966-69) we spent at Torrejon were a nice break except for thirty days at Incirlik, Turkey ROTEs (nuke alert again) four times a year. When not on alert with our flight, we flew low levels over much of Turkey, scaring the thousands of sheep herds on the upper highlands when we would pop over the ridgeline at about 500 feet and 420 knots. Another sight was to get the thousands of pink flamingos airborne off salt lake Tuz Golu in central Turkey.

What was more fun were routine deployments to Wheelus AB Libya (Tripoli) for air-to-ground weapons delivery at El Ouatia Range, thirty miles west of Tripoli in the Sahara. We also used the overwater gunnery range north of Wheelus for air-to-air training starting with shooting at the rag, then moving to the DART.

Suffice it to say that Wheelus was a wild place, marred only by the occasional presence in the bar from Lieutenant Colonel Khadafy and his minions sneering at us. The wonder

is that no one punched him out, mainly because we were too busy with other games. Some of us were there when Khadafy led a coup against the king (Idris, who was in the hospital in Malta). After a couple of tense days, we started redeployment to our home bases, and the USAF pulled out of Wheelus for good. Chappie James, eventually the Air Force's first black four-star, was the last commander there.

In the summer of 1969, I returned to SEA for assignment to Bien Hoa in the 90th TFS (Pair O' Dice), a former Alex squadron with its same wing, the 3rd TFW. Within a few months, the 90th was converted to A-37Bs, and as a high-time F-100 pilot with SEA experience, I was transferred to the 531st TFS (The Ramrods) as a flight commander. Heady stuff for a new slick wing captain. As an IP and flight lead, I flew regularly and mostly at night, since few of our pilots had much F-100 experience. We had more than our share of Majors who thought they ought to be flight commanders because of their Pentagon experience. Among other things, the 531st was famous for our squadron mascot—a twenty-one-foot Rock Python (named "Ramrod," of course) that roamed the squadron day and night. He got one live goose a week, and that kept him docile. He was not so popular with our sister squadrons when we would sneak him into the club for Wing Parties, and he would start roaming around, over flight boots, accompanied by inappropriate recriminations.

The missions were varied, but they were typically close air support (CAS) for the Marines in IV (four, for the AFA graduates) Corps (the southern one-third of South Vietnam) predominantly south of the Mekong River. The South Vietnam AOR started with I Corps at the border between the North and South Vietnams (Da Nang was there), then II Corps was the Northern Highlands with Cam Rahn Bay. III

Corps then covered the rest of SVN down to the Mekong. (That is my vague recollection of the areas—ask some Army troop if that bothers you.)

We ran a twenty-four-hour-a day operation, and our “Hooch” was our home with the bar open twenty-four hours a day, steaks in the freezer for the guys coming off alert. Down on the flight line, the squadrons ran a snack bar in the back of each squadron that matched any twenty-four-hour fast-food operation you could find in the States. We had walk-in freezers, grills hot all the time, locals providing cooking and cleaning services, all run by the two junior lieutenants in each squadron. These “Snackos” made a supply run to Saigon weekly for resupply (relatively safe during the day, but not safe at night). We made lots of money, which mostly went for freebies for our enlisted and officers, and a very generous monthly contribution to a local orphanage.

Despite these amenities, the Viet Cong (VC) were all around us and made their presence known several nights a week. We had bomb shelters just outside each hooch (all the squadrons’ hooches were inside one compound, about a block from the flight line). Our fighters were all in Tab Vee shelters that deflected most inbound rockets and mortars unless they got a lucky hit through the front or back opening.

We had a US Army 155mm and 105mm artillery unit about two blocks from our hooches. When a VC rocket launch was spotted on its ascent from just off the base, the control tower sounded a base alarm, and the artillery cut loose immediately in counterfire to preplanned target areas. They then adjusted fire as directed. But most rocket launches were fired on a timer, or remotely, and generally

results were inconclusive. The blast from a 155 just two blocks away will bring you from the deepest sleep to under your bed in record time before you are really awake. I recall that we did have one A-37B damaged by shrapnel while I was there. The most impressive rocket damage hit into the Raps' (90th TFS A-37B Squadron Ops) snack bar upright freezer. Blew bologna all over the place.

After you run to the bomb shelter a few times as a new guy, you generally just stay under your bunk under the theory of "Why die all tensed up?" Mortar attacks were infrequent because the Army and the ARVN patrolled around the base aggressively. On the few occasions attacks did happen, the Army Hueys (Army also had a Squadron of those at Bien Hoa) were airborne and aggressively pursued the shooters. We were fond of all of our US Army neighbors and made sure they came by our bars frequently for steaks and booze to their heart's content. This was also useful when we needed a quick ride to Saigon to catch a flight out of country.

The result of all this harassment was lost sleep, but after a short initiation period, most guys just rolled over and went back to sleep. The things we were doing on our missions were serious; this was just a bother. By the way, crew rest interruption was not a factor. If you could not adjust to this lifestyle, you probably needed an assignment as a duty officer in Saigon.

The life of a B Flight, slick wing, Flight Commander, IP, and Flight Lead was generally good. I flew at least once a day (most often at night when it was our squadron's turn for that mission). We did not have enough flight leads in our squadron because we had young guys out of the schoolhouse (whom we loved), FAIPs, and Air Staff

nonfighter background guys who needed a combat tour for career purposes.

This was the point in my Air Force career, as I approached two thousand flight hours in the F-100, and had the trust of my peers and superiors, that I recognized what I had been given by my mentors and teachers for the seven years of my Air Force flying training and experience. I became a very serious, demanding flight lead and IP. I was on my way to being a real “hardass.” I was proud of the younger pilots who had stepped up to their jobs, tolerated the senior pilots under my care who were giving their best, and ignored the straphangers. I made sure that my guys flying on the night CAS missions were in the first category. So, what were our typical missions for F-100 units in South Vietnam?

Close Air Support (CAS) for a Troops in Contact (TIC) with the enemy were the most valued missions that we usually got off a scrambled alert. TICs were much preferred over “tree blow downs” for a FAC searching for something. We kept two F-100s on alert for just such events. Arriving overhead in a TIC, we usually entered a stacked orbit of fighters waiting to be called in by the FAC for ordnance delivery and occasionally for strafing. Our FACs, some from Bien Hoa, and others scattered around smaller airfield around the country in close proximity to supported Army or Marine units, seemed always to be airborne. Our standard load was two 500-pound snake-eye (with retard fins) bombs and napalm. We generally put the bombs down first, followed by napalm on subsequent passes. Our experience was that nothing shuts down enemy fire like a napalm delivery. FACs would say the whole area would go quiet for a few minutes while the bad guys reassessed their devotion to Uncle Ho. The FAC was the boss, and he was very explicit

about the friendlies' location, our bomb attack vector, what ordnance he wanted delivered, and where it was to be placed. Their occasional visits to our bars were enthusiastic events.

FACS had a tough time coordinating with demanding flight leaders (often worried about their fuel state while in orbit) and getting the mission accomplished without harm to friendlies. The FACs expected the flight leaders to go the designated holding positions and wait their turn. Their patience was good, but not limitless. On many occasions, we were scrambled to IV Corps (Southern South Vietnam tip up to just south of the Mekong River). This was in the USMC Area of Responsibility and the area where John Kerry earned all of his combat experience and medals with the Riverine units. The Marines were supported by their own or USN fighters when they were available. On this day the FAC was working multiple flights on and off the target and he was clearly fully tasked. It was up to us in the fighters to be there, to be prepared, and to cooperate with the FAC because we damn sure did not want his job. Many FACs were fighter pilots stuck with that duty.

Those of us who had been in theater for a while had learned the geographical location of various holding points by their peculiar configuration when viewed from the air. On one day that I will always remember, we had been directed to the "Wagon Wheel," which is what one orbit point looked like because various branches of the Mekong had formed a large circle with spokes. While waiting our turn on one particular day, a flight of USN A-6s, having been diverted from another target area, checked in with the FAC.

Informing the FAC that they were hurting for fuel, the FAC then asked me if we had the fuel to delay. Responding

that we could wait, the FAC directed the Navy flight to the Wagon Wheel. The response was, "Where's that?" The FAC says find the southern branch of the Mekong and go upriver until you see where it branched into a large circular pattern. The response was, "Where is the Mekong?" After a pained silence, and as my wingman started doing aileron rolls, the FAC said, "Do you see a large river?"

"No" came the response.

"Do you see the coastline of South Vietnam?" asked the FAC.

Again the response was "No."

After a pause, and restraining his temper admirably, the FAC asked, "Look up; do you see the sun?"

Again a pause and the Navy guy said, "Never mind. We will dump them at sea."

The FAC then said, "Good luck with that. Out."

At Bien Hoa our most demanding mission was Night CAS. I personally grew to prefer the night mission because once you got over the challenges, you could discern the positions of the friendlies and the enemy from the ground fire. I had no problem being assigned to night duty because the strap hangers were hesitant, and there were not enough experienced flight leads in the squadron anyway. For example, I once flew thirty-two nights in a row, twice a night. On the thirty-second night I was pretty tired, and I made a switchology error and bombed off the flare pods. This was a no-no, and when I reported that to the Command

Post, they wanted to know if I was going to tell my Commander or should they wake him up and inform him. I told them it would be my pleasure to do so. I called him (about 0400) and told him what I had done. I think I interrupted other activities, because he told me to see him the next day. When I did, he did not remember our conversation and the Ops Officer, a good guy, told me to forget it.

Back to the mission report. During the day you often could not see the ground fire, but at night that is no problem. The IV Corps area was the most active, since helicopters and USAF fighters were plentiful enough to take care of that mission in the other Corp Areas in central and north South Vietnam. In IV Corps, the Marines were in very hostile, flat terrain, predominantly rice paddies interrupted by small earthen barriers every fifty yards or so to contain a rice crop. There were villages there, of course, but the farmers were either VC or terrorized by VC. Tree lines did exist, but over the ages a lot of them had been eliminated to favor the rice crops. A Marine patrol would sometimes begin a sweep that called for us to support with a FAC and USAF fighters, but sometimes that patrol would get trapped into a firefight from which they had difficulty disengaging.

Arriving at just such a situation with a flight of four, the FAC directed us to immediately set up a close-in orbit and begin bomb deliveries under his direction on a restricted heading to prevent overflight of the friendlies. After we had laid down our bombs, he got permission from the ground commander to come within a very close range of their forward line (behind a paddy wall). They were in TIC within twenty-five to fifty yards of the VC, so we made restricted heading strafe passes with opposing (180 degree out) attack headings firing two guns (of four) at a time in order

to prolong the attack and to encourage the VC to back off. After that, the FAC had us make single passes, dropping our napalm from the bottom of the attack line, one after the other, while our Marines jumped up and ran quickly to their rear and relative safety, where they could set up an offensive, not defensive, field of fire. The FAC worked several flights in this fashion until the VC withdrew.

Now, compound that experience at night. We generally just used two ships for night CAS to keep it simple. The F-100 Super Sabre was my love, but she was an unforgiving lover. The instrumentation was steam gauges with weapons switchology that literally required selection by feel, as the switches were tucked away under your left elbow. Too much head movement could lead to vertigo, which is clearly not recommended at night as you are going to get that anyway on recovery (on instruments) from weapons delivery. We used ten-to-thirty-degree passes depending on weather and visibility. Oh yes! I forgot to mention that the monsoon season added stress to the mission.

With no metropolitan areas to light up reference points out to the horizon, the definition of a “dark night” is IV Corps at night. Working with a FAC who has developed a target, or a TIC, we arrive on the scene with our own flare pods, for which we have practiced working underneath for weapons delivery. The FAC would generally put a Log Flare on the ground that would give us a reference point; then we would set up attack headings on our compass in the cockpit (having checked for precession). The first pass at altitude in a racetrack pattern was at base altitude for a single flare drop (I think we had four flares in each of two pods), and the FAC would designate how far left, right, long, or short the weapons impact point would be for our wingman. FAC would mark the desired impact point with a Willy Pete rocket and

then clear us “hot” when he confirmed the ROE was being met (they did that night and day). We continued this pattern, trying to stay 180 degrees opposite of each other in the pattern. We alternated flare drops with weapons delivery as needed. Navigation lights were out most of the time unless we needed to confirm position to our wingman or vice versa.

The interesting thing about night weapons delivery in the F-100 was that we had to keep our instrument lights at the dimmest possible setting (red lights) in order to make a good weapons delivery. F-100 pilots had grown used to a compressibility problem with our altimeter (or some other technical term that better describes it, and I do not remember) that caused us to fly and pickle off a bomb seven hundred feet lower than the altimeter indicated in order to correct for the error. Added to that, there was an altimeter lag as we flew down the delivery pattern for which we had to compensate. The effect was that for ten-degree bomb delivery of snake eyes at 1,000 feet release, we pickled at 300 feet indicated in a 10-degree dive and bottomed out around 0 feet indicated. Of course, we were really not recovering that low, but flying on instruments on the darkest night you can imagine, pilots were dependent solely on self-discipline. Those who could not adjust to that routinely dropped their weapons short of the target. Puckering.

Some smart guys may remember these details better than I do, but that is how I remember it. Following delivery, we initiated a straight ahead 4G pull going from visual reference to instrument reference and flew back into the box pattern on instruments. At every corner, I checked my wingman's position because it was so easy to lose

reference, and I was responsible for both his safe, effective weapons delivery as well as getting him back to Bien Hoa.

When we were safely on our way home on day missions, I often gave my better wingmen the lead for recovery so that they could prepare for their own leadership tests down the road. I remember my first flight at Alex with my Ops Officer. After rejoining off the range and safely on his wing, he hand signaled that he had radio failure and directed me to take the lead for a formation landing back at Alex. Talk about surprised. We were above an undercast and there was a 700 foot (good visibility) ceiling at Alex. We did a TACAN approach to the runway. After landing roll-out, his radio had supposedly been jarred back to life. He never debriefed me on this incident. But later, my flight commander asked me if anything unusual had happened that day. Our squadron commander had a strict rule that wingman never said anything but "Two" (pronounced "Tuwp") or, "Lead, you are on fire." So my reply was: "No, Sir." He just smiled.

Another mission we had was Ranch Hand Escort. A unit of C-123s routinely sprayed Agent Orange in heavily forested areas to defoliate. Our job was to weave above them in front to provide strafe where enemy reaction was present. The C-123s flew low and slow without onboard weapons. While they did take ground fire, and sometimes called us in to react, generally there was not much accomplished on these missions from my perspective. And no, I never claimed Agent Orange Disability.

Our missions in III and II Corps were generally along infiltration routes under a FAC's control, and occasionally around an Alpha Site, where our troops were in a protective fort but under enemy attack. Again, we worked with FACs

providing fire support as directed. There were times when this mission went on for several days.

In my earlier experiences at Da Nang, I had been on bombing missions (45 degree, 750-pound GP bombs) in Mu Gia Pass, and Ban Karai Passes from Laos into North Vietnam, some in daylight and some at night. Not knowing any better, we devised our own tactics—remember this was 1964-65. The C-123 guys at Da Nang agreed to support us with flare drops as long as one of our pilots flew in the cargo bay and pushed the flares out of the tube with a broom handle. The tubes were trapped by the aft door lowered down to the ramp onto them. Then the fighters would set up a 45-degree dive pattern plunging down into the pass for bomb drops on prebriefed targets. Recovering from such a pass at night was straight ahead because we had mountains to the left and right that formed the valley. I think the only thing we proved was that gravity worked, and our tactics needed some improvement. That is how we did it in 1965, but finding myself back in country in 1969, the tactics had become rational.

At this point, my memory banks are dying. But on a personal note, the earlier leadership and tactical aviation training and the discipline I had learned from my earlier squadron experiences and teachers had prepared me well for what I was doing at Bien Hoa. The feeling that I was being relied upon, and had leadership responsibilities, never left me and was carried over to my next combat experience at Udorn RTAFB, Thailand in 1971-72. I was also to learn that a single-seat fighter pilot attitude is a great attribute to have when I launched into the famous F-4 Phantom with a backseater, FCS! But seriously, since those days, my friends have all been fighter pilots. I have many acquaintances, and

few friends due to my unfortunate personality, but all of my friends are fighter pilots



THE "LAST" WOLF MISSION SCUD YATES

After a "normal" morning Wolf mission to Laos, Wolf 7 met the two of us on the porch leading to the headquarters building and our Wolf shop. He announced that the two of us had just flown the "last" Wolf mission. I laughed, but he didn't smile. After we took off that morning a team of folks, with cops along, arrived at the Wolf Shop, took it apart, and locked the door. The PM missions were cancelled, our Photo Intel shop was dismantled, the Task Force Alpha (TFA) Intel officer had been sent back to NKP and there would be no more Wolf missions. We were directed to go to the regular Intel shop and debrief like normal crews. Oh, and any meeting, anywhere of more than two Wolves was not allowed. The three of us on the porch was technically a "foul," but someone had to tell us.

This was just the end of process of getting rid of the wing's highest risk mission, the mission with the most hits and bailouts. Of course, we had been doing a mission for 7th AF that had us flying over the border daily and writing a separate report to two generals at 7th AF. That mission was supposed to be unknown to even our wing CC, and the

reports were sent under his signature, but he couldn't read them.

Well, we put our gear away and went back to the squadron. That wouldn't work for me, as they had thrown me out.

Panic ensued that evening when the Frag arrived with all five Wolf missions. It seemed the wing king could not cancel a mission 7th AF liked. The missions were apportioned to the three day flying squadrons. We were doled out to them to fly the lines with no place to get out mission data and film and no place to do the planning. Because we were pretty current, we could sort out who should be flying with whom in the short run. I was sent to 25th because they "needed" a certain level of Wolf.

The wing king would not let us fly with Wolf call signs. This really confused us, and the outside world. Who the hell was a Musket FAC? I ended up checking in with, "This is Musket 01 but I am really Wolf 03. What do you have for me today?" I would check out as a Wolf and become a Musket to return to base.

Scheduling problems were handled with guys being traded back and forth between squadrons so we could keep experience in each cockpit for the missions. Getting a plan together was pretty hard, but Intel caught on to what we needed and had a separate team formed to gather our stuff and accept our debriefs without really telling the upper management. The missions suffered mightily, but we did our job until the big war broke out again and the DO decided to do our scheduling for us.

With one or two missions a day out of the 25th, our routine settled down until the Squadron Ops office called me in to chat. I loved the guy, and he had been a prior Papa Wolf. He was taking care of us and keeping a “shit shield” between us Wolfs and the higher-ups. I never fought his decisions. “Scud, I had a dream last night, and Jim is going to get hurt if he flies any more Wolf missions.” I could not believe my ears. He said Jim was grounded from Wolf missions. I asked if Jim knew this. He said, “No” and was telling me first so I could start training someone else, a three-month process at best. He was solid and could not be moved. I paused going out the door and asked if the dream had me getting hurt too, since we flew together. He said, “You will be just fine.” Jim did not fly another Wolf mission, but three days later his aircraft had total hydraulic failure and the crew flew it a hundred miles out of enemy territory by using burner and manual rudder to fly big-ass rolls until finally bailing out over Thailand north of our base. Neither was hurt, but they were sick from the rough maneuvering. I asked the OPSO if that counted for the dream and could I have him back. He said that was not it, and I better look forward and not back. Jim, BTW, was as mystified by the grounding as much as I.

When we were in the buildup to go North again, there were some special missions scheduled to go into the North in force and clean out the built-up supplies and trucks just outside of Laos. I was fragged with the instructions to develop targets up the road from Mugia Pass inside North Vietnam. I was getting a sixteen ship in my third period, and I had to have “good targets” for them. We studied all the newest photos and had perfect weather. I had tried to call the flight leader at Udorn, but he couldn’t be made available. We took off at first light and for two hours, with a break to refuel, we found everything within twenty miles

along that road. We planned two aim points for each four-ship flight and would ask them to hold over the "Dog's Head" inside Laos. I wanted one four-ship every four minutes so I could put down smoke for each as they arrived. We had some great targets and had not seen any ground fire of any consequence. No SAMs were noted in the area by Intel or us visually.

We got the inbound call and heard the gaggle check in with fuel checks. When they finally contacted us, they were twenty miles away, headed right at us. I gave them a quick overview and told them to hold at the Dog's Head and call the first four-ship inbound. The flight lead then told me this would be "one pass, haul ass," although I had asked for two passes out of each flight on different targets. I said, "Fine. Call the first four-ship inbound."

He said, "It will be all of us at once and one pass."

I asked why, and he said it was "high threat." I countered once with giving the part of the target brief again, where we told them there was no threat. I looked up and here they came. They had not made a circle at the Dog's Head and were about five miles away now, smoking at us. All I could do was light the burners and get out in front until they called a "tally" then started marking the targets. I started at the first and just kept "bouncing" from one target down to the next. When I was marking the third one, they were already rolling in on the first one, so I marked one more of the eight I had planned and pulled up to see what they were doing. The radio was a solid wall of in and off calls and burners were all going as they jinked their way back over the border. Bombs were all over the place, and I didn't see but a few hit on a target. They rejoined in a circle over the pass area in Laos, where there were some real threats.

Guys were lost and screaming on the radio and some ended up heading home in ones and twos. One of planes called me when there was break in the chatter and very apologetically said I could send the result to the wing after we landed. It was not the flight leader talking.

I remembered a mission like this during my first tour. Our wing commander led it and started a fuel check at FAC check-in also, but we were a twenty-four-ship and the checks were still going on as we flew past the slow FAC on into North Vietnam. The CC's backseater had a clue and spotted the FAC, and when the CC was holding down the mic and saying "er...er...er...er..." the backseater, taking advantage of the open mic, told the trailing four ships where the targets were and they rolled in.

What a waste of a potentially great mission this was!



A TASTE OF LAM SONG 719 T. C. SKANCHY

Lam Song 719 was a large South Vietnamese ground-and-air operation that began January 30, 1971, and officially concluded on March 6, 1971. The operation was named after a Vietnamese village where a legendary Vietnamese hero, Le Loi, led a crushing defeat on an invading Chinese army in 1427.

Lam Song was a South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) planned-and-led operation without any US advisers or ground support. The operation would have unlimited US air support, and I was there flying some pretty tough and demanding missions. The objective of the operation was to enter Laos from Khe Sanh, press up Route 9 to the strategic Ho Chi Minh Trail city of Tchepone, destroying and disrupting the North Vietnamese Army's supplies and the roughly thirty thousand North Vietnamese (NVA) troops in the area. The South Vietnamese employed an army of roughly thirty thousand men.

The joker in the deck was that the NVA had the detailed plans of Lam Song 719, and as the ARVN buildup and preparations were made, the NVA was making preparations

to give all involved a hot reception. All along Route 9, the NVA had prepared bunkers, automatic weapons, artillery, and most of all, from my point of view, heavy antiaircraft weapons. It would be a hot time for all.

The ARVN strategy was to build artillery fire support bases on key mountain peaks to support the slowly moving armor-and-truck column that was heading toward Tchepone. For a few days the operation went well; then the NVA started to block the ARVN mobile force with fierce firefights. To make matters worse for all, there were no American ground forward air controllers (FACS) with the ARVN, only airborne FACS. The NVA understood this, so their tactic was to engage the ARVN as close to the friendlies as possible to discourage close air support.

I had flown a fair number of missions supporting the operation. About a month into Lam Song 719, I was in a two-ship of F-4s with low altitude, low angle, weapons aboard—500-pound “Snake Eye” bombs. My wingman and I, and our backseaters, were directed to a particularly fiercely contested area on Route 9. As we descended and took the FAC’s briefing, I was stunned by what we saw. It struck me as the reverse of what Toto and Dorothy experienced in *The Wizard of Oz*. It was like we were watching a black-and-white movie. Clouds of smoke, fire, and exploding shells were everywhere. I could actually smell the burning cordite in the cockpit although I was wearing an oxygen mask. I felt like we were at the very gates of hell looking into that inferno.

The airborne FAC was imploring us to destroy two Soviet-made PT-76 tanks that were overrunning a friendly position. I’ll never forget his briefing. It was like a football coach trying to rally his team at halftime. Throwing caution

aside, I realized that the only way to see the tanks in the poor visibility was to get down in the “dirt” and silhouette those mean-looking beasts by flying up the road. I nailed both of them on that pass. As the tanks exploded, the FAC let out a shout of glee and said those friendly troops would live to see another day. We quickly worked another target and got out of Dodge. By the way, since the enemy was above us on those mountainsides, we were also getting “hosed” from above. A very uncomfortable feeling, to say the least.

Getting into friendly airspace, we always did battle damage checks. “OB’s” F-4 had holes in it, and he was leaking fuel and hydraulic fluid. We headed for Da Nang, the nearest good recovery base. OB had to use emergency systems to get his gear and tail hook down to take an approach end barrier. He safely recovered as I escorted him down to landing; then I went onto Phu Cat with my backseater.

“OB” wrote a book, *The Hungry Tigers*, and he sent me an autographed copy. To be honest, I never looked at his book until September 24, 2010. Much to my amazement, he described this mission, writing, “Capt. Tom Skanchy was the first bird through on each pass and did some real good work with his high drags.” (p. 182) Thanks “OB,” those were kind comments.

At the same time as 719 was taking place, the NVA was putting pressure on us in the Central Highlands. There were two Special Forces camps right next to each other to block entrance into South Vietnam from Laos. The camps were the typical triangular defense setup; I flew several day support missions to those camps. On the first day, I was dropping high drag bombs between the two camps very carefully

because they were so close to one another. That night between my two missions supporting those camps the grunts were defended by a B-52 strike. Much to my shock on the second day, as I was attacking the NVA as I had the day before, I found the B-52 strikes had turned the landscape between the two camps into a moonscape. How the BUFs ever bombed with such precision was beyond me.

The next week, we were still working the same Route 9 area, now trying to help the ARVN get out of "Indian country" and back to Khe San. The NVA had pretty much destroyed the ARVN's vehicles, and the ARVN troops were coming out on helicopter skids. I was doing close-in work along Route 9 one morning, and when I pulled off the target, I saw a string of ARVN UH-1s. I flew pretty close to them and was shocked to see the number of troops sitting on the skids. The UH-1s looked like they were overloaded by at least a factor of four. "Oh," I thought, "this is a real disaster in the making."

The same week, "Doc" and his backseater were shot down in that area. Since they were from our fighter wing, we put on a big effort to pick them up. Neither of the men were hurt but were almost on top of the NVA bunkers and gun emplacements in the area. They were separated by about a half mile or so. They did the right thing and got away from their parachutes, so they were hard to detect.

In the general area where the two men were, we dropped CBU-52s, a dry, powdery substance encased in a bombshell. On impact with the ground, the shell cracks open and spreads the stuff. Just a small amount of the chemical will cause a human to have severe flulike symptoms, totally incapacitating the person. We put a perimeter of the powder around their general area, hoping to keep NVA search teams

away from them. The area started to take on the appearance of Alta, Utah, in January with all of that white substance on the ground. Those two cool dudes spent the night lying very still. The WSO claimed that some NVA soldiers got out of their bunkers that night to urinate, almost hitting him. Nerves of steel, right?

The next morning, we escorted the Jolly Green helicopters to the recovery site. Actually, there was the primary helicopter and a backup ten miles or so out of the battle area. I couldn't get over how quiet the area was—no shooting, no reaction from the NVA. Was this going to be a trap? Probably so. As the helicopter sent the winch down to get the WSO, nothing happened. The Jolly Green then flew over to "Doc" and started to winch him up. Just as Doc was being helped in the door, the whole jungle floor erupted with automatic weapons. At that moment, I was right over the top of the Jolly Green as holes started to appear in the fuselage and the external fuel tanks mounted on the sponsons. Thankfully, nobody on the Jolly Green was injured. The helicopter was able to get away from the high threat area and made a controlled landing a few miles away. The backup Jolly Green then picked up all of the airmen. We had to bomb the downed Jolly Green to pieces because it couldn't be salvaged.

The WSO was a big Irish American who probably played football in college. He was a gentleman and reminded me of the late, great Merlin Olsen. He went on to pilot training and was assigned to checkout as an F-4 aircraft commander at MacDill AFB, Florida, where I was an instructor. It was my pleasure to have him as a student.

Lam Song 719 resulted in about fifteen thousand casualties on each side. The ARVN lost a significant amount

of equipment plus highly trained soldiers. Although only partially successful, the operation set the NVA back a couple of years before it could mount the invasion of South Vietnam that so sadly snuffed out the freedom of those people.



THE "LAVELLE RAIDS" MIKE RIDNOUER

As I recall, in mid-to-late 1971, units were tasked to initiate strikes against targets in North Vietnam. This was unusual because officially we couldn't strike targets in the North unless they were an immediate threat, "Protective Reaction Strikes." These tasked strikes were called the Lavelle Raids because the man who directed the raids was General Lavelle. Being just a Captain in a war controlled by unknown military and civilians a long way above my pay grade, all I was concerned with was striking the targets I was told to strike. If the target was in downtown Hanoi or in Timbuktu, it made no difference to me. I recall being in two of the Lavelle Raid missions. One struck a target near a ferry the North used to transport supplies to bad guys in the South, and the second struck Bai Thong, a MiG base.

The strike on the ferry is memorable because one aircraft in the flight of four had one hung bomb after we attacked the target, with no visible reaction from the North. The tactics called for one pass to deliver all the weapons, exit from the attack east to the coast, and feet wet, turn south, and exit through the South. One pass, haul ass. Hung or unexpended ordnance would normally have been

jettisoned once the flight was feet wet. The flight lead decided that since our attack provoked no reaction, he would take all four F-4s back to the target area, and the aircraft with the hung bomb would reattack the target. Not a smart plan. This time the North's gunners and SAM operators were wide awake and launched all manner of SAMs and AAA at the flight. We managed to escape with no battle damage or aircraft lost, but we had unnecessarily exposed four F-4s with eight souls on board to a serious threat with serious intentions. The aircraft with the hung bomb ended up dumping it in the Udorn jettison area.

The Bai Thong strike was equally as exciting. As I recall, the wing generated twenty-four aircraft, six flights of four, for the mission. The tactic was supposed to be a quick attack by a large strike package and put Bai Thong runway and operations area out of business for some time. An earlier strike by a flight of four had managed to miss the target completely. Weather didn't cooperate for the twenty-four F-4 package, and a visual strike was out of the question. The backup tactic was a medium altitude, level delivery in resolution cell pod formation. LORAN would be used to determine the bomb release point. Exit from the target area called for us to proceed north, straight ahead, until well away from the target and the threat, then a left turn through west to south for the return to Udorn. I was number three in the third flight, and the prospects of flying level at a medium altitude across a heavily defended airfield was not my idea of a good time. To provide reasonable protection against radar guided SAMs, pod formation had to be flown precisely by every member of the flight. It was a difficult formation to fly, especially while maneuvering for an attack and keeping a look-out for SAMs and AAA. However, as is expected, a Captain F-4 driver salutes, lowers the seat, and away we go. As we approach the target, the area looked

like a Fourth of July display. Clouds below us prevented us from observing what effect the flights ahead of us were having on the target, but the Gomers were having a heyday launching SAMs. I don't recall seeing any AAA, and the MiGs stayed on the ground. Either the ECM pods and the pod formations were working, or the SAM operators were entry level because none were guiding on our F-4s. There is no way to describe the flight of a SAM as pretty, but to watch it fail to guide and explode harmlessly well above the flight was great. Our four-ship released our weapons and headed north, but the flight lead must have forgotten the part of the scenario where we didn't turn south until out of the threat area. Shortly after bomb release, my flight lead started a left-hand turn, catching the other three flight members totally by surprise because we were still right in the heart of the SAM engagement zone. I was all elbows and assholes trying to stay in formation and keeping eyeballs out, so I could visually acquire SAMs and evade one if I had to. Turning the flight blanked out the ECM pods and all those taxpayer dollars spent on jammers and all the energy it took to fly the pod formation were for naught. Without ECM, even for just a few seconds, the operators could see the individual aircraft on radar and the SAMs went from ballistic to guided. I, and probably the other two in the flight, screamed on the radio for the lead to roll out. I watched a SAM that was coming up behind our flight, but obviously not guiding on us, change course and guide directly toward our flight, now guided. Sitting where I was, I was certain that it was guiding on me. Even an evasion maneuver at this point was near futile. To be effective the pilot had to place the SAM at 10 or 2 and at the right time, make a hard turn to cause the missile to overshoot. With the missile at 6, in end game and now guiding, an evasive maneuver was going to be tough. A maneuver at that point would do little beyond keeping us from dying all puckered up, but that was little relief. The lead heard the call, immediately rolled out before

the flight was totally out of position, and the missile blew up just behind us. My guess is the missile lost guidance and exploded when some computer thought it should be in lethal range. It was a pretty sight from the standpoint that the missile caused no damage to any of the F-4s. However, I remember that looking down the throat of an SA-2 as it exploded in all different shades of black and orange, accented by reds, it was one of the ugliest sights I'd ever seen. Not one I'd hope to see again.

The reason the wing was tasked with the twenty-four-ship package was that the previous, smaller package missed the target entirely, even though they had good weather. A few politics were played in the flight that missed. Someone decided that since targets like this didn't come along every day, most of the flight should be field graders. The only company grade pilot was a Captain flying his Sawadee flight, his last mission in theater. I wasn't privy to the tactics they planned, but during a chance encounter at headquarters after the mission, I overheard a four star general, not Lavelle, scream, "And whose stupid, goddamned tactics were those?" So much for the argument that no one knew what General Lavelle was up to.

How many of these missions were actually tasked to the fighter wings was never fully disclosed. At my level, I had no reason to know or doubt that they were duly tasked by all the unknown unknowns. Evidently, there was, in fact, some discrepancy in just who knew and who told who to do what.

I never had the pleasure of meeting General Lavelle, but supposedly he either told or insinuated to flight leads that these missions were to be debriefed as reactions to threats against US forces. Our mothers told us that telling the truth was *always* the best policy, and they were right.

Tell one lie, and it'll end up biting you right in the ass. An intel debrief puke noticed discrepancies in the way some flights were flown versus the way they were debriefed, and he raised his concerns above the wing level. That's when the shit hit the fan. Everyone lined up to deny they knew anything, except General Lavelle. Now, I know at least one four-star knew because he sat in on the debrief, and I heard him question the tactics, rather loudly and profanely.

Lavelle was commander of 7th Air Force headquartered at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Republic of Vietnam, and was responsible for the conduct of the air war. He was removed from his position in 1972 and forced to retire. The Senate refused to confirm Lavelle's retirement as a four-star or three-star general, and he retired at his permanent rank of two-star.

On August 4, 2010, President Obama nominated Lavelle posthumously for promotion back to the grade of general on the Air Force retired list in light of the release of declassified information that showed that Lavelle had been authorized by President Nixon to conduct the bombing missions. The nomination to restore his four-star rank was recommended by the Air Force Board for Correction of Military Records, the Secretary of Defense, and the Secretary of the Air Force. The Senate Armed Services Committee declined to vote on the nomination, allowing it to expire without action at the end of the legislative session.

In retrospect, it seems to this fighter pilot that, while General Lavelle may have told some troops to be less than honest in reporting the strikes, he was probably directed to do that and then was abandoned by the nation's most senior military and civilian leadership. After the dust settled, and he retired into obscurity, Lavelle wrote no "tell all"

memoirs, and he gave no interviews to Matt Lauer, Katie Couric, or Wolf Blitzer. He quietly recognized he'd been abandoned, and he took one for the team. The nation has never made it right, and it needs to. And the nation needs to take this as a lesson learned and never allow it to happen again.



NIGHT MIG CHASE MIKE RIDNOUER

Late January 1972, and I was leading a night air-to-air CAP mission with an orbit in far Northern Laos. My F-4 was a Combat Tree bird with the expert, Gary (I think I have the name right), in the backseat. I'd flown with Tree before several times and was impressed with how well it really worked, but Gary was the expert. The wingman was another Captain flying in seven-mile trail stacked high, so I was visible on his radar just outside the ground return line. The first little while was quiet, but it was a beautiful night, no clouds and a full moon, very bright. Generally, there would be some warning when MiG activity was about to begin. The North Vietnamese height finder radar would start paying close attention, and you could hear their distinctive rhythm on the RHAW gear. GCI radar would be checking azimuth, again with a distinctive rhythm. The more often the check on our height and azimuth, the closer we were to something about to happen. That night was no exception. The Gomers were hot after our flight with GCI and height finders, and we were on the edge of our ejection seats waiting for that first Bulls-Eye call.

There it was, Blue Bandit, a MiG-21, headed north, probably out of Bai Thong, close to the Fish's Mouth, headed somewhere around Hanoi, maybe Yen Bai. I'm sure the intel community knew the base, pilot's name, his hours for the month, and his call sign. Information sharing between intel and the operators was a one-way street.

Tree confirmed the threat location and we were engaged. No need to maneuver for an ID; Tree did that for us. Just get the F-4 into missile parameters and fire. My wingman lost me in the first thirty seconds, so I directed him to leave orbit and find a tanker. No reason for him to be in the flounder mode trying to find me in North Vietnam. He wasn't going to be in position to support, and I didn't want him shot down.

It soon became apparent my plan to cut off the MiG wasn't going to work. The geometry wasn't there. The best we could do without putting ourselves smack in the middle of a SAM ring, which is what the bad guys had in mind, was to get as close behind the MiG as we could, knowing the Gomers wouldn't fire if we were close, hoping the MiG driver would make a mistake and turn when he got low on fuel and had to land. That would allow us to close to a reasonable range. We also expected another MiG to be in the area with the one we were following being the bait and his buddy staying low out of our radar coverage, ready to jump. Gary was doing his good work in the backseat with the radar and the Tree, and I was marveling at how the weather made it almost like flying during the day. The mountains and valleys were clearly visible, and we were able to fly low enough to avoid some of the bad guys' radar.

We gained on the MiG, but it was a slow process. It wasn't long, and we were flying near a fairly well lit piece of

real estate. Between the ground lights and the moon's illumination, it became obvious we were close to Hanoi, and the presence of two rivers, the Red and the Black, confirmed it. Two seconds of risk analysis was all it took to realize we needed to let the MiG go and head back to the relative safety of Laos. I communicated my plan to Gary, and he gave me a heading. As soon as we turned and got spacing on the MiG, the RHAW lit up. The SAM sites were trying their best to get a shot off. I don't know if it was blind luck or the excellent conditions that allowed us to fly pretty low that prevented a launch. We had a scope full of warning but no moving triplets and no visuals of a launch. There was a certain pucker factor and some heavy breathing going on in those two cockpits, I can assure you.

We had maintained communication with our controller, and I notified him I was going to need a tanker pretty quick. I hadn't used AB because, one, I wanted to preserve fuel and, two, I didn't want to light up our position for the bad guys with our AB. Even out of AB, the Phantom drinks a lot of fuel. The controller relayed that the MiG had also turned, and he was now in pursuit of me. Another, and the best, reason to not light the burner. I was pretty sure his radar wasn't going to find me as low as we were flying, so he would have a real problem finding me and getting into firing position. He seemed to be closing a lot faster than I had estimated. MiG-21 flight control issues generally precluded MiGs from going much faster than 500 knots on the deck unless he was flying one of the newer models with flight-control boost. Again the controller suggested I use AB to stop his closure. I declined, not wanting to give the MiG driver an opportunity to pick me up visually and with no AI light on the RHAW gear I was confident he didn't have his radar on us. It wasn't long, although it seemed like an eternity, and the MiG must have hit bingo fuel because the

controller reported he had reversed back north. The really good news was the controller had done super work and managed to have a tanker waiting for us as soon as we left North Vietnam. Those controllers were really good.

The whole event probably took less than twenty minutes, a lot less time than it took to write, and at the time it was a lot more exciting than it is to read. Chances to bag a MiG didn't come along every day. Less than a month later, Bob Lodge and Roger Locher were able to down a MiG-21 when the Gomers tried to lure them into a trap on a night mission. That time the cat-and-mouse game the MiGs played backfired.

For us, we refueled, rejoined our wingman, finished the CAP, RTB'd to Udorn, spent the rest of the night debriefing intel, hit the Club for a meal, got some sleep, and were back to do it again the next night, if we were lucky.



TCHEPONE, LAOS T. C. SKANCHY

One of the repeated nightmares I have is of the campaign by Americans and South Vietnamese against a major North Vietnamese logistical center at Tchepone, Laos, starting in late January 1971 and ending at the end of March 1971. Tchepone was the junction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and Route 9. It would be the equivalent of the intersection of I-95 and I-40 in the United States. In short, it was hugely important to the North Vietnamese pursuit of that war.

I flew combat missions at Tchepone during this period and after. The campaign was called Lamsong 719 and was to be an all-South Vietnamese combat operation. Well, not quite; we lost more than a hundred helicopters and a dozen or so fighters in that operation, not to mention losing more than a hundred Americans. The South Vietnamese took hellacious losses there. At the end of March, the nominal commander, a South Vietnamese general, declared all objectives reached, and we ended the campaign. Our South Vietnamese allies and we did not do so well there.

At Da Nang Air Base, I flew combat missions with a GIB (guy in back), an old Air Force major—Art. This crusty but great warrior actually was a navigator on Douglas A-26s, flying out of Tchepone when we “owned” the place. By 1966, “they” had the real estate, and things got very hot for us.

You know, I don’t know how the US military got so proficient in hiding all of those great warriors who don’t “look good in the shower” or have the social graces the general officers’ wives approve of, but they are the cornerstones of our combat capabilities during wartime. They are usually allowed to retire as majors, if they are lucky. Art was one of them.

The North Vietnamese had moved SAMs into the Tchepone area but also had serious numbers of 130mm, 100mm, 85mm, 37mm, and a host of automatic weapons for a very heavy defense. We called them “The Guns of Tchepone.”

When I was the Wing Weapons Officer at Phu Cat and Da Nang, I had the absurd additional duty of a check pilot. I checked new F-4 pilots out on combat missions. It was like having an electrician check out “Old Sparky” before an execution in the electric chair. I rode along in a lot of “qualification” flights, and I assure you that I never failed one pilot. As far as I was concerned, all those pilots were approved to go get themselves killed—but without me.

My boss at Phu Cat was the Deputy for Operations in the 12th Fighter Wing. Hailing from Oxford, Mississippi, he spent a career in Air Defense Command flying F-86Ds, F-101s, F-102s, F-104s, and F-106s. He wasn’t an “air-to-mud” pilot, and when he flew combat missions, which was rare, I

would end up leading him into combat to keep him “out of harm’s way.” We dubbed him “The Sheriff” because he looked like and acted like Jackie Gleason in the *Smokey and the Bandit* movies, sans the mustache.

The wing was assigned a new Assistant Deputy for Operations, a Colonel Smith (not his real name) fresh from being a U-2 pilot and previous to that a B-52 pilot. Smith cut a dashing looking figure, tall, slim, and debonair. He really was the Clark Gable type. A very nice guy, but not a fighter-pilot type.

One morning, the Sheriff called me into his office. “TC,” he said, “Ah want you to check out Colonel Smith.” “Oh my gosh,” I thought. The next series of missions was assigned to attack Tchepone, not my idea of a good check ride.

Those 7th Air Force planners (pukes) at Saigon were all crazy. They planned the missions to be convenient for Air Force maintenance. The missions were mostly scheduled for six-hour breaks between launches. The first missions were the “dawn patrol.” The second missions were about six hours later, and the night missions were about six hours after that. Not great tactics for the good guys. Great news for the bad guys. This meant our attacks on Tchepone were early in the morning, when the sun was just coming up, or toward sunset. In either time of day, the attackers (us) were perfectly highlighted and it was most difficult to see the targets because of lighting, smoke, and haze.

So the next morning I briefed the mission, a four-ship attack on specified targets at Tchepone, with Smith leading the four-ship with me in his backseat (GIB or in this case, IP). I briefed simple tactics and three passes to drop the bombs.

I normally briefed “one pass and haul ass,” but Smith had some squares to fill. How utterly ridiculous.

We got to Tchepone after an inflight refueling, identified the targets and attacked. We usually “jinked” like hell to throw the radar-aimed guns off of their mark. The sky became full of flames and smoke in no time. In half of a prayer, half of taking the Lord’s name in vain, I said, “for G--s. sake, Colonel Smith, jink, move the aircraft around.” He didn’t seem to hear me. He was task saturated. Coming around for the third pass he said, “Look, TC, it’s getting overcast.” “Colonel,” I said, “those aren’t clouds, that is flak (smoke from the antiaircraft fire).” He about pulled the wings off of the F-4 from then on, jinking the aircraft.

If Jane Fonda had been crewing the guns of Tchepone that day, she may have just shot us down. That evil so-and-so.

Debriefing the mission, it occurred to me that “The Sheriff” or Smith would ask for another checkout flight because Smith didn’t feel quite comfortable. At the debriefing I quickly said, “Good job. You passed your check ride.”

On a later mission to Tchepone, I combat checked out a Lieutenant Colonel O’Bannion (not his real name). He went against my directions and went down and strafed the targets. I was furious and chewed him out good for being so stupid at the debriefing. He said, “TC, if we don’t stop them at Tchepone, they overrun all of Vietnam.” I told him he’d get himself and/or others shot down and killed. He did. A few weeks after I left the war, he got his wingman shot down and he and his GIB were killed. For what?



LOW AND SLOW
LEIF DUNN

This mission was a 433rd TFS F-4D Wolf visual recce in eastern Steel Tiger and into I Corps.

A “standard” Wolf load usually included a couple of 2.75-inch rocket pods, centerline gun, and a pair of wing tanks. Not particularly lethal, but enough to stir things up and get some bombers on a target. Wolf backseaters were a special breed—exceptionally well groomed, and nearly fearless. They could convert lat/longs to UTM's in a nanosecond and always knew to a gnat's ass where a tanker was or would be. Front-seat Wolves were just eyeballs whose main job was to keep the airplane out of the dirt (and get the occasional Willy Pete close to a truck).

We were basically lost someplace near the Laos/RVN border, kind of west of Khe Sanh. We'd popped up over a little ridge line, and I thought I'd seen some sparkles (small arms) in a treeline dead ahead about a mile out. It seemed *obvious* that a little popup, roll over, pull down, and pickle would put a smoke pretty close to the intended area. Then we could climb up and take a better look from overhead. Well, as luck would have it, the right hand pulled back, but

the left hand forgot to push forward. The result (wait for it) was a popup to a 250-knot apex, followed by a 30-degree, 250-knot pass. Needless to say, the pass bottomed out low and slow. I still have a clear picture in my mind of pulling to the beeper, donuts on the AOA telltales, and a lot of heavy breathing. I also remember the peripheral view of the treetops coming up to the canopy rail, settling in clear view above the rail and then slowly falling away. Full grunt, a little unload, and a left turn toward Thailand was the rest of the mission.

Lessons learned: (1) no good idea was ever spawned at 250 knots, and (2) the guy I was flying with never flew with me again and went on to a UPT slot, F-15s, and a wing. He's a lot smarter than I am/was.



"CLEARED TO FIRE"
MIKE RIDNOUER

I was scheduled to lead an air-to-air configured flight with my favorite backseater, RTFL, to support a B-52 strike in one of the passes between Laos and North Vietnam. As I recall the weapons load was three AIM-7E2 radar-guided missiles and at least two AIM-4D heat seekers. We hated carrying the AIM-4D for a number of reasons:

1. It was cumbersome to arm and cool and was a "heads-down operation." There were two series of the missile. One series armed and cooled with Air Force Standard Logic and one with Air Force Reverse Standard Logic, and the switchology was different depending on the series.
2. The AIM-4 didn't have a proximity fuse, and the warhead was about the size of a baseball. If the weapon missed by an inch, it might as well have been a mile. A real "Hittle" and not a "Missile" and even if it hit, the warhead was so small a kill was problematic.
3. The missile had to be cooled at least thirty seconds before firing and had to be fired within two minutes after the missile was cooled. The pilot could cool

only one missile at a time, so if the two minutes timed out and the missile was not fired, it was back to square one while the next missile was selected and cooled—a “Heads Down” operation, and not what the pilot wanted to be doing in the middle of a day or night MiG engagement. Hard to get a target to hold still while the F-4 driver went through selection, cooling, and arming process.

4. And last, after the missile was cooled but not fired, the missile had to be shipped back to the States for overhaul.

Most pilots preferred the AIM-9, which was simple to arm, point, and shoot. The warhead was larger and it had a proximity fuse. The Pk wasn't great but better than the AIM-4, without all the fuss. And, it didn't have to go back to the States every time someone attempted to use it. But the F-4D was designed and produced to employ the AIM-4, so the AIM-4 it was. Not much longer and the F-4D units began to loudly complain about the AIM-4 to anyone who would listen. A few refused to fly with them at all, preferring to just go with AIM-7s and lose the AIM-4, which was considered just to be extra drag anyway. The Air Force yielded and the AIM-4s went away and eventually we flew with AIM-9s.

The plan that night was to establish an orbit just outside North Vietnam, and if there was any MiG activity, to be in position to prevent them from attacking the Buffs. Normally a pretty dull mission. The B-52s completed their drop without a MiG reaction and, we were looking forward to being released to RTB to Udorn, dinner, and the O'Club.

“Falcon Twenty-one, not sure the Call Sign is right but it was Falcon, you have one bandit bearing zero-eighty, range twenty-five miles, cleared to fire.”

Sounded like something right out of a simulator mission, except there weren't any simulators in the combat zone. No one ever said "Clear to fire" without demanding and receiving a positive ID, and at night that is close to impossible. Not many MiGs are going to fly straight and level and let the old F-4 slide up close enough to ID it in the dark, and they probably aren't going to turn on any lights to make it easier. Yet here was our controller giving us clearance: "Cleared to fire."

I acknowledged the "Cleared to Fire" and got the F-4 turned around and pointed in the right direction while RTFL authenticated the transmission and began looking for the "MiG" on the radar. Didn't take long, and right in the center of the scope was the target. I didn't even have to turn. All I had to do was avoid hitting the ground, get the AIM-7s tuned and armed, and the Triple Nickel could have a new trophy. Fangs were out! Now, the ease with which Roger found the target should have set off some warning bells. Roger worked magic with the radar but a MiG, head-on, doesn't present much of a radar return and a bright blob that really was a MiG at that range was not impossible, but not likely. Just outside solid AIM-7 firing range the target made a 90-degree left turn down the border between North Vietnam and Laos. The AIM-7 min range shrank, and the steering circle collapsed to almost nothing. An AIM-7 was out of the question. That vintage AIM-7 wasn't very good in a tail chase, especially at a fairly low altitude. Now it was beginning to be AIM-4 time, so I tried to get some cutoff and started the AIM-4 missile selection, arming, and cooling process.

Just as the first missile cooled, I saw what looked to be a rotating beacon in the vicinity of the target. Could a MiG-21 jock (in my mind I'd already determined it was a MiG-21) be

stupid enough to fly around with his rotating beacon on and exterior lights in bright flash? OK, the two-minute cooling clock is ticking; the AIM-4 is acting like it might really hit something if I fired it, but bright flash and a rotating beacon? Roger and I decided to get as close to the target as possible, leaving the wingman at 6 o'clock in firing position to see what we were really chasing. It took a few minutes; the AIM-4 ran out of juice, but I was too busy trying to identify the target to go heads down in the cockpit to select, cool, and arm a second one. It seemed like an eternity but was probably only a couple of minutes, and we could see enough from the light produced by the beacon to know the target was an F-4. What it was doing in North Vietnam, single ship, at night, in the middle of a B-52 strike, I'll never know. But there it was.

And there was one disappointed F-4D MiG killer flight heading back to Udorn empty handed, fangs retracted, facing a long night debriefing intel on what just happened. And one AIM-4D headed back to the States for depot.



BUFF BOMBS AWAY AND MORE JACK PETRY

As one of the initial F-4 pilots at MacDill AFB, I was tapped for a European RF-4 assignment as the RF-4 was new to the theater. Following this tour, my good friend, Marv in Officer Assignments, set me up with a great combat assignment to Ubon. Unfortunately, I was diverted to the 474th F-111 Wing at Nellis because they needed SEA eligible pilots in that machine so they could send an F-111 squadron to SEA. Next glitch was an F-111 wing box problem, which killed the deployment to combat. Marv again worked his magic: they needed SEA eligible guys for Weapons Instructors in SEA, and he arranged a two-sortie checkout at DM in the F-4, transferring to the Fighter Weapons School (FWS) as a student. What fun! I refused to remove my F-111 patch from my flight suit, and Major Bill Wilson (FWS Ops Officer) gave me crap the whole time. All the other guys wore some sort of an F-4 Squadron patch. Oh by the way, I won the Outstanding Pilot Achievement Award at graduation.

I was assigned to Udorn as 432nd Wing Chief of Tactics. Udorn had the 13th TFS, the 555th TFS, and a Recce

Squadron. Being qualified in both the F-4 and RF-4, I flew both machines in combat (Laos).

Flying as element lead in a four-ship, making toothpicks from trees on the Ho Chi Min Trail in Laos, at 18,000 feet in spread formation, all hell broke loose below us. My first thought was AAA; then I noticed 500-pound bombs falling through our formation. Turns out this was a B-52 Arc Light drop. We had zero warning—no radio calls or squat. When I landed I called the 7th AF Command post and raised hell. The answer was, SAC could do no wrong; they always follow established procedures...most disciplined crews in the world...puke. I did confirm there was no alert/warning issued for this drop. Of course we all broke formation and emptied the piddle packs on landing!

As the Wing Weapons Officer, my diligent research validated that there were very few worthwhile targets in Laos that were 500 feet wide and a mile long that would suggest a string of 108 500-pound bombs dropped from a B-52 was an effective airpower application in Laos. I then went to work; this is where it started to get interesting. We experimented with various F-4D four-ship spread formations loaded with eighteen by 500 pound bombs, each with an RF-4 at bomb trail distance behind the flight (and a bit higher!) to capture the bomb impact pattern. With some refinement, we were able to totally saturate a rectangle shaped area, which was much more effective than the Buff pattern—so there, SAC!

When this system was pretty well refined, I casually mentioned this technique to General Lavelle (CC 7th AF), at some great personal risk. He clearly saw that we had developed a capability that was, in many applications, superior to the mile long Buff drops. General Lavelle was

some impressed. The final result was that the 432nd Wing was authorized to develop and strike targets that we had identified, by our process, sans 7th AF approval. This could only have been possible because we had both a Loran equipped recce and fighter squadrons at Udorn. This was a big deal in contrast to the way the war is being conducted currently (centralized command and control) in the Mideast.

More good stuff. The RF-4 had a very good IR sensor and recording system. The RFs would fly the trail at night and find where the Gomers were doing their "fish heads and rice trick." I then tasked the recce pukes to fly the same trail in the daytime to provide a complete photo imagery of the parts of the trail where we had interest. This imagery was put on the shelf for future use. Next, the recces were tasked to fly the trail again at night, and we correlated the night IR film with the actual daytime photos of the trail. So the big deal was that the F-4 drivers, at the morning briefings, had a day photo of where the Gomers had been the night before. I have no idea in the world if this won the war, but the fighter guys felt they were attacking bad guys instead of trees. Great morale booster. We provided the fighter guys with a correlated IR image to a day photo taken hours before...magic. Both the RF-4 and the F-4D were Loran equipped. Our Photo Interpreter guys could pick up the Loran TDs (time delays) from the RF-4 imagery, and the warriors could plug those TDs into the bomb system for very accurate all-weather, day/night bombing.

Well, it gets a bit better for me. While flying the RF-4 at Toul, France, and Ramstein, I was the IP for the 17th Air Force Commander, General Jack Lavelle. He would fly only with me. Fast forward: General Jack Lavelle became the 7th AF Commander. He came to the Wing, met the Wing King and asked, "Where is Major Petry?"

The Wing commander responded, "Who is Major Petry?"

Lavelle responded, "He's my Instructor Pilot."

Things got a lot better for me at Udorn. I flew General Lavelle in the RF-4, as he was more comfortable in that machine. I was somebody. Of course the recce pukes were pissed off because I took center stage on his visits to the Wing. I had no problem at all with this arrangement.

Unfortunately, General Lavelle was fired and demoted for a breach in ROE. He noted the Gomer trucks all lined-up preparing to cross the river from North Vietnam. Being an astute Flag Officer, he surmised it would be easier to kill the trucks in bivouac rather than try to find them later in the jungles of South Vietnam. He ordered the appropriate strikes. A Photo Interpreter picked up on this ROE and ratted on the General. He was subsequently removed and demoted to Major General. Bad joss; he was a pretty good guy.

Keep your nose low in the turns.



SHOOT DOWN STORY SCUD YATES

May 7, 1970. I was flying in the back of a Tiger FAC mission in an F-4E out of Korat with another pilot, Ted Sweeting. For the whole day we put Thuds in on guns and tree parks along Route 7 in North Laos's Ban Ban Valley. Once their bombs were off, we sent them to a Raven T-28 FAC trying to staunch an overrun at Lima 32, an outpost just north of the PDJ. The F-105s would make one pass for us and do as many strafe passes for the Raven FAC as they needed or could do.

At the end of day and about four hours into our mission, we ran out of Thuds and offered our 640 rounds of 20mm to the Raven. He was only about twenty miles away. The target he wanted us to get was a couple of BK 82 mortars about half a click away from the fence. They were knocking down buildings inside the site. Most of the site was either emitting dust or burning, as far as I could see when we got there. It was May, and the bad guys were on their yearly rout of the good guys in the dry season.

There was only one way to get to the mortars, as they were sheltered from a Westerly run in. The Raven talked us

into the target as he was out of marking rockets and had already been shot up way too much for one day. After two passes and corrections, we could see what needed to be done. There was a lot of stuff going by us each pass, so they knew where we were coming from. On the fourth pass, as the FAC was saying that we finally hit the target, we took a shattering series of hits. Ted yelled about all the lights in cockpit being on but managed to get us headed south and upward, climbing at about 350 knots. BLC (bleed air ducts) and fire lights were coming on as we passed six grand climbing. We were headed to the PDJ, as it was the best chance for a pickup. The noise between us inside was pretty frantic, but I managed to get Ted to shut up and make a calm call out to the ABCCC (C-121s who would track aircraft transponders in the war zone) that we were "hit and getting out soon" and gave a TACAN cut: "zero one zero for thirty from channel one-oh-eight."

About then the controls froze up, and as we rolled past 90 degrees Ted pulled the handles, and out I went. It must have been a quick roll, as he went out the 1.4 seconds later and ended up above me. We had made it about four miles away from the target and were another four short of the edge of the PDJ.

I watched the plane spiral down and hit near route 71 and then watched as Ted fell past me with about a third of his chute torn away. He was not moving so I figured he had had it. When I was descending through 7,000 to 8,000 feet, about 5,000 AGL, I found what they don't prepare you for in survival training: the hang time. It takes about a minute a thousand feet. Many panic opportunities can happen when you have this much time. It was a spectacular view until I realized I was falling into a "free fire zone," just named that week. It was at the staging area for the attacks on the PDJ

and this Lima 32 site. Then, there was the little detail of the bullets zinging by every so often even if I could not see the flashes or hear the shots. Little holes appearing in the canopy are disconcerting. I looked up to do the “four line cut” only to find it had been done for me...or I did it during one of my panics.

I beat back panic about thirty times until it was time to prepare for landing. I had to dump the seat pack to be ready for a tree landing. I tried for a clearing but got caught in the last pine tree on the edge. It was fifty-foot tall and two feet thick. After hitting a bunch of branches and banging up my legs and back, I was hanging about thirty feet up, looking into the second story of a barn or a barracks. The latter was what it most likely appeared to be. I did see someone look out and run away but couldn't tell who it was.

The tree-lowering device was not quick enough for me, and I crawled in close to the trunk and released. The climb down was going well until the branches started getting brittle, as lower ones do on pine trees, and I put my arms around the trunk and slid the last ten feet.

Now what? I grabbed my trusty pistol and faced the building. Nothing moved, and I figured out my helmet was not helping to hear oncoming problems. Off it came and then with nothing happening and no way to clear my flaglike chute to hide it, I started moving away from the clearing. It was not easy to hide, as this was a well-worn area with deep paths. I made it a couple of hundred yards and hid in a bush.

When I tried the first radio, the buttons were jammed into the case from hitting the tree. The second one was OK

but there was a beeper going. It was not mine, so I figured it was from Ted's, and he was not likely to turn it off. The backup channel got me talking to the T-28 FAC, only after I drank an entire bottle of water to get my throat moist enough to make a sound. He said the SAR forces were notified, and it should be about an hour before anyone showed up. I did not think I was going to last that long in this area and said so. He was short of fuel and passed the effort off to an O-1, another Raven.

In the effort to spot me he passed over, and I directed him to turn left and I kept him turning until he was in a circle with me off the wing line. He still could not see me, and I explained, "I was in a bush with my pistol out one side and a radio antenna out the other." I then took my glasses cleaning rag out, a hanky my grandmother gave me with my initials on it, and waved it at him out the side of the bush opposite the direction of the barracks. He spotted me waving the white hanky. Then he said to go back to the clearing by my chute. I protested going back that way, but he insisted a pickup was coming quickly. I ran back up and stopped at the edge of the trees, about fifty yards from the building and a bit away from the chute. He told me to get in the middle of the clearing. I balked and then heard the chopper coming. About then an H-34 came into my view around the corner of the building, and I ran toward it as he came to a hover. A horse collar started down and then went back up. In that thirty seconds, I reviewed how to get into a horse collar with the "knot" in the front and to let it hit the ground first before touching it to avoid getting shocked. Then panic set in as the thing was being pulled back up. The chopper had changed tactics and decided to land on the hill and set its front gear down as I ran up. The hill was enough; the back wheels were off the ground, but the rotors were clear. I hit the door at about my chest level from a mighty

but ineffective jump and a strong arm pulled me onboard. I was in a heap on the floor, sorting things out as we escaped back down the clearing, getting up steam to climb.

This bird was blue and white with Continental Airlines written on the side. Both pilots, one Anglo and the other Asian, were in airline-style short-sleeved uniforms. The guy that grabbed me was dressed more casually and had a big helmet on. He was one strong guy. I tried to say something to him, and he tossed and hit me in the chest with a M-16 and told me to get on the strap in the door and shoot at any muzzle flashes I saw. We started circling another clearing near my old one at about a thousand feet.

I asked what was up, and he said the other guy (Ted) was going to be picked up by us if he could get away from the people shooting at him. It was good to hear Ted was still around, but it did not sound all that good for him. He had been stunned by the ejection and hard opening and was falling pretty quickly. He wisely did not do the four-line cut we had been trained to do to steer some, as the damage would make it fall faster. He was in great shape and still strong as an ox from football in college. His landing was in a bunch of trees near a clearing too, but he was under fire almost from landing. Hanging with his feet right off the ground, he just stepped out of his harness and ran. He did have an activated beacon but did not pause to turn it off, thus the noise on the primary rescue channel. He did not get on the backup until I was already off it.

Our bird would swoop down, and Ted would tell us we were drawing heavy fire, so we would climb back up. On the second or third decoy run, I was to find out later, a UH-1 came low up the center of the clearing and set down in the middle as Ted came running out for the fifty-yard yard dash

to the bird. He was jinking hard, but I never saw anything to shoot at. The dirt was flying up around him when he got within twenty feet of the bird. He got in, and off we all went to the North. His Huey was shot up and "people are hurt" onboard, I was told.

Both birds set down on the top of a karst after about thirty minutes of flying northerly. This hilltop looked like hell with wounded walking among the dead, lying beside barrels of fuel and supplies. The other bird was hit badly. The crew chief had hits in his knee and elbow, and Ted was bloody, some on his neck and chest. His blood came from a cut he got in the violent chute opening, but the cut on the neck was superficial, just looked bad.

We and the wounded crew chief, now heavily drugged, were shuffled into a third copter, another UH-1, and we took off for a trip south. This was an hour-plus long ride that ended at Lima 98, the head Raven base south of the PDJ. We were met by the FAC we were working with in the 0-1. They offered some medical help to the wounds and then gave us several beers while we waited for ride back to Thailand many miles south. It was a busy place, so we were left alone. It was now about 1:00 p.m. or thereabouts. We had briefed at 0300 and gotten started with a 0500 takeoff to start this day. About the time the SAR would have started if Air America hadn't helped out, along came a Jolly Green H-53. They took us back to Udorn, another hour-plus flight. They were disappointed we were not a combat save but made up for it by shooting up some boats on the river along the way. We were just chilling when the minigun went off the first time, making us almost jump out of our skins. It seemed our nerves had been overloaded long before in this day.

The Udorn brass and a big party were there to meet us, as they didn't hear it wasn't a combat save. We were whisked off to the hospital to do a checkup and blood work, but they only patched up Ted. No blood taking was a better idea after I told them we were full of beer from the last stop.

A steak and a couple of hours later and we were on a C-47 for a ride back to Korat. By then the juices were starting to settle, and we were smiling but tired out. It was the fifth flight of the day. My legs were starting to hurt, and looking at them for the first time showed how hard I had hit the tree.

The whole base turned out for our arrival, as nobody from the wing had been recovered in a long time. There had been several shootdowns in the last year but no survivors. Ted's wife and two girls were standing there, since they lived in Korat City. We had a few minutes with friends and were then taken in and seated in front of all the O-6s in the wing, the top three. The first question from the wing king was, "Why in hell were you strafing when you know you are not supposed to do that?" The tone of voice and the looks on the other two Colonels seemed to say we were in for a scolding. Ted stood up and announced, "Any man that did not do what we did today could not be called an American." And then he said, "Come on, Scud, we're out of here." Out the door we walked to the stunned looks of our Colonels. The Assistant Director of Ops, a good guy, followed and talked us back in. He said the "word" had been passed that we were shining our asses and got hit. "Ass shining" might have been the rumors of the Tigers of old, but we sure were not doing that crap. They knew nothing about anything that had gone on but were sure we were fuck-ups. Captains and Lieutenants are put on this earth only to ruin careers of Colonels.

The second seating took place with a flustered look on the commander's face, but he asked this time, "What happened to you all today?" The rules are no strafing except for a SAR or TIC (troops in contact). We qualified there. "Why more than one pass?" was the second concern. Ted said we would have made passes after running out of ammo if they needed it. The bad guys were on the walls and knocking down buildings with the mortars we were after. They accepted the story, and we had to go back to the hospital for checkups as the sun went down. They did not buy the beer story this time and we got stuck. It had been hours since beer time, or they did not care about that now. You can never be too sure your troops are not druggies.

My wounds were just heavy bruising and scratching and Ted's were just about the same. He may have had some stitches in his neck, but I don't remember. We went home, had some dinner, and fell asleep. I awoke as the sun came up and made a tape as the sun rose. I talked standing alone in my shorts with a woody, feeling happy to be alive. After getting the whole story out, I found I had not turned on the tape machine. The second version had less cussing and might have been a better-organized thing. More damage occurred to my body at a party the next night when I fell through a roof and had a hard landing on a "carrier landing deck" behind the 34th Squadron party hooch. We flew injured a few days later on a strike mission just to "get back on the horse that threw you." Nice flight, and we got to chase a tank all over the trail in south Laos, even though the North Vietnam forces did not use Laos, did not have tanks, and we did not fight there. I then got to go on "convalescent" leave for few weeks as a midtour break.

The Lima site was not overrun, at least that day, and we had helped by getting some of the offending guns. The good

guys would get the place for a while longer, until the bad guys forced them out. Then the good guys would come back when the rains drove the bad guys out again next year. The same family ran both sides; brothers were the leading generals in the war for each side.

Ted and family went to Holland, where he was killed several years later in an F-4E "pitch-down" accident. The F-4E had some control bugs for years. His wife, Lynn, with three daughters, would marry another fighter pilot a few years later, and they are now settled in Phoenix after three stars on new hubby's shoulders. There are many grandbabies from Ted's loins, so his great blood is out there still.

A side story to this was when I came back for another tour and had been scheduled for another jungle survival school at Clark. Day one I showed the instructor my name on the wall for being a successful evader, being picked up, and an "honor" grad. I told them I had a tape I made the morning after getting sober. They asked me to tell the story the next day, and then I could have the rest of the week off. I offered them the tape and left. I showed up to tell the story and was taken in the back room and read the riot act. My pickup was "Top Secret." Air America, or the USA, was not even in Laos. They took my tape, and I noticed a blank space on the board where my name had been. They did not ask how many copies I had, and I didn't offer. Funny, but the briefing I would have given was one I had given in a couple of classes at George for RTU students. Classification is in the eye of the beholder I guess. Who knows, this could still be secret.

Another story about this day happened on a fishing boat off Mexico several years later. John Lapoint and I were

standing on the rail of a boat, fishing for yellowtails, while a bearded boat hand was throwing anchovies over and on our heads to keep the fish boiling. We were hooked to nice fish and animatedly talking as only half-drunk friends doing something fun could. The fish tosser interrupted and said he knew my voice and then gave the exact radio call I had made just before we jumped out of the burning F-4, "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday, this is Tiger oh-one, oh-ten for thirty channel one-oh-eight, we are hit and getting out pretty soon."

The guy was a controller on the C-121 "Ethan" that day and it was the last mission of that type to be flown in SEA. He had heard it but was not alarmed because I was so "calm." Boy, I was not calm in my head or in the cockpit, but I had managed to get out the perfect radio call as fighter pilots were supposed to. It reminded me of the call an F-100 pilot made at the AF academy once when he was about to hit the mountain after a buzzing pass down the cadet marching area. He managed a calm "Oh, shit" and melded with the hillside, bashed into a million pieces. Anyway, the rest of the fishing trip was down memory lane while we landed more fish and had many more beers, shared with my new friend who got more erratic with the fish tossing as the day went on.



DECEMBER 1971
MIKE RIDNOUER

I'm not good with dates, but December 18 and 19, 1971, remain firmly etched in my one-byte brain calendar. This is how I remember those events after forty years, so accuracy may be limited.

The squadron scheduled me to fly a theater indoctrination two-ship check ride, "Bombs in the Barrel," with the 13th Squadron early on the eighteenth. However, the night before, a SAR mission for a Ubon F-4 shot down in Steel Tiger kept me airborne most of the night. We landed from that mission and finished flight and intel debrief early in the morning, out of crew rest, so I asked my boss if he'd take the check ride for me. No problem, and I headed for the Nickel hooch to catch some sleep. A short time later, I awoke to pounding on the door and a voice telling me to get up and head for the squadron to support a SAR for a squadron crew. That notice got me moving and fully awake without a lot of sleep.

A squadron two-ship had been scheduled to provide air-to-air escort for a classified mission with a rendezvous over Northern Laos near the border with North Vietnam. The ROE

called for a two-ship; single ships were not authorized. An abort by one of the F-4s meant a scrub for the classified mission, and no one wanted that. Here the details get fuzzy, but as I remember, for some reason the flight lead aborted in an end-of-runway quick check and was headed back to the ramp for a spare. The wingman, Falcon 66, new to the F-4 but an experienced combat pilot with an F-100 tour, and his WSO either decided or were directed to take off and proceed to the rendezvous area to expedite the mission. Shortly after arriving in Northern Laos, they were jumped by a MiG-21 and downed by an Atoll missile inside North Vietnam. We'd had a Nickel party the night before at the O'Club, and the WSO had been pretty wasted. I remember thinking that getting shot down with a hangover was about the worst possible scenario.

The flight I asked my boss to take for me, Falcon 74, was airborne. His flight consisted of a backseater on his tenth mission and a wingman, Falcon 75, with both pilot and WSO on their tenth mission. The flight was fragged for a "Bombs in the Barrel" under the control of an airborne FAC, but both aircraft were armed with at least two AIM-7 missiles, and possibly several AIM-4s, in case MiGs were encountered. Shortly after crossing the border into Laos, Falcon 74 flight was diverted to provide SAR for Falcon 66. MiGs were up, and the flight pursued them into North Vietnam and were soon targeted by North Vietnamese batteries of SA-2s in a classic drag-and-bag strategy. After dodging SAMs and MiGs and jettisoning the bombs and tanks, the flight soon became separated, and both found themselves well below bingo fuel. The wingman elected to attempt to go "feet wet" for a controlled ejection over water, while the lead elected to try for an exit back into Laos with a fading hope of finding a tanker. The wingman didn't make it to the water and ejected over North Vietnam,

were picked up, and became POWs. Falcon 74 made it to the Laotian border, very close to the “Fish’s Mouth,” before the F-4 flamed out and he and the WSO ejected.

To my knowledge there was no radio contact with Falcon 66 by friendly forces after they ejected, so their condition was unknown for some time. Presumably they were captured soon after ejection. There was also no communication with Falcon 75 after ejection, and they were also presumably captured soon after ejection. It was good news to see them paraded in Hanoi by the North Vietnamese because we knew they were at least alive. The crew of Falcon 75 were more fortunate. They ejected in an area that allowed them to evade until a SAR effort could be executed. Interestingly enough, there were reports that an Air America aircraft was overhead the pair soon after they hit the ground and was able to pinpoint their location for the SAR force. The WSO was the most unflappable backseater I’d ever met. After the SAR forces told him to come up on the radio every ten minutes, he told them he was going to be radio out for a while because he was going to hide from his pursuers and take a nap. Both were eventually picked up by helicopter and flown back to Udorn.

I led one of the early flights launched to Major Johnson’s last-known position. Due to the nature of rescue missions, we launched with the pilots and WSOs we could round up, so I don’t recall who was in my backseat or even who was on the wing. I do remember it was an ideal morning for a MiG to attack—low-to-medium visibility at altitude with an undercast probably at about 10,000 feet. Add the sun angle, and it was easy to imagine a MiG-21 at low altitude, vectored to Falcon 66’s position. With a single ship’s lookout vulnerability and the MiG leaving his radar in standby, there’d be no visual or RWR warning. A MiG could pop up

through the undercast at close range, hose off an Atoll, then descend, undetected, back through the undercast, escaping before anyone even realized there were MiGs in the area.

By the time we arrived on station, there were numerous MiG calls from the early warning assets, but it was clear the North Vietnamese were executing a “Drag and Bag” strategy to get kill-hungry F-4 pilots to chase them over SAM sites. It was very tense for several hours, maintaining CAP, waiting for the next MiG, refueling and returning to CAP. We never heard a word from the downed crew, nor did we ever hear a beeper. My flight was relieved about midafternoon on the nineteenth, and we had just landed when the helicopter returned Falcon 75 to Udorn, so we got to greet them soon after they arrived. I was a little concerned how I would be greeted. He was my boss, he was leading that flight because I asked him to take my place, and there was a chance he may not have been all that happy with me. But he was a great guy and maybe we joked about it but there never was an indication he thought that it was anything but fate. I should have been in that F-4, and he would have missed that experience. That day I flew 9.4 hours supporting SAR efforts for Falcon 66 and Falcon 74 flight.

Unfortunately, the losses weren't over. Bombs in the Barrel continued. Captain Leo Thomas, Falcon 82, and his WSO, First Lieutenant Daniel Poyner and wingman Major Roger Carroll and WSO Captain Roger Locher were directed to a target near the Plain of Jars (PDJ). As I recall, the bottom of the cloud layer in that area was about 7,000 feet AGL and as the flight broke through the clouds, the bad guys opened up with 37mm and scored a direct hit on Leo's F-4. No chutes, no beepers. Leo was on his second tour following a tour in the F-105, so he was no aviation slouch. He was one

of those guys everyone liked, and he was the Wing Commander's Executive Officer. Sadly, it was one of Dan Poyner's first missions in-theater. Not the first, and certainly not the only, but a tragic day for both of Udorn's fighter squadrons. Leo was flying one of the Combat Tree F-4s on its first mission at Udorn. The equipment, at the time, was so sensitive that those seven aircraft were never to fly air-to-ground missions. Then there were six. I flew 17.2 hours and four missions supporting the three SAR efforts.

As a postscript, Roger Carroll was shot down on September 21, 1972, and he and the WSO were KIA in almost exactly the same location under almost exactly the same circumstances.

Roger Locher was credited with three MiG kills and was shot down in North Vietnam on May 10, 1972, while positioning for his third MiG kill. He evaded for twenty-two days, was rescued, and returned to Udorn only slightly the worse for wear.

The WSO in Falcon 75 ejected again on February 1, 1972, when his aircraft caught fire on a night takeoff. If I recall, Air Force personnel thought Lester had spent enough time in a parachute and sent him home early.

The crews of Falcon 66 and Falcon 75 were released from North Vietnam. and returned to the United States in 1973.



F-4 NIGHT FLIGHT—NORTHERN LAOS (LESSON 1) BUCK BENDER

We were a flight of two, capping a C-130 gunship working one of the trails, along with a Nail FAC in an OV-10. The Nail had a laser designator and night vision, and the C-130 had night vision. We were carrying two MK-84 LGBs under the wings and either MK-82s or CBU-52s on the centerline. We usually had one fighter overhead, and the other on a tanker, rotating back and forth. I was just about to unplug from the tanker when the tanker said ABCC wanted us to check in right away. We did, and were directed to get back to the Nail and the gunship ASAP, so away we went. Apparently the Nail had located a more lucrative target than trucks and wanted us there in a hurry. I believe our other fighter had already departed for gas. The Gunship would mark the target (and the laser box) with his 20mm tracers while the Nail did his designation thing—a real goat rope. We, hastily got all set and rolled in, with a gentle tap of the burner to get up some smash, headed down the chute. Tracers were coming at us from everywhere. All of our lights were still on from our tanker gig!

I was yelled at, simultaneously (and rightly so), by my WSO, the Nail, and the C-130. I can't recall if we dropped

the bomb or aborted the pass. Fortunately, my WSO knew exactly where the external lights circuit breaker was, because he had the lights off almost before he finished calling me a dumb shit. Lesson learned—don't forget the "Fence Check" just because you are in a hurry.



F-4 NIGHT FLIGHT—NORTHERN LAOS (LESSON 2) BUCK BENDER

This one was with RTFL, thank God. Doing the night escort thing with a gunship, we had been there for a while. Most of our ordnance was gone as we had dropped one bomb at a time just to keep the gunners on the ground from harassing the gunship. When we had arrived on station, it was a full moon night, and we could almost see what we were doing with a visible horizon (bomber's moon). When we were returning from the tanker, the moon had gone down, and it was really black out. I just didn't realize how black until later. The Gunship marked an area where they thought a gun was located, and we rolled in and dropped a bomb or two. Lo and behold, the whole world lit up behind us as we were pulling off the target. I rolled into a smart climbing turn to the left (we always like turning left, don't we?) so we could see what we had done. Problem was, I was looking outside, and just kept steepening the bank—to about 135 degrees, and we were headed for the ground at a rapid rate.

I heard this calm voice from the back say "Buck, if you don't roll this thing out, we're both gonna die."

I rolled out, and we lived happily ever after.

Apparently, through sheer dumb luck, we hit an ammo dump, and it put up quite a fireworks display. The gunship guys thought it was really S.H. I was glad to be alive.

Lesson learned—when it's dark and there is no horizon, keep your eyes on the gauges.



THE 8TH TFW'S DYNAMIC DUO
LT STEVE MOSIER
UBON RTAFB 1968-69
SATAN'S ANGEL AND WOLF FAC

The 8th TFW, like most units, had higher headquarters attached pilots. Most were Lieutenant Colonels, beyond their proficiency, but willing to do their part on the staff at Blue Chip and take an occasional combat sortie with their attached wing. Satan's Angels had two: we called them Hear No Evil—he wore hearing aids—and See No Evil: he flew with Benjamin Franklin autograph model half-frame glasses. Colonel Hoot gave them respect and got them on the schedule when they came up from Saigon for their missions. But he had rules known only to a few, among those the Lieutenant duty pigs: they should never fly in a flight bigger than two-ship and never together. The below-the-line rules were well executed, but like many informal codas, were susceptible to a loss of corporate knowledge at the worst time.

One day when the “pig” on the desk was one not briefed that the back channel ROE, Colonel Hear No Evil exercised his senior prerogative and adjusted the schedule so he could lead See No Evil on a Steel Tiger mission. The

assigned GIBs were out of the loop, and just assumed that this was OK and briefed up accordingly. The fearsome twosome started up, taxied out, and made it through last chance without incident. They took the runway and were lined up for the first two-ship of the afternoon go. They taxied on to the runway, and started the pretakeoff checks. Lead selected his outboard tanks, and you guessed it, fuel began to vent on the runway from the dump masts. Well, number two called out on tower frequency, "Lead, you have a fuel leak." Lead replied, "Roger, aborting," and announced on Tower frequency, "Banyon lead, abort, abort, abort" and initiated the boldface emergency procedure he had so aptly memorized (before the GIB could suggest another course of action):

1. Throttles Idle
2. Chute Deploy
3. Hook Down

After a short, but seemingly endless, silence, Ubon Tower responded, "Roger, Banyon, cleared to abort—please raise your hook before you engage the barrier departing the active."

Drogue chute was swinging in the jet wash, and GIBs' heads buried in their radar scopes, See No Evil and Hear No Evil were never seen or heard from again!



NEVER TELL INTEL
MIKE RIDNOUER

Back in Northern Laos, we were leading a night air-to-air cap hoping for some MiG action. My wingman that night was a great guy we called “Fast Eddie” or “Pick.” A little background on Pick. He had completed a tour in the Nickel as a GIB and after promising to return in exchange for an upgrade to the front seat, he was back for his second tour. A very good pilot, gung-ho, he had a favorite trick of putting his finger right in the middle of your chest when “discussing” a subject that he was expert in. A great guy to fly with and a great guy to have on the wing.

The RHAW gear started making noises indicating the Gomer GCI had some interest in what we were doing, so we got ready to go MiG chasing. We had all the ingredients, but no MiGs. Pick was flying behind me about seven miles, just high enough to be able to look down and pick up my radar return out of the ground clutter. He transmits on the UHF, “Lead are you locked on to me? I have an AI light.”

The AI light indicated a radar operating in a fighter radar frequency band was locked on. Most fighter radars would light it up. Our flight was the only fighters in that

vicinity that we knew of. The only possibility was a MiG we didn't know about. It wasn't me, because I was seven miles in front of Pick, and I let him know it. Could only be a MiG. Directing him to break, I put my F-4 in a hard turn, hoping to catch the MiG on my radar and get him off Pick's tail. And, if I was really lucky, maybe get in a shot.

The F-4, at the altitude we were flying, didn't turn on a dime, and as I completed the turn to where the intruder should have been, an aircraft with a single burner lit flashed by in almost exactly the opposite direction. Back goes my F-4 in the opposite direction, and I can see the AB, just a blue pinpoint of light in a descent heading for North Vietnam. We had no radar contact with the intruder, and soon the blue light goes out and we lose contact altogether. Never a word from our controller about another aircraft being in the area. We all unpuckered a little, got the flight back together, resumed the CAP, and finished the rest of the mission uneventfully.

I debriefed intel on the event, relating that I was sure a MiG attempted to, and almost succeeded in, getting an Atoll off at my wingman. Any MiG sighting caused an intel stir, and a MiG sighting that had not been confirmed by one of the controlling agencies really got their attention. I spent three hours on the secure phone with Saigon explaining why what we saw had to be a MiG. There were no other friendly fighters in the vicinity. F-105s would have had no reason to be in the area, and F-100s had long since left the theater. Everything else was two-engine and would have two ABs with an orangish color, and they sure wouldn't escape into North Vietnam.

One of the intel officers tried to tell me that we had probably seen a shooting star—not funny at 4:00 in the

morning. In my mind they didn't want to accept the fact that it was possible for the North Vietnamese to launch a single-ship MiG-21 and not be detected by at least one of the resources we had scattered throughout the region. Believe me, no one wanted to believe it. I became weary of telling Saigon headquarters, one office after another, what we had seen and why I believed it was a MiG. I may have become short with one or two of them. I did make a vow that if I ever had another MiG contact, and I didn't shoot it down or it didn't shoot me down, Intel would never hear about it from me.



TOM GOLDMAN'S WAR STORY #3
(SUBJECT TO AN OLD FIGHTER PILOT'S MEMORY
OF EVENTS LONG PAST)

At Bien Hoa, as I was on the phone discussing my next assignment with TAC Rated Officer Assignments, Major “Marvelous” Marv Gradert, I was told that my desire to remain a single-seat fighter pilot by assignment to the A-7 (F-100s were being retired in favor of the F-4) could not be done. Too many high-time F-100 pilots were already in those units, and experienced fighter pilots were needed in the F-4. Instead, he decided that I was to be assigned as an IP at Luke as the RTU (replacement training unit, or the schoolhouse). It was obvious that Marv did not understand the ego of a single seat, single-engine fighter pilot who could not imagine crew coordination or a fighter with a rotating beacon. For some reason, the Hun did not have a rotating beacon—that was for trash haulers.

I fussed so much about it that the system decided instead of another fighter assignment, I needed to be a Duty Officer at the Direct Air Support Center at 12th Air Force, Bergstrom AFB, Texas. Moral: Be careful about getting in pissing contests with Rated Officer Assignments. After six months at Bergstrom, with 200 percent manning in the

DASC (lots of Majors and lieutenant colonels who just could not get assignments to SEA for one reason or another, and flying the T-Bird for proficiency), I found myself calling Marv again and saying I would love to fly the F-4. By the way, after my SEA tour, Marv must have been pleased to see me assigned to Luke as an RTU IP (another example about arguing with the Godfather). The one friend I made at Bergstrom was John Mesenbourg, a former F-105 pilot who had the same single-seat religion that I did. He and I worked Marv at the same time, and we both ended up at Udorn in the 13th with him becoming my Ops Officer.

Marv allowed as the only way I could PCS so early is if I volunteered to return to SEA and accept a Cat 4 checkout. That sounded just fine to me, and so the wheels were set in motion. and I reported to Seymour Johnson for a Cat 4 (about twenty missions and thirty hours flight time) checkout. The "Chiefs" squadron at SJ welcomed me like a beggar at the door. My assigned IWSO was Chuck DeBellevue, who was excellent at his craft—which I did not understand. The Chiefs were not helpful in getting me the required flight time and training, so I turned to some old F-100 friends in other squadrons who worked me into their schedules. After the minimum training, I was on my way to Udorn. Compared to the F-100, the F-4 was an easy airplane to fly, with lots of power. As time passed, I learned to appreciate what Mother Mac had provided us: a capable fighter that was also forgiving (most of the time).

So, about one year after leaving Southeast Asia, I was back at Clark again inbound to Udorn. At Clark the folks were adamant that I needed to go to the Snake School (Jungle Survival School there in the Philippines) for the third time! This time complaining worked, and I was soon on a C-

130 en route to Udorn with stops at Da Nang and Ubon on the way.

The C-130 was our famous “Klong” airborne transport in the 7th AF AOR for moving folks and equipment around. In those days, they were TAC C-130s, and the flight crews identified with us and allowed us to jump on flights unscheduled with orders. They just put us on the aircrew manifest as ACM (additional crew members). In later years, when they left TAC for MAC, they got much more professional and could not condone such unprofessional behavior.

Upon arrival at Udorn Royal Thai Air Base, Kingdom of Thailand I was taken to the 555th TFS (Triple Nickel), where I was assigned to room temporarily with Captain Mike Ridnouer or Dick Stamm, I can't remember which, since I knew them both from somewhere in our past. Someone decided that I was apparently not Triple Nickel Material and so within a couple of days I was moved down to the 13th TFS, the Panther Squadron—the best thing that could have happened to me at Udorn. I became a flight commander and IP in short order, despite having only about thirty hours flying time in the F-4. I also was working with some amazing fighter pilots and WSOs.

After some combat orientation in the Barrel Roll (the plains of Laos) and Steel Tiger (the mountain passes and supply routes from North Vietnam to Cambodia and SVN on the eastern side of Laos). I was set for a check ride to be anointed combat ready and then an IP—with Mike Ridnouer. Landing from the backseat of an F-4 (required of an IP) was a piece of cake compared to the F-100F, since all that was expected was a controlled crash on the concrete surface. Mike (with Bill Stanley) was our Wing Stan Eval “Puke”—a

favorite fighter pilot descriptor for a good guy. A “f--ing”puke was not a good guy). Mike took great pleasure in having me do a backseat landing (required for my IP Check ride) with a LORAN F-4D because the instrument panel is much taller, with all the additional LORAN equipment, and looking forward was futile. So, we S-turned down short final, centered up at the last minute, and hoped not to blow a tire on touchdown. Incredibly, Mike kept hands off during this approach and landing—although I sensed his hands and feet were just millimeters off the flight controls.

I do not know why fighter squadrons feel compelled to come up with mascots, and you will remember Ramrod the Python at Bien Hoa. The Panthers came into possession of a Black Panther cub from a local CIA pilot who had been laid off for a few months but knew he was coming back. Since we were a Panther Squadron, he asked if we would take care of this cute little kitty cat while he was gone. With the squadron commander’s blessing, we built a cage next to our building with a trap door leading into the squadron. The cage was about twelve-by-eighteen feet, with a raised platform and a car tire suspended on a rope for him to play with. We advertised on the base for a “Name the Panther” contest and we selected “Eldridge” after the famous Black Panther, Eldridge Cleaver. One of the flight line sergeants, an African American, suggested the name. Eldridge would be allowed into the squadron to roam around after he had been fed our vet’s directed food, to play with our boot shoelaces, and to sneak up anyone with his back to him. In time, this became a little dangerous as he grew older and larger.

During the monsoon period, when we were all sitting on our front porch waiting for the weather to allow a scramble, we would let Eldridge out on a forty-nine-foot rope, just one

foot short of the parking ramp. He would crouch down in the weeds in the drainage depression that led to the ramp, within about ten feet of the ramp, and wait for an unsuspecting Thai workman pushing a wheelbarrow to walk by. Leaping to his feet, he would charge the poor man, who would scream, toss the wheelbarrow aside, and take off. Of course Eldridge always came up short of his prey, but we all thought it was hilarious. Sick, weren't we? Anyway the Base Commander found out and made us quit. You can imagine what kind of Puke he was. Besides, we never saw anything in those wheelbarrows, but they never ceased to be moving up and down the ramp.

The CIA gent returned for his Panther several months later, and the Base Commander said we had to give him back. We really did not want to lose our mascot. The CIA guy came to retrieve his pet and was appreciative of us taking care of Eldridge. In the interim Eldridge had grown to about forty to fifty pounds and about three feet long, We had a couple of guys who were still brave enough to go into the cage and play with Eldridge while wearing the correct protection equipment. They warned the CIA gent that Eldridge had matured and had to be handled carefully. While our guys were standing there (Eldridge having already been fed and was in a good mood), Mr. CIA started roughhousing with him, and Eldridge nipped at him in response. CIA man then slapped him much as he must have done when he was a kitten. Our panther was having none of that and did a rapid stern conversion and clamped down on his former owner's butt with no intention of letting go. Our guys (Greg Crane being one of them, as I recall) came up from behind and choked off Eldridge until he released his bite, ordered everyone out of the pen, backed to the door, and then tossed Eldridge forward as Greg jumped out of the door himself. It was a couple of days before Eldridge calmed

down and would be let back into the squadron for short visits. We never heard from CIA man again. Later, when the squadron closed down when we pulled out of the theater, the guys sent Eldridge to the Phoenix Zoo.

So, what did we do day-in and day-out at Udorn in '71-'72? The procedures and command and control were now well established. Our Wing Commander and Vice were great: Charlie Gabriel and Jerry O'Malley. Both gents went on to four stars and became respected senior leaders in the USAF. But in those days, they were just two colonels who flew on our wing and did what they were told. Of course, Colonel Gabriel could have led any mission he desired, but it was his style to fly wing to evaluate the rest of us, I suppose. Colonel O'Malley was a former U-2 and SR-71 pilot (SAC Strategic Reconnaissance) and a close friend of Gabriel. Between the Nickel and the Panthers, the squadron IPs flew in O'Malley's backseat since his fighter time was limited. He fully understood and was always cooperative with us junior guys, but I noticed that Gabriel made sure O'Malley flew only with hardheads like me, Cherry, Stamm, or Ridnour.

Before I get into the mission, I will say that the wing social attitude and tolerance of all of our fighter pilots (and even the recce pukes in our wing, the 14th TRS) was paternal. I think we all behaved professionally, but heavy partying on occasion was not forbidden. I will elaborate a bit on the night mission that Bob Lodge from the nickel shot down his first MiG. My flight and I took the Nickel Commander's Jeep. I drove it up the front of the O'Club steps (my guys put boards down on the steps) and had it jammed in the front door of the club because it was just slightly too wide to fit. As I was rocking the jeep back and forth, trying to get it in (we thought it would be a great idea

to mount it on the bar to honor the occasion) the Wing King and Vice walked by from the dining room headed to the bar. Gabriel asked me what the hell I was doing. I think my reply was: "I thought that would be pretty obvious, Colonel." He just turned his head and went on into the bar for a night of carrier landings and dice games. I am sure this kind of thing is probably still going on today, don't you think? This is just one of my stories, and I can assure you that each of the guys at Udorn could tell you something just as unconventional.

The most common mission at Udorn was either off the alert pad (air-to-air loads) or out of the squadron on routine "frags" (fragmentary orders) that came in the night before at the Command Post and were broken out—therefore fragmentary—and assigned to the units for the next day's missions. Our Wing Weapons Officer (Captain Bob Lodge) sat in the CP every night and helped guide this process and assure that the right loads were assigned, right fuse settings, and so forth, and so on.

Bob (later KIA in the spring of 1972 while shooting down a MiG) was one of the most professional fighter pilots at Udorn, with the personality of a CPA. But, I sat many hours on alert as lead of the 13th two-ship, and he often led the Nickel two-ship), so we developed a better relationship over time. Lodge later set up some of the MiG Sweep missions that were highly successful, and he had the full trust of Colonel Gabriel and the staff at 7th Air Force. If that existed at Ubon, I would not have been surprised, but I just knew that what I saw him doing at Udorn was unique. I have not mentioned Korat up to this point because most of our contacts were with the folks at Ubon. But Korat was also very active in the war—or so they told us. (Fighter pilot humor.)

On the night that I took the Nickel jeep into the club (or halfway, if you want to be picky) Bob Lodge shot down a MiG coming out of North Vietnam into Steel Tiger with a max range head-on AIM-7 shot. That was our first MiG kill at Udorn for that year. Bob had devised this tactic of launching comm-out at Udorn, proceeding to Orange Extension AAR track (comm-out) for a top off, and then flying MEA to just short of Ban Karai Pass and setting up a MEA orbit racetrack to try to catch an ingressing MiG. He talked me into joining him as the thirteenth flight lead on alert to fly this mission thirty minutes behind him, relieving each other on orbit with mike clicks. We did this for several nights, and our experience was no MiGs came out. After about a week, I became convinced that the North Vietnam AF knew we were there because a height finder signal would come up on me intermittently like it was saying: "Ha ha, dummy, I see you." So I opted out and went back to day flying. The next night Bob bagged the MiG, and that shows how clever I am. He deserved it. But a max range AIM-7E shot? You gotta be kidding me, but Bob knew that stuff cold. Bob and his GIB, Roger Locher, were working on their third MiG on a daytime sweep later in May 1972 when they took a hit. Bob was killed, and Roger spent twenty-one days on the ground in one hell of a survival situation until he was finally rescued and brought back to Udorn.

As I said, we had four F-4s on air defense alert at Udorn to scramble for MiG intrusions into Steel Tiger or the Barrel. Those two AORs were populated with gunships and reconnaissance every night to detect and destroy enemy combat and logistics activity on the trails. The North Vietnam AF would often send a MiG into those AORs to disrupt the gunships (who would automatically withdraw when a MiG was detected). The other activity when the alert pad would be scrambled was when there was a RESCAP

underway for a downed pilot or aircrew, as that would generally cause the MiGs to stick their noses in looking for a quick shot at orbiting fighters or helicopters.

On December 17, 1971, I was on alert and had just settled in for breakfast when we were scrambled to cover a SAR underway for a downed 555 Udorn fighter pilot in the Barrel who had taken the golden bee-bee and went straight in (I can't remember his name but he was the Wing Exec, and a well-respected fighter pilot). Before we were scrambled, a MiG had jumped in there and did shoot down one fighter. That was one of our worst days at Udorn, as we lost a total of five fighters that day and not all the aircrew were rescued. In fact, I flew five (might have been four, I just do not remember) times. Three was the normal limit, but that day we were turning as quickly as possible, and there was no time to swap alert commitments. Of course, the squadrons were reconfiguring and launching fighters also to cover this day's activities. There was nothing happy about that day. It did remind us of how quickly things can turn "brown."

The regular (not on air defense alert) missions were varied. I will run through those that I remember to give a feel for what we were experiencing. A standard two-ship to the Barrel would be fragged to work with a slow mover FAC (Raven was one of the more effective FACs in Laos) on a target that he and Intel had developed for a strike. Our munitions varied from 500-pound bombs or various CBU loads (-49, -52, or -58) were the most common antimaterial loads), and sometimes at night we used CB-58 (I think that is the number) which was characterized by its white phosphorus load. When you dropped -58 at night, the whole ground activity within sight of that explosion went "deathly"

silent. Reminded me of the effect we use to get from napalm in the Hun.

Barrel Roll missions were usually fairly routine, with sparse enemy ground fire that would affect the fighters. This is where we took the new guys to get their feet on the ground, and the visiting strap hangers from 7th AF who needed one combat mission in each month to get their combat pay and to be able to go home and say they flew in Vietnam. In particular, that is where we took the visiting General Officers looking for a combat experience. There were a few IPs in either the Nickel or the Panthers who got this duty if they could be polite, but firm, with a General about to do something that was OK in Korea but very dumb in SEA.

Another common night mission was gunship escort in the Barrel or Steel Tiger when our armed AC-47 or AC-130 gunships would be working a target area and started receiving ground fire. The gunship would mark the target for us (with his gun), and we would roll in with our CBU munitions (most common weapon for this mission). They loved the -58, although we had to warn them they were about to lose their night vision for a few minutes. Night missions usually required that we refuel at least once in order to cover a target area for as long as we had munitions onboard, or the gunship went home. There were several tracks in Laos that were situated to support refueling from any of the fighter bases in the AOR with proximity to both the Barrel and Steel Tiger. These orbits were also handy for any Route Pack (North Vietnam missions) for pre- or poststrike refueling.

For point targets that required a no-kidding precision strike we used our LGBs (laser guided bombs) with target

illumination coming from an off-board illuminator. For us that was usually another F-4 with a pod (ZOT was common then), but it could be from any other airborne platform with the equipment or from a ground FAC with a handheld illuminator (not common for our theater). All we had to do was put the bomb into the “basket” at sufficient airspeed, altitude, and vector so that it had enough energy to “fly to” the illuminated target. Always impressive.

When we were fragged to go to Steel Tiger, it was usually as a four-ship, and we would work with a fast FAC or a Slow Mover on interdiction missions. Sometimes it was truck parks discovered under the jungle canopy, or POL and supply parks, or anything Intel thought worthwhile for a strike. We worked the passes in and out of North Vietnam into Laos, and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We never really knew how effective we had been, except occasionally we would get one hell of a secondary explosion in the target area just attacked. Because of the triple canopy in the jungle that covered the Trail, only the FACs could sneak around enough to sometimes verify results. Working the passes through the mountains during the early-morning or late-afternoon hours would reveal convoys on the road going through steep, switchback turns, making them vulnerable to visual attack.

Our sister recce squadron (14th TRS) at Udorn required escort when they were to be sent through North Vietnam to recon Intel-directed target areas. We would provide protective reaction for any North Vietnam ground fire directed at the recce bird. We flew above and behind them for the best view of what was happening. We flew a little faster than their routine route airspeed so that we could weave to get the best view. But when they were approaching the target area and departing that area, they

always pushed the throttles forward, and we called that phase "The Run for the Roses." A RF-4C is one fast Phantom unencumbered by any weapons load, so we had to "unload" to accelerate to keep them in sight as we all proceeded feet wet over to the Gulf of Tonkin. They were generally through with their mission at that point, and we departed their company and proceeded to RTB over SVN back to Udorn unless we picked up follow-on tasking.

Toward the end of my tour, we were being tasked to provide big raids into North Vietnam periodically. I think it was tied to a protective reaction to some unlucky guy getting shot down, and we were going after the offending SAM site, for example. Or, we were taking advantage of an enemy's unwise gathering of logistics support at some transshipment point. Or, for whatever reason 7th AF came up with (and, by that time the White House) that required that kind of 8-, 12-, or 16-ship strike. When this happened, it was often the case that the guys from Ubon were also there hitting a different target concentration. Some flight leads in the Nickel or Panthers were cleared to be leaders or deputies of these gaggles, and they sometimes resulted in being roused out of bed very early in the morning with limited time to get to the squadron, to Wing for Intel, get a "line-up" card with your flight already manned, get a special instructions brief, and weather guess before running to the squadron for your flight gear and a quick aircrew briefing (sometimes finished in the truck en route to the flight line). Meanwhile, our maintenance and weapons load crews were busting their asses to get the F-4s gassed, armed, and ready.

Also by 1972 in the spring, someone decided that the B-52s needed to start bombing around Hanoi and Haiphong at night. The BUFs came in at altitude (somewhere in the mid-

thirties as I remember) and cranked up their ECM for the target run. The job we hated the most was the chaff bomb mission. We preceded the BUFs above their altitude (42,000–43,000 feet as I remember) at a relatively low Mach and bomb off these chaff bombs so that they would release their contents to drift down through the attack altitude and try to mask the bombers and confuse the enemy radars. Great World War II tactics, but it was all we had at that time. There were EB-57s and F-105 Wild Weasels also waiting for the SAMs to come up.

MiG sweeps became more common in that period because they were also trying to bag a BUF at night and disrupt our ground-strike missions during the day. Our sweeps generally consisted of one or two four-ships in North Vietnam from our Wing to be relieved by other units during the periods when our strike activity was in full swing. While I never got a MiG kill, I was very proud of my teammates, who did bag a MiG—particularly Dan Cherry and Phil Handley.

A side note is that I did fly right up to the buffer around the North Vietnam/China border during this period, and in earlier assignments I flew to the Southern Tip of South Vietnam. I did not even think about this at the time, because our focus was on the war. But in later years it dawned on me that I had seen the entire Vietnam country, all of Laos, and up to the border with Cambodia (another story for another time).

A few of our F-4Ds were equipped with LORAN equipment that some smart engineer had integrated into the Phantom to allow us to bomb over an undercast using time delays navigation. If we knew the GEOREF of a target (an intersection, a bridge, a downed aircrew in a SAR

operation, for example) we could fly above the weather and deliver ordnance on or around that target. We used this very effectively in support of SARs in North Vietnam, when everybody with a bomb load showed up in the target area to jump on our wing as we were proceeding inbound to a target area for a drop directed by the SAR on-scene commander (how far away, in what direction, etc.).

The first one of these runs was generally well briefed and on our frequency. By the time we were on a second run, as directed by the SAR commander, armed fighters arriving in the area on a different frequency would jump onto the formation to participate in the drop. This was not standard, or allowed, but there was no way to control it when you are sitting in the middle of a gaggle, above an undercast, flying into North Vietnam with four to six fighters on either side of you waiting for you to drop, or your immediate wingmen to drop, or to see my hand signal to drop. The SAR commander would be advised we had straphangers and he needed to give us a down-range free track to allow for the different munitions headed his way. In debriefs we were generally told it had been “spectacular” coming out of an overcast and helped greatly to facilitate the rescue. The challenge was how to turn that gaggle away from further intrusion into North Vietnam with a formation of twelve or more disparate fighters on your wing, and you are stuck in the middle. I had a solution that left them in no doubt that it was time to leave. My longest mission out of Udorn was twelve-and-a-half hours from takeoff to landing (yes, I know the rules) on a LORAN SAR around Bat Lake. Every LORAN bird generated to replace us on scene aborted, and we were sent to the tanker to keep it up. Quite a day.

This brings me to the end of my war stories. The best thing about all of these experiences was the respect and

friendship I gained from my fellow fighter pilots, and the confidence I had in our strong leaders at the unit level. I do not need reunions to savor that. But if any of my friends needs a helping hand, all they need do is call me.



FIRST MIG ENGAGEMENT
DECEMBER 19, 1971
GREG CRANE

In the last part of 1971, President Nixon relaxed the rules of engagement, and our excursions into North Vietnam became more frequent. Many of our missions were along the borders on the Laos side, with occasional flights into the North for specific targets or when threatened. This seemed to make the MiGs more emboldened, and they came up more in response to our flights, but usually returned to their bases when we turned toward them.

Since Udorn was the closest base to Hanoi, we kept two fighters on five-minute air defense alert and two on fifteen-minute alert, 24/7. The normal load for each fighter was at least three Sparrow radar-guided missiles and up to four Sidewinder heat-seeking missiles. Alert was the classic example of “hours and hours of boredom filled with a few minutes of excitement.”

On the nineteenth of January 1971, I was the flight lead of the five-minute alert cell. About midmorning the claxon went off, and we ran to our jets, cranked, and taxied out.

The tower gave us clearance for a “gate climb heading 060 degrees.” That meant afterburner climb as fast as you could go. On takeoff we accelerated to 450 knots in full afterburner, made our turn to 060 degrees, and headed out. I had done this before only to be cancelled about right here, but today we got a frequency change to the radar controller. Even with a full load of fuel and missiles, the F-4 could hustle when you got it up into the 450-knot range and climb like no other airplane at the time. As we checked in with Red Crown, the radar controller, his first words were “continue heading oh-six-oh degrees, gate climb to twenty-five thousand, your target is on your nose for one hundred twenty miles.” My thoughts are “now that he knows we’re airborne, he will turn around and head home.” Not today!

When we got to 25,000 feet we leveled off and left the throttles in afterburner until we reached about .97 Mach. The controller continued the calls “target on your nose now one hundred miles.” We continued on our heading and the calls just kept coming “now eighty miles.” I couldn’t believe that the target would continue directly at us since that was the best shot for the AIM-7 Sparrow missile, but he just kept coming. Then came the radio call from Red Crown I had never heard before, “You are cleared to fire.” Both backseaters were busy trying to make radar contact, but we all knew any contact on the F-4 radar of a MiG size target before 20 miles would be sheer luck. At 60 miles we jettisoned the centerline tanks and armed the missiles, and at 40 miles we dropped the wing tanks and accelerated to 1.2 Mach, the best speed for the F-4 to engage any target. The controller reported the target was at 36,000 feet, so we started a gentle climb while maintaining our speed. I was expecting the target to change direction at any minute and put us into a tail chase toward a SAM ring, but he just kept coming. As I looked out the front windscreen I could not

believe my eyes. There was a MiG-21 making a contrail coming right at us slightly high. With both the target and us above the Mach, it was amazing how quickly the distance to the target was changing. I was trying to verbally guide my backseater to the target in relationship to the horizon so we could find it on radar, lock on, and fire the Sparrow at the perfect 180-degree aspect ratio that the missile loved. We quickly closed the distance without a radar contact, and at the merge, the MiG started a slow left turn while maintaining his altitude all the while continuing to give off the contrail directly above us. I fell in behind him at his 8 o'clock low, selected boresight on the radar, and launched a Sparrow missile at him. I figured this was going to be the only MiG I ever saw and I wasn't going to let him get away without a fight. In the boresight mode, the missile should ride the radar beam to the target, no ranging information or turn inputs other than just the straight radar beam. We were about two-and-a-half miles to the inside of his turn, but the missile took off after him and went right for him. The missile tracked to about 500 feet from him and then fell off, out of energy. At that moment he finally saw us and continued his left turn, tightening it up only slightly. I launched two more Sparrows at him, still in the boresight mode, and they both tracked but missed their mark.

Now the scenario changes slightly from the plan. Along the way, the weapons gurus had decided to change some of the airplane loads from AIM-9 Sidewinder heat-seeking missiles to AIM-4 Falcon heat-seeking missiles. The AIM-4 was designed for the F-102 and F-106 interceptors. The theory was the AIM-4 had a superior tracking seeker head, which was cooled by liquid nitrogen, but it did not have a proximity fuse like the Sidewinder and the warhead had only four pounds of explosives. It would also take commands from the F-4 radar and position the head of the missile to

look directly at the target. The other big difference was the Sidewinder flew a lag pursuit route to the target, so it went out and basically flew the same flight path as the target, but the AIM-4 flew lead pursuit, which meant it would cut across the circle and fly to where the target would be in the future. I had fired Sparrows and Sidewinders before, but never a Falcon. On this day I had three Sparrows and three Falcons as my alert load.

Since the Sparrows had failed to hit the mark, next up were the AIM-4 Falcons. I selected the first missile, hit the button on the side of the stick to cool the seeker head, heard the tracking sound in my helmet, and fired the missile. The missile flew a lead pursuit flight path as it left the airplane and took an immediate very hard left turn. In the heat of combat, I wasn't quite ready for that and figured it had gone stupid. But as I watched it cut across the circle, it was going much faster than either the Sparrows or Sidewinders I had fired in the past and was definitely headed directly for the MiG-21. It continued to make corrections and then flew past the target about five feet behind the tailpipe. So once again I selected a missile, pushed the button to cool the seeker head, heard the tracking tone, and launched the missile. Out it went, hard left turn, correction, correction, and wssshhh right past the tailpipe. So I go through the whole litany again and launch missile number three, and you guessed it, it too went past the tailpipe and didn't explode. At about this time the MiG driver had figured out that we didn't like him, and he yanked the pole into his lap and passed canopy to canopy with us at about 300 feet. I can remember him looking out the top of his canopy at us as we did the same to him.

Postanalysis of the AIM-4 Falcon (or Hughes Arrow as it was called): it did just as designed. It tracked perfectly for

the hottest spot it could find. The hottest spot in a MiG-21 in afterburner is about five feet behind the tailpipe, where everything is in full combustion. And since it is a hit-to-kill missile without a proximity fuse, it went through the hottest spot and failed to detonate. That was the last time they were carried on the F-4s.

The next day an Army Major came to see me and said he had something to tell me. There was a listening site on Udorn that had monitored the North Vietnamese ground controlled intercept (GCI) throughout the entire engagement. The Major told me the pilot of the MiG was Colonel Nguyen Van Coc, their leading Ace at the time. In retrospect, he did not fly a particularly aggressive jet. His turns were very gentle and without conviction. Any US pilot would have pulled a high G turn into the enemy, which would have spoiled our shots, but he just flew on in a gentle turn. He really made some major mistakes that could have been his demise, if only we could have launched a successful missile. Luck was with him this day.



SA-2 OVER FINGERS LAKE LEIF DUNN

This F-4D mission was during the late winter/early spring of 1972. Linebacker I was about to get under way.

The 433rd TFS (8th TFW—Ubon RTAFB) was the primary laser-guided bomb designator unit at this point of the war. We had two designator systems: (1) the ZOT Box was a rear-cockpit left-canopy rail-mounted manual optical device and (2) the Pave Knife was a podded system (used a highly modified SUU-16/23 pod) mounted on the F-4's left inboard pylon. On this particular mission, we had a ZOT airplane and were fragged to look for heavy equipment in the vicinity of Fingers Lake in Route Pack I. It hadn't been long since Wolf 7 had been lost in this general area, so we were fairly alert to anything that might shoot at us.

We basically recced the area for a while and then called in bombers to deliver LGBs when (and if) we found anything interesting. On this mission, we had an ALQ-62 (I think) on the right outboard. This was a relatively new pod developed as a Quick Reaction Capability pod that was supposed to jam the SA-2's downlink beacon. If it worked, the SA-2 battery lost track of their missile-in-flight and couldn't

effectively guide or command detonate it. As we worked around Fingers—generally in a left orbit between 15,000 and 20,000 thousand feet, we eventually found a grader and a couple of AAA sights. The exact sequence of the next few events is a little fuzzy, but the sequence isn't critical. We'd called in at least one set of bombers and "moved a bit of dirt" and finally moved the grader enough to convince us it was KIA. About that time, we started getting SA-2 acquisition beeps on our RWR—somewhere off to the north in the direction of Bat Lake.

During one of these later orbits, we noticed a four-ship of F-4s, flying in loose route in a right orbit some distance north—maybe not all the way to Bat Lake, but not far from that area. Coincidentally, with one of the RWR tickles, we both saw an SA-2 come off the ground, as I recall, just east of Bat Lake. We hollered like hell on main and guard for the F-4s over Bat Lake to break. The time line was short—maybe ten-to-fifteen seconds max—before the SA-2 gutted one of the northern F-4s. Blew it clean in half—no chutes no beepers. The remaining three departed the scene.

Within a short period of time, we got another SA-2 tickle on the RWR. It was north of us and could have been the same site that just scored. The acquisition mode rapidly transitioned to a tracking mode, and we were pretty sure that we were going to draw some fire. At this time, I asked my buddy in the back if he had the pod turned on. No immediate answer. I asked him again and immediately heard the scratchy static from our RWR that was a clue that the pod was active. Within seconds, we saw a big, fast missile go a few hundred feet over our heads. We never saw it come off the ground, as we were belly up to the site. It flew south for a while and looked like it made it to the DMZ before it hit the ground—kaboom.

So, this mission taught me the following: (1) Don't cruise around in route formation over a SAM site, (2) listen to your RWR, (3) ECM pods really do work some of the time, and (4) when there's an active SAM in the area, don't give him your belly.



LINEBACKER



THUD
DICK JONAS

There's a million, plus or minus, Thud yarns. Built by Republic originally as a high-speed, low-level penetrator for the nuke mission, the bastard sat countless hours of alert all over the world in places you never heard of.

But Vietnam is what gave it a full-grown personality. That son-of-a-bitch would go like a scalded-ass ape. We had driven the Alpha Day Strike Force into downtown Hanoi one beautiful, bright, sunshiny forenoon and were beating feet back out along MiG Ridge for the water. The idea was to get as close as we could as fast as we could to the Navy rescue choppers, just in case. We had our flight of four Phantoms spread nicely in fluid-four (patrol formation) with the speedometer reading something in excess of nine miles a minute.

Looking back over my left shoulder, I see this lizard-colored machine creeping up from seven o'clock. I yell over the UHF, "Bogey! Left seven o'clock! Closing!" Five seconds later, I key the mike again. "Disregard. It's a Thud..."

This lonely bastard is all by himself, smoking along with the throttle locked high and tight in the far northwest corner of the cockpit. They say the Thud will do 800 knots on the deck. This guy drives right past us and leaves us behind in the North Vietnam smog.

The Thud was among the first to fire in anger in Southeast Asia. The squadrons based at Kadena Air Base on Okinawa started out down there on a TDY (temporary duty) basis. That's how Robbie Risner and a bunch of other guys became very high-tenure POWs.

Thuds and Thud jocks will be forever in a class all their own.



MY FIRST SAM GARY PORTER

I asked for an F-105 assignment out of pilot training, convinced it was the only jet worth flying, a conviction nurtured just a bit by one of my T-37 IPs who had completed his hundred missions and returned as a UPT instructor. I reported to McConnell in January 1972, expecting to complete RTU and head straight over to the war. About midway through the course, all of the students from the various classes were summoned to a meeting and informed that all the D Model Thuds were being pulled out of Thailand, and that we would complete the course and then help stand up two operational squadrons there at McConnell.

The battle-scarred F-105Ds started arriving in flights of four, and once we graduated we formed up the 562nd TFS and my squadron, the 563rd TFS. Our squadron's jets were to be uniquely equipped with the Thunderstick II fire control system. Once we brought the squadron to combat-ready status, we (at least some of us) harbored faint hopes that the Air Force would see the value of the new precision bombing and Loran navigation capability and send the planes back into the war. It was not to be. We continued to

train at McConnell until one day the call came down for volunteers for Wild Weasel duty in the F-105G. The only catch: selectees had to have 500 hours in the Thud and be a four-ship flight lead. Some of my compatriots with time in other aircraft had reached those milestones and headed out for Weasel school.

My wife was pregnant with our first child, and we decided that once I met the qualifications, I would volunteer for a Weasel assignment but ask for a report date a few months after our child was born. Kristina was born, and I reported for Weasel school at Nellis on our second anniversary, and the first of several I would miss. I was teamed up with my “Bear,” Bob, who came from B-52s and was a great laid-back kind of guy. We quickly developed the team skills we needed to survive as a Weasel crew.

The local checkout went by unremarkably, and on my first “counter,” on the wing of the Squadron Commander, I was introduced to the harsh realities of war, a boom equipped Papa tanker! At least it was in daylight. I’d refueled only once before by probe and drogue—two years ago in RTU. Now, with my new Squadron Commander watching, I was a little nervous—read, panicked—but managed to get hooked up on the first try.

Throughout June and July, I flew nothing but Arc Light support missions over northern South Vietnam and the southern reaches of RP-1 without seeing a single radar signal, SAM firing, or even much in the way of AAA. All that changed in early August. On the night of August 9, 1972, with twenty-one combat missions under my belt, I was leading a night three-ship, Coy flight, supporting three successive B-52 missions north of Quang Khe in southern

North Vietnam. The first two missions went by uneventfully; the Buffs dropped their loads unopposed.

After our final air refueling, we arrived in the target area for the third drop and began patrolling and checking the weather. At the appointed time, we set up our normal tactic of paralleling the planned B-52 target track and, about two minutes past the scheduled 23:45 TOT, the Buffs called out on the radio that they were withholding and going to an alternate target. Moments after the Buffs said they were withholding, two SAMs lifted off from a site north of Dong Hoi. When the SAMs were fired, I was positioned between the site and the Buffs who were still in the process of completing a 180-degree turn to “get out of Dodge.” It appeared the SAMs were being fired at Bob and me. Bob called a valid launch light, but he didn’t say the Azimuth Sector Light, known as the AS, or “Aw Shit,” light was not illuminated. I didn’t notice this omission at the time. Lack of an Aw Shit light probably meant we were not truly the target of the day. I engaged the afterburner and started a descending turn, trying to gain airspeed and keep the missiles positioned off our left wing.

The SAMs appeared to drift toward our 6 o’clock position and appeared to still be guiding on us. I ran through all the instructions from Weasel School in my mind, and then realized I didn’t remember them talking about defeating SAMs at night! But the basic rule still applied: do a SAM break too late and you’re toast, too early and you’ll give the missile a chance to recover. This was going to get exciting. Our aircraft was still pretty heavy with gas and, this being my first encounter with SAMs, day or night, I decided a little more airspeed might be useful when it came time to maneuver against the flying “telephone poles.” I decided to jettison the aircraft’s external stores. My aircraft was loaded

with a centerline fuel tank, an AGM-78 on the right inboard pylon, a 450-gallon fuel tank on the left inboard pylon, and AGM-45 Shrikes on both outboard pylons. I pushed the jettison button, felt a "thump," and looked down at the weapons panel, only to see that the AGM-78 had failed to jettison. We learned a few minutes later that this was because Bob had inadvertently left the consent switch open in the rear cockpit. The AGM-45 missile on the right outboard pylon also failed to jettison, we found out later, due to a broken wire in the pylon. What did jettison were the 450-gallon fuel tank, the left AGM-45 missile, and pylon and the centerline fuel tank/pylon. I continued my descending left turn and kept padlocked on the SAMs. It soon became obvious to even this unseasoned Weasel that the SAMs were not guiding on us. Both SAMs eventually detonated at high altitude several miles behind us in the vicinity of some RB-66s that were also supporting the mission.

By this time I realized how foolish I had been to jettison my stores. Due to the loss of the external fuel tanks, we now had only six thousand pounds of internal fuel and, after being told there were no more air refueling tankers available, I decided that my remaining fuel was insufficient to make it back to Korat, so we headed for the closest friendly airfield, Da Nang.

It was near midnight when we recovered safely at Da Nang AB, and I noted on final approach that the aircraft felt a little "squirrely." After landing and parking the aircraft, Bob and I walked into Base Operations. There we were greeted with "Welcome to Da Nang," as the dispatcher handed us each a helmet and flak vest and told us where to dive in case of a rocket attack during the night. Wonderful. Had we just cheated death in the sky only to be killed in a rocket attack on the ground? Da Nang had picked up the

nickname "Rocket City" for good reason, as the Viet Cong periodically sent rockets flying across the perimeter fence. We headed for the VOQ, checked into some rooms, and tried to get some sleep, one ear perked to the sound of sirens.

The next morning, there had been no attacks; we called back to the squadron to have them schedule a tanker for the flight back. I discussed the asymmetric ordnance load with the Ops Officer, and he asked me to check with Da Nang Transient Maintenance to see if the missiles could be downloaded or the Shrike moved to the left wing. Maintenance said they had no equipment and no T.O.s to safely download the two thousand pounds of missiles hanging under the right wing. I called back to the squadron to relay this info and received approval for the return flight with the admonition, "Be careful." Neither I, nor the Ops Officer, bothered to check whether the aircraft was legally certified for flight in this configuration. I think both of us knew what we'd find if we did. And besides, the aircraft was scheduled to fly an afternoon go, so it just had to get back to Korat, right?

While it was obvious the aircraft was asymmetrically loaded, I didn't realize how significantly this would affect our aerodynamics. We were taking off with more than two thousand pounds of missiles under our right wing with nothing under the left! We started up, were cleared onto Runway 17, and completed our before-takeoff checks. Tower cleared us for takeoff. After releasing brakes and engaging the afterburner, I noticed how difficult it was to keep the plane going straight down the runway. A few taps of the left brake and little left nose wheel steering, and then, when we were going fast enough for the rudder to be effective, full left rudder, and we were off! At 180-190 knots, I rotated the nose, and the aircraft began to lift off the runway. The

unequal weight and drag caused the aircraft to immediately roll to the right. It felt like we were in a 90-degree right bank, but it was probably around 45 degrees. I attempted to counter the right roll with left stick input, and inadvertently pulled the throttle inboard. This was not good. If left in this position more than a millisecond or two, the afterburner would have terminated, followed quickly by us settling back down on the concrete and ending up in a ball of fire at the end of the runway. I immediately slammed the throttle back outboard and the burner stayed lit! Thank you, Republic Aviation! Moments later I was able to level the wings of the aircraft, and we slowly climbed out on an otherwise uneventful departure from Da Nang.

The Vietcong that were no doubt hiding at the end of the runway probably thought we were putting on a show for their benefit. We climbed out to the west; the right turn to the west was certainly easy, found our tanker, and completed an uneventful flight back to Korat. Of course, I had to explain the previous night's incident, especially my decision to jettison some very expensive missiles.

I didn't tell him about the takeoff.



HIGH NOON QUICK DRAW NORM POWELL

“Linebacker” in 1972 was well under way when I briefed and led a flight of four F-105G Weasels, call sign “Dingus,” from Korat to relieve another Weasel flight, “Napkin,” in support of Phantoms dropping some of the first laser-guided “smart bombs” on the generator building of a hydroelectric power plant. A succession of Weasel flights was needed as employment of these first-generation LGBs was a somewhat cumbersome and lengthy process, since there was then no capability for the same aircraft to both laser-illuminate the target and deliver the weapon. One aircraft would go into orbit around the target so the GIB could aim the laser designator (becoming instant flak bait), while a succession of bombers would make individual bomb deliveries. It was necessary that the bomber and the illuminator be on the same side of the orbit for the bomb to “see” the laser spot on the target, so there was considerable radio chatter setting this up (more, even, than the usual F-4 banter). Periodically, one of the bombers would call “pickle, pickle, pickle” to signal the illuminator to aim the laser carefully, as a bomb was on the way.

All this chatter was clogging the UHF strike frequency as we hustled north after a mix-up of assigned prestrike tankers caused us to be delayed. "Napkin" was reporting little SAM activity, but there were Barlock, Spoonrest, and Cross-slot GCI-type radars on the air, so the North Vietnam air defense network was well aware of our presence. As normal for Weasels, we were not operating jammers because they would blind our signal receivers. The fact that we were racing around like idiots with no jammers could work in our favor by alerting enemy radar operators that Weasels were "trolling for SAMS," thus encouraging them to pull the plug. We were now carrying the AGM-78 "Standard ARM" in addition to a couple of AGM-45 Shrikes. The -78 was a vast improvement over the Shrike; for the first time we could shoot from outside SA-2 range, program a turn into the missile rather than having to line up precisely on the emitter, and impact the target radar with a larger warhead faster than the SAM could reach us. This 1,500-pound blivot was adapted from the Navy's "Standard" shipboard SAM, the very one that shot down that Iranian Airbus. Rather than launching from missile rails, it fell from a bomb rack to the end of a lanyard, which ignited the rocket motor, thereby wiping out your night vision.

We had nearly made up our lost time and were slowing as we approached Yen Bai and the target area when suddenly the missile audio and RHAW gear erupted with that distinctive and chilling rattlesnake warble of a strong Fan Song tracking radar aimed directly at us. By this time, the enemy had learned to reduce their exposure by using other radar and visual means to line up their shot before beginning to transmit. Bear Sam Peacock immediately tuned the AGM-78 onto this signal and told me to "shoot" just as the signal stopped. After a short pause, probably to see if there was any reaction from us, it came back up with a valid

launch light. Sam was yelling "Shoot, shoot!" which I did, followed immediately by the element leader also firing his Standard ARM. I pulled up slightly and rolled inverted, looking for the SAMs. Sure enough, there came three SA-2s, obviously tracking us from straight ahead.

I called out the missiles to the flight as I continued to pull down and, reluctantly, rolled slightly "belly-up" to the SAMs to get them off the nose for better evasive maneuvering. Meanwhile, the RHAW audio was a screeching cacophony of radar signal, launch warning, and the AGM-78's BDA transmitter. This was a solid tone transmitted from the AGM-78 missile, which vanished at the instant of impact, hopefully simultaneously with the sharp cutoff of the radar signal. "He's down!" Sam yelled, as this racket mercifully went silent. The three SAMs began to diverge, obviously now ballistic and unguided as they went smoking by. "We got him!" Sam gloated, "We busted his ass!"

He became positively gleeful as I pulled up and launched a "preemptive" Shrike into the air just in case we hadn't really killed the site, and soon asked, "D'ya wanna go down and strafe him?" Umm, no, I don't think so. I don't think I can stand any more glory for today, Bear, balls of brass or not.

Our EWOs were really pleased that finally they had control of a weapon on the aircraft, even if they had to rely on the dumb fighter pilot in front to punch the pickle button. They had a mission patch made up showing a "Pogo"-looking flat-bottomed johnboat with a shotgun-armed bear in the back and a warty frog manning the oars. The caption read: "You row the boat, I'll shoot the ducks!" I guess that's only justice for having to hurl their tender bodies into combat behind a wild man up front.



AGM-78 FUN AND OTHER SURPRISES ROGER PRATHER

My EWO and I were leading a hunter-killer flight of two F-105Gs and two F-4s, a great combo by the way, just east of Thud Ridge in the vicinity of Kep, fairly close to the Chinese buffer zone. The main strike force had already egressed west toward Thud Ridge. We were still headed generally east looking for signal activity. There was an F-4 and MiG furball of some kind going on somewhere out in front of us. It was difficult to see what was going on visually due to the buildups in the vicinity, but we could hear the melee on the radio.

Suddenly I saw what appeared to be the vapor trail of an air-to-air missile pass in front of our flight, coming at a quartering head-on angle from left to right. Others in the flight saw it, too. Hmmmm...interesting. At that time, a Fan Song signal came up slightly to our left. We turned into it while my EWO locked on to it with the AGM-78, a great weapon with a big punch. The indication was the associated SAM site was relatively close, and my EWO said, "Cleared to fire." The big missile dropped from the pylon, the booster lit, and imminent SAM destruction was on the way. But instead of nosing over after boost for a close-in kill, the missile went

into a steep climb and was obviously starting the up-and-over maneuver for a very long-range shot. Ooops...China. Oh, s--

At that point, there was nothing we could do since there was no recall button. The irksome signal was still alive, so both of our F-105Gs expended their Shrikes as a consolation effort to suppress the site. Now we had managed to mess around near an air-to-air engagement, had seen a loose missile in the vicinity of our flight, and expended all our missiles with Big Bertha no doubt still headed north at high altitude at Mach 3. I figured we had done enough and decided to exit stage left. Our killer F-4 element quickly punished something with their bombs, and we headed out toward Thud Ridge and the Black.

I don't recall how we debriefed our AGM-78 shot, but we never heard anything more about it. Whew!



THE WEATHER CHECK KARL POLIFKA

The North Vietnamese “Easter Offensive” of 1972 had the 432nd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing at Udorn, Thailand, extremely busy when I arrived as an RF-4 pilot in the 14th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron (TRS) in mid-April. The 14th lost an airplane and crew that day, demonstrating that this wasn’t a walk in the park (the nav was recovered a week later, and the pilot was a POW). The 432nd was a two-squadron fighter wing with a recce squadron and soon grew to a total of five (three TDY) fighter squadrons.

Most understand that the reconnaissance mission involved collecting information, in the form of imagery in this case, on the enemy. This included both general intelligence gathering and poststrike operations. There were also a couple of other chores assigned to the 14th, with which some might not be familiar. This is a brief description of those additional duties.

The 14th TRS was authorized for twenty-four RF-4Cs with a normal crew assignment of thirty pilots and thirty navigators in addition to the hundred-plus personnel in the

PPIF (photo processing and interpretation facility, which was transportable). Since almost every sortie used all its film, the PPIF was augmented with an additional Reconnaissance Technical Squadron (RTS) to enable processing and interpretation of all the imagery. The squadron shot an average of thirty thousand feet of film per day and that, added to the four duplicates, kept the PPIF/RTS working 24/7.

In reality, the 14th had, most of the time, seventeen aircraft with seventeen pilots and nineteen navs assigned to the squadron, numbers that did not increase until December 1972. A few other flight personnel were scattered through staff jobs at wing headquarters. When an aircraft was lost, a replacement was provided, but the 14th never reached authorized strength. At the same time, the powers-that-were complained about the lack of imagery coverage. During my year at Udorn, the 14th had five aircraft shot down, and three were so badly damaged that they had to be disassembled and shipped back to McDonnell Douglas to be rebuilt.

While the response to the North Vietnamese offensive involved plenty of bombing in the southern regions of North Vietnam, a full-scale offensive against the entire country did not begin until May 9, 1972 and was named "Linebacker." There are plenty of stories to be told about Linebacker, but this one is about the prestrike weather check process.

It was certainly a good idea to get a weather check before launching a couple of hundred fighters, dozens of tankers, and a bunch of other aircraft. The way that good idea was executed was a little strange. The Director of Operations for 7th Air Force insisted an RF-4, escorted by two F-4s, do the prestrike weather check, since the RF-4 had

an HF radio for long-range communications and could report directly to Udorn, or Saigon. However, no one was to enter Route Package V or VI unless they had UHF radio contact with Red Crown—the cruiser USS *Long Beach*. The ship had superb radar coverage of the area in addition to Vietnamese linguists on board to translate the North Vietnamese's air defense communications. Red Crown had direct contact with Saigon, so the question is, why send a scarce resource, the RF-4, into an area because of its communications capability when everyone was in contact with Red Crown anyway, and fighter pilots are just as capable as anyone else in giving a weather report? Then comes the question of how did the weather report influence decision-making?

The answer was, apparently not very much. On more than one occasion, the weather report clearly indicated that the target areas were unworkable, and yet 7th Air Force launched the force anyway. The worst weather report I heard, from an RF-4 pilot, was a near solid overcast from about 1,000 feet, layered to over 30,000 feet. Again, the Seventh Air Force Director of Operations made the launch order. A whole lot of ordnance and external tanks fell somewhere!

I worked in the Wing frag shop most of May and June 1972 (four days on, four nights on, four days to fly). One of the aspects of that job was learning how difficult it was for maintenance to keep up with demand. Most early mornings started with two or so RF-4s ready for flight, followed by a constant scramble to generate enough aircraft to meet the schedule of seventeen sorties per day. One morning, the RF-4 aborted a weather check, and there were no replacements. The two F-4 escorts flew the weather check and reported to Blue Chip via Red Crown that the weather was “clear and a million.” However, the Linebacker launch

was delayed until the lead fighter pilot reported to the frag shop to talk to 7th Air Force via phone, per Blue Chip instructions. The fighter pilot was on the other side of the room, but that same 7th Air Force voice was very clear to everyone as he screamed that he wanted a weather report. The pilot calmly repeated, "clear and a million." Seventh Air Force screamed that he wanted "eighths, tops, and bases" A look of disbelief showed on the pilot's face as he got the drift. His reply was, "zero eighths at the surface to fifty thousand feet..."

"That's better, you dumb sonofabitch," screamed the 7th Air Force voice, who then slammed the phone down in Saigon. A minute later, the launch order was received. We all looked at each other in disbelief.

I well remember my first weather check and not with pleasure. We had a 0200 (2:00 a.m.) showtime at Wing, where we got the normal pre-mission briefing in addition to receiving information on the designated weather check/target areas. We also received the code letters we were supposed to use in reporting specific target areas. This was followed by a few minutes with the fighter crews before we went our separate ways to get ready for an 0400 takeoff that was to be followed by a refueling (which the RF did not need) and then onto the Hanoi area arriving about 0500.

The weather around Udorn was not very good, with rain and a broken deck up to at least 20,000 feet. While I had around two thousand hours, most of it as a FAC and Raven, I had little formation time after pilot training, and the RF-4 RTU did not include much, since most recce missions were single ship. However, since I was lead, I should have had fewer problems. That situation changed quickly when I had to abort the first RF-4 and quickly crank up another. In the

meantime, both fighters took off and headed for the tanker. We took off in the second RF-4 and headed for the tanker through the dark and stormy night, a process made much more difficult since the radar on the RF-4 was for mapping the earth, not weather. By cranking the radar antenna up to max elevation, the nav was able to make out the tanker and fighters. This was not fun, but we finally rejoined and headed north.

We descended to a few thousand feet northwest of Hanoi, the weather being fairly clear in the light of the rising sun. The east, toward Haiphong, was another target area to check, but the skies were overcast, and mid-level broken clouds stood between us and there. I elected to do a 180 and head south of Hanoi to loop around to the east, where the surface weather was fairly clear. I was a bit surprised to see the fighters during that 180-degree turn maintain their relative positions rather than having the high bird descend and the low bird climb on energy. Well, it was their fuel to worry about, not mine. The weather in the second area was workable, so we made the required transmissions and headed toward Udorn. The fighter lead, who was the 13th TFS ops officer, seemed a bit grumpy about my loop around Hanoi, but I had no intention of flying through multiple SA-2 rings at 4,000 feet when I couldn't see the ground. Additionally, the RF-4 had older RHAW (radar homing and warning) equipment than the F-4 D/E and, too often, we did not get the warnings that the fighters got. After we landed, fighter lead had me visit his office, next door to our squadron, where he did a minor amount of grumbling and ass-chewing, which I suppose I deserved.

The weather check process went on, of course, throughout Linebacker, but not without incident. In August, an RF-4 pilot Roger was the doing a weather check north of

Hanoi, with a new guy nav who was on his first Pack 6 ride. The fighters were in a standard tactical formation when an SA-2 seemed to appear out of nowhere and detonated at the RF-4's 12 o'clock, nearly level with the aircraft. The RF-4 was shredded, the pilot was killed, and the wounded nav was captured after he was able to eject. The fighters got an extremely brief RHAW warning. At the time, we surmised that the North Vietnamese had launched the SA-2 and guided it visually until they needed to turn on the radar for the final seconds prior to intercept. They had been practicing this for a while.

The weather check process continued until the end of Linebacker in October 1972. In the meantime, we had also been occasionally flying a particularly nonfun data collection mission named Combat Thunder. Many fighter pilots had been involved in LORAN bombing. In order to do that, someone had to go collect the LORAN TD (time delay) data so that it could be translated into the coordinates used by the fighters. LORAN equipped RF-4s in the 14th TRS accomplished the collection. Most of the Combat Thunder data collection occurred in North Vietnam, and the required data collection technique made it a particularly unpleasant task.

The RF-4 typically operated at 540 knots ground speed, and the multiples of sixty made planning easier. A typical Combat Thunder run would last about three minutes at 15,000 feet, on autopilot, and at a constant airspeed. To make it even more fun, we were told to assume the position ninety seconds prior to the run and ninety seconds after. You can do the math. My worst run was from just north of Haiphong to Kep airfield, the other RF-4 and two F-4 escorts standing well back from our path. The RHAW was about blanked out with radar signals, but there was almost no flak.

The Vietnamese probably could not believe anyone would be that stupid. We did not do the ninety-second postrun business.

On December 9, 1972, the new 14th ops officer and nav were airborne in the Than Hoa area with two F-4 escorts. After doing some standard imagery collection, they lined up for a Combat Thunder run. They weren't far into the run when an SA-2 detonated level at their 12 o'clock. One KIA and one POW. There was no RHAW warning, although the fighters had some warning because the nav saw them starting to move away about the time everything in front of him turned to fire. This sort of makes you think a bit.

A few days later a Lieutenant Colonel nav from HQ PACAF arrived to talk to some of us about a new Combat Thunder target area. The visitor was talking to a table full of us in the O'Club—not exactly a secure environment. He indicated that they wanted us to do a Combat Thunder on downtown Hanoi—sort of an indicator of the upcoming Linebacker II, although we didn't know that. His information was met with silence. Finally, someone said that the LORAN signals were pretty weak in that area, and it probably wouldn't work. The visitor got kind of huffy and asked, "You mean you are refusing to fly this mission?"

"Oh no," we all mumbled. "It's just that the signals are pretty weak there." We didn't fly the mission and they LORAN-bombed in the Hanoi area anyway. I guess we didn't need to fly it?

Linebacker II had some interesting angles, and then came the ceasefire, which meant we, and the fighters, made the long haul to Cambodia while we also raced around Laos.

A few days into this different environment, we received a visit from somebody with the title of Wing Electronic Warfare Officer. We didn't know there was a Wing Electronic Warfare Officer. He was a bit apologetic as he said that he should have told us this some time ago, but, things didn't happen that way. He told us that the "special" ECM (electronic countermeasures) pod that we carried—"special" since we usually flew single-ship missions—made us stand out as a natural target when in a formation with another F-4. There's not too much to say or do about that, other than maybe a little head shaking.



WOUNDED BY A POD BUCK BENDER

This was a mission flown shortly after the big NVA push into South Vietnam the end of March, early April of 1972. A flight of two flying from Udorn with downward ejecting pods of CBUs, we headed for an area just south of the DMZ where a FAC was down. We were to lay the CBUs down around him to keep the bad guys away so he could be rescued. He had been there a while, and things weren't going well. I guess Udorn had the ordnance they wanted, and none of the closer bases did. Anyway, we were to do our thing then go feet wet and jettison the pods to save fuel so we could make it back to Udorn. We did our thing, headed out to sea a ways, I checked, carefully, for fishing ships, and the like, below, called "ready, ready, pickle," and let go. Unfortunately, my wingman had decided that he would raise a wing and look below just as I said "pickle."

My wingman's right-side pod decided to go forward, then up and over the leading edge of the wing, destroying the leading edge flap, and generally made of mess of things. We did a thorough damage assessment and controllability check en route to Da Nang (closest base), declared an emergency, and checked in with Da Nang tower

and requested the arresting gear. We were told we were number three in the emergency sequence, and they would let us know when they were ready. They were having a bad day, as the big invasion was really keeping them busy. While we orbited south of the field, looking north, we could see SAM contrails in the DMZ.

Everyone got down safely, but my wingman had to stay in Da Nang for a couple of days until they fixed his bird. I remember his wife was about to give birth, and he was concerned about being out of touch. A couple of days at Da Nang were fair punishment for not flying the flight as briefed.



THANH HOA BRIDGE SCUD YATES

The Thanh Hoa Bridge in North Vietnam served a major roadway used to supply the war in the South. The French built the concrete-and-steel truss bridge, and Ho Chi Minh destroyed it by running two locomotives loaded with explosives together on the bridge. Following the defeat of the French, the North Vietnamese rebuilt the bridge better than ever and called it the “Dragon’s Jaw.” The bridge remained operational until it was finally closed at a cost of 104 US aircraft lost.

My April 17, 1972, mission to the “Bridge” was off the books and the FRAG. I had flown a four-and-a-half-hour Wolf mission over Route Pack 1 beginning at daylight that morning. I landed and was met at the front door of the headquarters building while Denny Stanford, my WSO, arrived for debriefing. The greeter told us to go to the main briefing room, as we were going to fly another flight. We walked in a briefing in progress and sat in the back. It was the mission to attempt to drop the bridge, the second try in two days. The day before the weather had been bad over the target and strikers overflowed it without seeing the bridge and had one airplane shot down on egress. The Navy had

warned the weather was bad, but the flight leader put the flight right on top of overcast. Predictably, a SAM popped through the undercast and nailed an F-4 carrying a laser Knife Pod.

The briefing ended without us knowing our mission, so we asked which position in the eight-ship flight we were flying, because our names weren't on the schedule. The Wing leadership didn't want to take a chance on the weather again, so they wanted a weather check before the mission showed and found the target weather was bad. A full day of missions was on the schedule, and adding one wasn't in the cards. However, the plane I had just landed wasn't scheduled to fly again, and we were technically free, except for the four hours of debriefing left to do after the Wolf mission. I was selected to check the weather.

We were told to launch ASAP and get across the target before the TOT and call with the weather report and to find fuel somewhere after we launched. We stepped to the airplane as soon as we put on our gear, still wet with sweat from the previous flight.

We started engines, and the Command Post told us they could find us no extra fuel but should see if we could find gas after takeoff. We didn't have a new mission number, so we used the morning one and the old Wolf 3 call sign. Wolfs could be found in odd places begging for gas most any time, and the Wolf call sign ruse worked. We found a load of gas and headed out over the water and headed north to get to the target.

At altitude the air controllers knew who we were and what we were doing. We gave call sign and mission number,

to which they said we were not on any FRAG they had and we needed to depart. The first controllers on the route north were Air Force, and we talked them into letting us continue without letting them know the target. Once we got about 150 south of the target, Navy controllers took over. They flat out said we had no business up that way and told us to depart south. We did a 360-degree turn, turned off the transponder at 180 degrees of turn, and descended to wave tops and continued north. I told the controllers we had some system failures and would head home. They did suspect we were not speaking the truth and offered up they would shoot us down if we didn't have a transponder. We thanked them and pressed on.

The Navy started calling out "bandit" calls from Red Crown. The estimates included "high/med/low" altitude. The first couple calls were medium or high, and as we got closer, we determined the MiGs were circling over or just north of our target in three groups of two, waiting for the afternoon attack on the bridge mission to arrive.

It seemed like with one of us and six of them, there was a good chance we'd become a target. I had two AIM-7 missiles and a gun, but only one missile tuned, and gun hadn't been reloaded from the morning mission, so only a couple hundred rounds remained. My plan was to get close enough to check the target weather from low altitude, banking on the North Vietnam radar not seeing us since our Navy couldn't. We had no indications on our RHAW gear of anything watching us, but the Navy must have had a clue we were there because they kept giving us threat updates. That was probably the reason the MiGs were up and waiting for the mission. They expected the same mission at the same time as the day before, but they had launched on us and were too early for the eight ship of attackers.

The weather check was quick. The target was about fifteen or so miles inland, and we hit the river mouth on the deck. There were puffy clouds low and scattered with slight radiation fog over the shore. We passed through that in a flash and could see the area in front of us was blue sky. The moment I saw the bridge about five miles in front of us, I began a hard turn of about 150 degrees, so we departed on a slightly different heading. For the next few minutes calls from Red Crown indicated the MiGs never vectored toward us but were still holding around the target.

Once clear. Denny switched the tanker frequency, and we heard the strike flight. We made our "weather clear" call, climbed, and departed south, found a tanker and landed without incident.

Just another ho-hum day at Ubon air patch.



MIGS IN RP-I LEIF DUNN

This mission was a Wolf visual recce in Steel Tiger and I-Corp (RVN) flown single-ship out of Ubon in a “Summer Help” F-4E from Seymour Johnson.

The mission itself was totally benign. However, the postmission debrief was a real indicator of the wing leadership’s focus. We’d been out looking for movers on Route 9 east of Tchepone and on into I Corps. Not much that I can recall had turned up—it was a nice day, and the natives were probably resting up for a night Turkey Shoot (AAA gunners loved to hose away at the Spectre gunships). We were about done, but had a tanker asking to get rid of some gas so, we headed toward Channel 89 (NKP). As we pulled up on the tanker, I ran off the remaining few feet of film in the gun camera. Having a gun camera was a real luxury for a “dumb” F-4 driver, and we were all happy to have some pictures of our work. Usually nothing more than a gun/bombsight image of the sight reticle was visible. Clouds, haze, and altitude pretty well clobbered anything you might claim to be a target. But on this day, the sky was blue, clear, and sunny. The tanker was big, shiny, and cooperative.

When we landed, I handed the gun camera magazine to the debriefer and expected to look at it in a day or so. Before I'd gotten through intel debrief, someone told me to report to the command post ASAP. The DO wanted to talk to me—*now*. Let's see, we hadn't killed anything we could remember, saw nothing exciting, and had accommodated a fat tanker. WTF?

When I got to the Command Post cab, the colonel was there waiting with a fiery look in his eyes. Maybe there were other witnesses, but memory fades. I probably didn't care anyway—this guy had a reputation for being most interested in getting a Silver Star on his left tit and least interested in leading his troops. He asked me where I'd been and what I'd done on this last mission. I was pretty glum/defensive by now, and kept it simple. Route recce, no joy, tanker, full stop.

He blew!

"What the hell were you doing chasing MiGs?" was what came at me. I sat there for a minute, thought about a couple of smart-ass remarks, and came back with a witty "What?" I did have a gun.

Turns out that ole no-name was screening all the gun film to make sure his boys weren't out there strafing AAA sites and such. He'd spotted that silver smoker in the last few feet of my film and immediately ID'd it as a MiG. It all fell to pieces when I pointed out the finer details—like four motors.

The lessons for this experience: (1) never underestimate what the head shed might do with

meaningless/benign information, and (2) even a dull, boring mission can be perilous.



OLDS FLIGHT MARTY CAVATO

The mission was MiG CAP over North Vietnam. Five F-4s went to the tanker, I was the spare, Olds 5. After we refueled, the four-ship headed to the CAP point. The spare was supposed to return to the base, but I was a Fast FAC and was used to flying in North Vietnam alone, so I decided to stay just inside the border—not sure why, but something made me stay.

We listened to the dogfight unfold as two Nickels shot down a MiG-21 with their gun, and two more shot down two MiG-19s with Sidewinders (which made the GIB the leading Mig Ace in Vietnam with six kills). As they egressed, they ran through heavy flak and shortly thereafter Olds 4 was below bingo fuel—minimum fuel to get home, possibly due to flak hitting their fuel tank. Olds 3 was also low on fuel due to the MiG engagement.

I went to the refueling frequency to alert the tanker to head north to meet them. We found the tanker, but the radar controllers thought they had Olds flight on the tanker and the tanker was heading in the wrong direction. I told him to turn back north toward Olds 3 and 4, but he didn't

respond. So I flew right under the KC-135 and pulled up in front of his nose and said, "Follow me!" The language was slightly more colorful, however. They turned around and we managed to get Olds 3 on the tanker with only minutes of fuel left.

Olds 4 was not so lucky, and when they ran out of fuel, they ejected over North Vietnam. With Olds 3 on the tanker, we turned back north and descended to low altitude to try to find Olds 4's wreckage. They had broadcast their coordinates just prior to ejecting, and we had inserted them into our inertial navigation system, so we headed in that direction. I kept calling on Guard frequency for several minutes when finally we heard a weak, scratchy transmission. I said, "Give us a hold down," meaning to constantly key the mike so we could get a bearing. We picked up the signal and turned to put it on the nose. When the needle swung from our nose to our tail, I lit the afterburners and pitched up into a tight turn. I asked, "Did you just have an F-4 go over you in burner?"

Olds 4 Bravo said something like, "Yeah, hell of an airshow, but send us a #!\$&# helicopter!"

As we made our circling turn I saw the Olds 4 Bravo's parachute in the jungle canopy. "Where's Olds 4 Alpha?" I asked.

"Up toward the top of the ridge about two hundred meters."

I looked and finally saw his chute also beneath the jungle canopy. I had previously called the rescue guys and told them Olds 4 wasn't going to make it. They sent a Jolly

Green helicopter with two Sandy A1-Es to cover them. With their position marked, we turned south to find the Jolly and Sandys. A few minutes later we met them head-on, turned to get in front of them, and slowed to as slow as an F-4 can fly and led them back to the crash site.

As we approached I said, "Do you see the river at twelve o'clock?"

"Yes."

"Olds Four Bravo is just past the river and Olds Four Alpha is about two hundred meters toward the top of the ridge."

A short time later they said they had both chutes in sight. We were now bingo fuel also and left the scene to find the tanker, the same one we flew under, refueled, and headed back to Udorn. The Jolly Green picked them both up, with both hearing sounds of people yelling and dogs barking.



Photo, courtesy of Marty Cavato

Photo was taken when the Jolly Green brought Bill and Murph back to Udorn later that day. Those in flight suits had just flown a victory fly by for the MiG kills and to welcome Bill and Murph home. Olds flight (in flight suits) from left to right: Billy Graham, Mike Francisco, Bud Hargrove, Bryan Tibbett, Bill Dalecky, John Madden, shaking the hand of Terry Murphy, Chuck DeBellevue, and Marty Cavato. John Dubler is just out of the photo on Marty's left. Bryan and Bud were tragically killed two-and-a-half months later, Bryan leaving behind a wife and infant son, and Bud leaving behind his fiancée. At the top left is Lieutenant Dwight Cook in a short-sleeved flight suit. Dwight was killed in action twelve days after this photo was taken. At top center is Lieutenant Bob

Carley, who survived the war but was killed in an F-4 accident at Bitburg, Germany, thirteen months after this photo, leaving behind his wife, Cheryl, and young daughter, Shannon.



A RIDGE TOO FAR
JOE LEE BURNS

What can I say? Happy Hour had been long and exuberant, and now 0700 hours Saturday, April 1, 1972, my squadron, the Black Panthers (35th Tactical Fighter Squadron), and its F-4Ds were on the move from Kunsan airbase Korea to Southeast Asia. TDY to Vietnam. (Yes! Recall was on April Fool's Day! It was *not* pretty. But, that's a whole 'nuther story!). It was just the beginning. May 1972, hardly unpacked, we left the 366th TFW at Da Nang to join the 388th TFW at the Royal Thai Air Force base at Korat, Thailand.

The 35th was one of the most experienced SEA F-4 squadrons. Although we had about eight First Lieutenant aircraft commanders, we had been training them for six months prior to deployment. The rest of the squadron averaged over eighteen hundred hours of F-4 time and included eight Fighter Weapons School graduates.

0600 HOURS, JULY 20, 1972

We are being briefed on a mission to Route Pack 6, bombing the underground fuel storage area located about twelve nautical miles southeast of Hanoi. The mission is a min-

strike package with 16 F-4Ds as “iron haulers.” Eight ships, call signs “Caddy”(1st Striker) and “Buick” (3rd Striker), each carried twelve Mk-82s with delayed fuzes. An additional eight ships, “Dodge” (2nd Striker) and “Chevy” (4th Striker), each carried nine incendiary mix CBU-58s.

The “plan” called for Caddy and Buick flights to break open the earthen revetments with their 500 pounders and Dodge and Chevy flights to ignite the exposed fuel. Our MiG cover would be provided by eight F-4Es, Pistol and Saber flights, armed with Sparrow and Sidewinder missiles and an internal 20mm Gatling Gun. Each F-4 carried a radar jamming pod. All the aircraft and spares would be flying out of Korat. Support aircraft included a mix of Wild Weasels, tankers, and Command and Control aircraft. Weather was reported to be scattered clouds in the target area, with a scattered-to-broken cloud deck to the east along our exit route toward the North Vietnam coast, “feet wet.” Intelligence warned us about a potential “new” SAM site just north of Thud/Phantom ridge, roughly halfway between Hanoi and the coastline to the east.

After wheels-up, the strike force and spares were to join up and proceed to Purple Tanker orbit, abeam the city of Vinh, over the Gulf of Tonkin. After midair refueling, we were to cross the North Vietnam coast northeast of Thanh Hoa. Our IP would be Minh Binh and from there, to the target. After the strike, we were to egress northeast then east just north of Thud/Phantom Ridge to feet wet, then South to Purple tankers and RTB to Korat.

I, Caddy 3, was the Deputy Mission Commander. The rest of the mission briefing is “normal—normal” Well, except for this: Sometime during the mission brief, Roscoe, the Korat fighter-pilot dog-warrior-mascot got up and left the

briefing room. “Aw, heck,” says me. “That’s just a superstition, isn’t it?” It probably doesn’t really mean this will be a “tough” mission, that is, lose an aircraft. Heck, sometimes a dog just has to take a whiz!

Shortly after engine start Caddy 4 ground aborts for an air refueling door failure, dashes to a spare, but it ground aborts also. A ground spare crew who had attended the flight briefing replaces Caddy 4. We taxi as four-ship, and at the end of runway checkpoint, Caddy 2 ground aborts for a massive hydraulic leak. Now down to three aircraft, Caddy flight took off on time with the rest of the strike force in tow.

Rendezvous with tankers in the Purple orbit was uneventful—gas passed in reverse order, 4, 3, then 1, per briefing—except Caddy 1 keeps getting disconnected. He backs out so Caddy 3 and 4 can top off and then tries again. At about this time, an air spare crew joins Caddy flight. It’s an F-4E with CBUs from the 421st TFS. He tops off after Caddy 4. Caddy 1 can’t get his Control Augmentation System to stay on line, can’t take any more gas, and air aborts. Now Caddy 3, me, is the flight lead and the only remaining member of the original four-ship.

Now a three-ship flight, call signs were rearranged. Caddy check in is, “Caddy 3 check” “2”—an F-4D with bombs, “4”—an F-4E with CBUs.

After drop-off from the tankers, ingress proceeded as briefed, feet dry northeast of Thanh Hoa, IP at Ninh Binh to the target with slight weaving along the route at an altitude of 18,000 to 22,000 feet. When the flight switches Master Arm On, one of Caddy 2’s bombs just falls off the rack! Cripes! Hope it doesn’t hit those Navy ships!

The inbound route is eerily quiet. My pitter, Mike, and I discuss target area responsibilities again. There is very little activity on the RHAW; only occasional, short beeps from various enemy radar, GCI, Fansong SAM, and the larger AAA tracking radars. The “new” Caddy 4, since he was not in the briefing, asked from which direction roll-in was and moved to right combat echelon as we approached the target area.

The target area is almost free of clouds—some scattered ones at 8,000 to 10,000 feet—a heavier, layered deck appears to cover the egress route. For an underground fuel storage site, this one was fairly easy to identify from altitude due to good intelligence target photos of the dirt roads. As we approached the roll-in point, a single 85mm AAA gun started shooting in the vicinity of the target area—dense black flak balls widely scattered at 15,000 to 18,000 feet. It’s 1145 hours.

“Caddy, check switches hot—Caddy has target in sight—Lead’s in.” Ground level winds in the target area were forecast from the northeast, and it looked about right to me from the movement of low clouds and smoke from ground fire. My briefed aim point for Caddy’s bombs and Dodge’s CBU’s was the southwest half of the target area. Buick and Chevy flights could target the northeast half of the target area without being hindered by smoke from Caddy and Dodge’s ordnance and, hopefully, secondary explosions.

We thundered down the chute at 500-plus in a 60-degree dive. I stopped the wind drift with the pitter directly on the target and pickled off my weapons at 14,000 feet. Funny how the “light, sporadic 85mm flak” seemed much heavier during the pass! All bombs off, I started a hard 6 G pull, jinked left, and then jinked hard right as we bottomed out about 7,000 feet. I continued in a hard right turn

climbing toward 10,000 feet, heading for the north side of Thud/Phantom Ridge.

Coming off target, we craned our necks against the G forces, scanning the ground and skies for SAMs, AAA, and MiGs. I noticed several 37mm or 57mm AAA guns joining in the defense of the target area—but still only at the moderate level. As I looked back over my right shoulder, I see my two wingmen below and inside my turn—no immediate threat to them or us, says my fearless pitter. As we join up to combat spread formation, I got a look at the target area some ten-to-fifteen miles away. Black, heavy smoke, with fires visible at the ground, rose to some 18,000 feet as the second wave's ordnance started to impact. Sierra Hotel! We wouldn't have to come back to bomb *this* fuel dump for a while! That feeling of knowing that the bombs are on target is wonderful. The fact is, our bombs didn't always hit the target, or if they hit the target, the "target" really wasn't there anymore—that is, no secondary explosions. So far on *this* mission, it appeared the mission objective was accomplished and things looked pretty good!

As Caddy 2 and 4 joined to combat spread, I'd been turning enough in a high-speed climb to give them cutoff; we saw the thickening cloud deck to the east from 5,000 to 12,000 feet. This observation, plus the intelligence briefing on a possible new SAM site, made me decide to drop down and egress at 500 feet AGL. The thought also crossed my mind that a few MiGs might be lurking at low altitude to snipe at us along our egress route. I had been on our Wing DCO's wing the day before when he went out north of Thud/Phantom Ridge at low altitude! The pitter was busy fine-tuning the radar in search of low altitude "bogies."

I heard a little UHF radio chatter as flights came off target, rejoined, and started their egress. It sounded like we got lots of bombs on target with good secondary explosions and big fires. Not much activity on the RHAW scopes, but there was a SAM radar warning call from one of the flights exiting the area above 20,000 feet. I maintained my easterly heading at 500 to 1,000 feet AGL, in a slight weave with my wingmen in V formation. We cross-checked our location by counting the smaller north/south oriented ridges coming off the main east—west ridge. All three of us had good fuel status.

OK, after the next ridge we started a minimum burner climb above the clouds before going feet wet at the coast. Oops! I saw water—the coast—shoot!—we’d gone “a ridge too far.” Caddy 3, joined (and partially blocked) by Caddy 2, transmits, “Look out, they’re shootin’, two o’clock low!” “Well, well, well! Isn’t this a fine kettle of fish you’ve gotten us into this time, Ollie!” Apologies to Laurel and Hardy!

Yep, there were the gunners! We’d gone a ridge too far to the east, too near the Cam Pha coastal gunners, who reportedly had a very good training program for pulling the correct amount of lead on fighters. Wow! Look at those Gomers hand crank their “bicycle peddles” to turn their gun. Is that a chain down on the floorboard by the one on the right’s feet? Funny-looking helmets—must be ear protectors underneath—huh—probably need those goggles, too, with all that smoke and fire and debris leaping from the gun barrels. Hey, the tires are folded up underneath, and the gun platform is kicking up dust as it bounces up and down on its metal footpads! Jeez! Look at that—the two barrels are firing alternately with those big flame suppressers spewing most of the flame sideways and down as each gun fires! Must be a 57mm gun since the barrels look so long—

probably no more than five hundred meters away. Must be in the “real-time zone”—that is, no lead is required! All they have to do is put the crosshairs on our plane and shoot!

The above thoughts occurred in the five nanoseconds it took for me to jam both throttles into full afterburner and pull *hard* into a climb—apparently the same amount of time it took one of the 57mm rounds to travel the short distance from the barrel to my trusty F-4! Just as I pulled, we felt a powerful jolt and a right yaw. I guess we were too close for the 57mm fuse to arm before it hit us, without detonating, near the left engine afterburner section. Have you ever felt that cold, washed-out, sick feeling in your stomach or gotten that hard, bitter metallic taste in your mouth when something *really* scary has happened? Have you ever been hit so hard in football all your muscles just sorta relax all at once? That’s what it felt like! Big Ugly is still flying...into the low clouds now...Left Fire Light is on...think I’ll keep both engines in burner a little longer...hmmm...lots of other cockpit stuff not working very well.

“You okay?”

Mike. “Yep, I’m ready when you are.”

“Okay, hang on. We gotta try to get feet wet.”

Caddy 2, in his terse, nasal tone, said, “Lead, you’re on fire!” Later he told us the flames were as long as the airplane!

I switched our radio to Guard frequency. “Mayday, mayday, mayday! Caddy three on fire, trying to get feet wet north of Cam Pha!” We were now above a lower deck of

scattered clouds, and I could see I was right at the coastline, indicating about 450 knots, slowing; about 3,000 feet in a slight descent. The right overheat light comes on! Shoot! Okay, left engine out of burner...couldn't feel much difference in thrust...pulled the left engine to idle. Left generator...out; PC 1 hydraulic light...on; stick was getting heavy; right overheat light was still on. "Shoot!" Right throttle back to full military power, reset right generator and bus ties, losing all but airspeed and altitude instruments. Yikes, the whole warning panel just lit up!

Trusty pitter says, "Handle turned; you initiate ejection, Joe Lee!"

"Okay. Not yet."

Pleading quite earnestly with my rugged "steel stallion," I whispered, "Hang in there a little longer, Baby; we're just passing the coastline." Losing altitude and speed, but feet wet, the valiant F-4D, Phantom II, tail number 65-0265 starts to give up the ghost and starts a small, but increasing in amplitude, oscillation in the vertical. Our radios were cutting in and out, but I hear one of my wingies telling us to "get out"! Trying to time it so as to punch out at the top of an oscillation, I tell the backseater to stand by for ejection. All of the above—from being hit to ejection—transpired in about 90 to 120 seconds, enough time to cover ten to fifteen miles and get three or four miles offshore. I could talk for an hour or more on the sequence of events—switches, instruments, warning lights, cockpit discussions, visual sightings, and so forth. The point is that a major temporal acceleration occurs in most stressful situations like this. Adrenaline, heartrate, all your sensory perceptions go full pegged.

What is truly amazing is that our Air Force training (and all US military training) gave each of us the capability to successfully respond to crisis situations. We did things correctly, without hesitation, to handle each little nuance as the major emergency progressed. Mike and I weren't perfect, but we were pretty good, and I'd have to say we were a little lucky! But the bottom line is—we are well trained in a great air machine!

“Okay, bailout!”

My wingmen later tell us that they saw: the two AIM 7s “cook off,” launch, and go ballistic, our F-4 pitch up into the clouds at about 1,500 feet AGL and come back out in an inverted spin and the jet exploding on the karst on Elephant Ear island.

1205 HOURS, GOMER TIME, JULY 20, 1972

Oops! So much for my timing of the oscillations! At about 3 Gs, 1,000 feet AGL, and 400 knots airspeed, with my chin on my chest, I pulled the ejection seat handle between my legs. I saw a bright orange glow in my peripheral vision as my hands come up to crotch level. I sensed major temperature and noise changes as the aircraft rear canopy came off. I got a quick, powerful jolt in the butt as my seat starts up the rail. I perceived one slow—I think it was slow—360-degree forward tumble; the drogue chute straightened the seat's trajectory. From canopy off to drogue chute deploy, everything seemed gray—we were either in the low clouds or my eyes were deprived of oxygen: “gray out.” I'm not really sure, since our wingies did not see the actual ejection. They did pick up our white chutes on their next pass, so I think we were in the clouds!

Instantaneously, the seat straps released, the “fanny kicker” straps booted me away from the seat. The “Mark 1, Mod O, government issue, nylon, white, personal descent device”—aka parachute—deploys, eliciting a verbal comment from deep within my bowels—something like, “Aarrgrruumpphhhhh! That wasn’t terribly pleasant!” Okay, I looked up: the chute is fully deployed, no torn panels, no time to cut lines. I look down. My survival kit is deployed, lanyard is secure, and I’m gonna splash down in the water. Oh, yes, yes, thank God! The life raft is fully inflated! I won’t have to orally inflate the son-of-a-gun! I wasn’t very far above the water. There’s the big island—couple of miles away; guess that smoke must be where she hit. Lots of little islands down there—hope I don’t land on one! Is that a “lighter” with dirty sails to the northeast? I unhook my oxygen mask from one side; get the survival radio from vest; raise the antenna; switch from beeper setting to voice. I see my backseater, Caddy 3 Bravo, in his chute and closer to the water than me.

“Mayday, mayday, mayday. Caddy 3, two chutes, about to splash feet wet.” I heard a garbled response from somebody airborne. Hey! Water’s getting close! I shoved the antenna down (it’s the on/off switch); stuff radio in flight suit chest area. Oh, crap! I did occasionally cuss in the war zone. I pull both Life Preserver Unit knobs and both spring to life—fully inflated. Feet together, look at horizon—splash!

I’m thinking, “Hmmm...the water was not as cold as the pool water in training. Wonder how deep I went. Good, the canopy isn’t in the way. Wonder why I haven’t reached the surface of the water yet...Aahhh, air!”...Up...down...release and toss parachute canopy straps. Grab the lanyard; pull raft to me hand over hand. Wait!, whoa! I check for anything sharp on flight suit, harness, and vest. Okay! Pushdown, pull

under! Hey! That worked easier than training in the pool! I rolled over on my back and scootched back into the raft. Okay, what's next? Oh, yeah! I pulled on the lanyard until I get the survival kit into my raft.

I didn't see anything moving near us on the water or on these little islands—that was a good thing. Not drifting much, but I tossed the sea anchor out. Survival radio out; antenna up—Beep, beep, beep! Beeper is blocking voice; need to check my other radios to see if one of them is activated. I switch my radio to secondary guard frequency.

“Mayday, mayday, mayday, Caddy three, two souls feet wet, over”—er—“on twenty-eight, twenty-eight!”

“Roger, Caddy three. Copy all, stand by!”

Hallelujah! Somebody read us! That sounded like a fighter jock! Couldn't have been a spoofer, could it? Naw! In fact, the voice sounded familiar!

Oh, yeah, hey, there was the backseater! We were about a hundred meters apart in gently swelling seas, among about twenty or so small, vegetated islands, each about twenty feet high with bushes maybe three or four feet high on top. The islets were eroded somewhat at the water line kind of like a narrow waist. It is quiet where we were—we could talk in conversational tones across the water. We heard occasional heavy gunfire from beyond the coastline about three miles away. We confirmed that each of us was OK—no major injuries, no bleeding.

“Caddy three, Caddy three, Come up primary Guard freq.” Yeow!

Switch radio: "Caddy three, up on Guard!"

"Caddy three, This is Pistol One, on-scene SAR Commander. We think we have you located. Stand by and come up 'freq.' to check in at the briefed times. Over."

"Caddy Three, copy, standing by. Out."

Mike suggested that if we're not picked up by dark, we'd need to hide on one or maybe separate little islands after sinking our rafts. Yep, that sounded like a plan. We both go back to inventorying our survival gear and putting stuff in our survival vest and flying suit pockets. "Mike! We need to drink water." We both finished off our mission water from our G-suit pockets.

Hey, that's a plane to the north! It's one of ours! Bottom of the clouds must be 2,000 or 3,000 feet. Smoke trail—F-4; six miles or so, dropping down, must be looking for us! Yes! It's coming right at us! Must be slow, though—it's rocking its wings! We both wildly wave our arms!

Quick! Up on "freq." to hear, "Caddy Three, we have 'Tally Ho' on two."

"Caddy Three, copy."

"Caddy Three, This is Pistol One. Hang in there; we're working on a pickup. Come up in fifteen."

Pistol 1 is Escort Mission Lead from the 35th TFS. With over two thousand hours of F-105 and F-4 time and back for a second tour, he has all the crusty fighter pilot swagger a

man could want. Only better, because he always delivered—in flight discipline, in bombs on target, and in smoothly guiding his squadron mates in the pointy end of the spear, common sense tactics. His eyes are those of the aerial predator, and his heart—well—he did a lot of things on this day he didn't have to do and maybe a few he should not have.

I found out later that he stayed on scene as SAR Commander the entire time, making three trips to the tanker. ABCCC tried to send him back to Korat by replacing him with a scrambled two-ship but he refused—since he had a “Tally” on the downed crewmen and would need to verbally guide the rescue chopper in.

Back at the Tonkin Gulf Yacht Club, small rubber boat class, Mike and I stayed busy selecting favorable little islets for potential use if we were not rescued before nightfall. We secured our survival kits to the raft and went through all our pockets to sanitize our belongings so as not to aid the enemy should we be captured. Ahem, well, yes, we did sanitize before every mission. But here's what I found in my pockets and nervously sent to the bottom of the Gulf: Thai, South Vietnamese, and government-issue “script” money; a driver's license from Da Nang; part of a letter from my wife; and a head band I wore under my helmet to catch the sweat. The headband was cotton, blue and red patterns with “Love” in the center and “Viet” and “Nam” on the sides. It was inappropriate attire, no doubt, if a “guest” of the Gomers. I tightly wrapped all my coins for ballast, I send my *unsanitary* package to the deep. I would have *sworn* I'd honestly sanitized before stepping to fly!

I took my helmet off for a while, but remembered about heat and fluid loss, even with the broken-to-overcast cloud

deck above, and put it back on and drank some canned water. I start to notice some soreness in my back, my neck, and the insides of my thighs. Mike said he thought his neck was burned a little and was a little sore. Then it hit me like a ton of bricks: My gosh, what if we're captured! It'd been in my thoughts before, but I thought I had it under control. Oh, God! Wife, kids, Mom, Dad, sisters, brother. What would my capture do to them? I knew the torture stories. Will I be strong enough to just give them the Code of Conduct stuff—or not much more? Can I keep from signing their propaganda? Can I escape?—Have to try before we get to the Hanoi Hilton. I had nausea, shivers, and a washed-out feeling in the gut, that feeling in the jaws back by the ears when you've blown up too many balloons.

Hey! Get hold of yourself! We ain't done yet! So I fought it. It helped to talk quietly to Mike. "Dear God, please help us get rescued!" We both realized we'd been on an enormous emotional roller coaster—highest when in radio contact, lowest in between—and vowed to help each other stay up.

"Yeoww, what's that?" Oh, an F-4—looks like an "E" model with shark's teeth—wonder why it's making a low pass halfway between us and the coast? Don't think I like this much! Well, he's gone now—sure am nervous, though—hey! He's on a low pass again! "Bbbrrrrrrrrrr" Oh, shoot, he just hosed something over there with his 20mm Gatling gun! Hope he got whatever it was! Well, he's not coming around for another pass—that's good news, I guess. We found out later that four Gomers in a wooden boat were paddling in our general direction. Probably just fishermen, but unlucky ones this day. They jumped out of the boat during the first pass by the F-4E; the boat was cut in half by the F-4's bullets on the second pass.

We hadn't heard anything since the last fifteen-minute check-in. How long have we been here playing sailor in our rubber dinghies anyway? Poop! My watch stopped! We must have been in the water for three hours or more! Darn it, my big, heavy, auto-winding, steel-cased Seiko from James Jewelers in Bangkok is still ticking; second hand is moving; 1245 hours! That can't be right! Oh, time for check in. Radio out; antenna up; static—hiss.

Shoot, what's that sound! Jet engines! There! MiGs from the south? Four- ship? Oh, thank God, they're ours—Navy A-7s—just south of our position headed for the coast. On Guard freq.: "SAR commander, this is Alpha Kilo Lima Three Seven—four A-sevens with sixteen Rockeyes, eight Zunies and four thousand rounds of twenty mike mike. Where do you want 'em!"

Sierra Hotel! I almost wet my pants! That's definitely a good sign! Navy must be sending in a chopper! We hear sounds of AAA guns from the shore as the A-7s continue in a turn underneath the cloud deck and go to an orbit somewhere to the north.

"SAR leader, this is Caddy Three, over."

"Caddy Three, this is Pistol One. Starting to look good again. Come back up in fifteen."

"Caddy Three, roger."

Mike and I were definitely on a high. We talked a little about the possibility of a Navy pickup. A boat? Probably not here. We were only about fifty miles north of Haiphong Harbor. Navy chopper? More likely. Hmmm—that's a little

different—they hook up to our harness with their cable, don't they?

Okay, let's recheck everything: flares, radios, survival kit, raft, helmet strap snapped. Oh yeah, we'll have to cut away from the raft before they'll hook us to the chopper—check G-suit survival knife hook blade—OK. Hey! What's that? Another F-4E low pass from the north? Not Good! Quick scan of the horizon—I don't see anything! What gives? Oh, shoot, he's lining up for a pass on us—I don't see any Gomer boats! What's that? Under his nose? Is he shooting at something? I'll be darned, he's flashing the landing/taxi light! Big Ugly, draggin' smoke, gear and flaps down, rocking its sawtoothed wings at about two hundred feet AGL! Beautiful sight, but why?

"Caddy Three, Pistol One. Caddy Three, Pistol One."

"Pistol One, Caddy Three is up!"

"Caddy Three, Navy chopper southeast about five minutes out. Stand by with Smoke!"

"Caddy Three, roger that!"

Mike and I had drifted to within fifty feet of each other for a while, but knew we needed a larger distance between us for easier pickup. Also, if a Gomer boat swooped down on one of us, the other might be able to hide, get up on an islet, or whatever to avoid capture. We are about fifty yards apart now and eagerly paddling for more separation between ourselves and to gain positions equidistant from the many small islands. Satisfied with my position, I paddle around to face southeast with Mike to my north.

There she is! Big ol' helicopter coming around the south end of one of the bigger islands! The F-4 must be giving a vector! F-4 is pulling up, but the chopper is coming straight on. Must be at 200 feet AGL and three or four miles away! Okay, about time for smoke. A wave to Mike and we both pop our red-orange smoke flares. Looks like a "Jolly," but not quite. Must be the Navy Rescue bird. Looks like she's slowing down. Why is she hovering there? No, she's accelerating again.

"Caddy Three, this is Navy 'Big Mother' rescue, how copy?"

"Darn, you look good! Caddy Three Alpha and Bravo standing by!"

Passing half mile to our east; going for Mike first; oh, he must be positioning to hover into the wind! Yep, right down our smoke flare trails. We find out later that the Navy chopper HH-3A, "Big Mother," almost has to do another big 360 degree turn to burn off about twenty minutes' worth of fuel. They are so heavy they are afraid they can't hold a hover for the pickup. Our smoke indicates that there is about fifteen knots of wind from the southeast, which is enough to hover. I sometimes wonder what my reaction would have been if she had passed us by, flown off to the northeast, and not come back for fifteen or twenty minutes.

Jeez! That guy was pretty high when he jumped from the chopper! Don't see the "penetrator" device on the rescue cable? Oh, yeah, Navy hookup is different. Seems to be taking a while; hope Mike is all right! Right! Need to do some more preparations! Smoke is gone; toss dead stub. Recheck harness hooks, all secure; helmet secure; find raft

lanyard; cut it with survival knife (hope it isn't too soon); get raft lanyard out of the way. Dig out second smoke flare; pop it.

Mike is on the way up! Now the PJ is on the way up! Here they come! Gettin' close! Toss flare, radio off, stuff it in suit, roll out of raft, push it away. Chopper starts to slow to hover. I can see the two pilots' faces with big grins. Big two-armed wave from me and I mouth the words "Thank you!" and I throw them kisses with both hands! Now why did I do that? They'll think I'm strange or something! They're pulling up abeam now. Hey! Look at the PJ! Black flippers, cutoff dungarees, black snorkel and diving goggles, and a full black beard, but within Navy regulation, I'm sure! Boy, he looks like a linebacker!—and a gray T-shirt with a big yellow "smiley face" on it and the words "Jesus Saves"! Prettiest sight I've ever seen!

Here he comes! Splash! "Yeah, I'm doing fine, no injuries, raft is cut away!" Did he call me Sir? He didn't have to do that! He checks me over first, then the harness and the raft lanyard. He grabs the rescue cable as the chopper comes close again, hooks me up, grabs on to my harness, and off we go up the cable lift. Strong hands grab me from behind and tumble us both onto the "deck." I'm already speaking "Navy"! Somebody grabbed me again, picked me up, guided me to a web seat and buckled me in—all the while asking me how I am, where does it hurt, am I sick, and so forth. A couple of guys are working on Mike, putting a light bandage on his neck.

I became aware of the warm air; the sturdy metal airframe around us; and the powerful, comforting roar and vibrations of this American built air machine. All of a sudden I was inundated by a huge rush of gratitude welling up from

deep inside—toward someone, toward everyone, toward God, Buddha, whomever. It slowly dawned on me just how tightly wound up I have been for the past hour. Mike and I gave each other a “thumbs up,” and I noticed the other Navy crewmen nodding to each other and toward the cockpit. I could feel some of the tension ebbing from my shoulders. I checked my watch—it’s working, but it said 1315 hours—it can’t be right! It’d been at least three hours! I felt myself starting to relax a little, and I took what seems to be my first really deep breath in a long time.

Shoot! What was that! We’ve been hit!

My “oh shoot” meter had just been frapping pegged! Again! As scared as I had been before and as “rescued” warm and fuzzy as I was just starting to feel, I jumped so hard I darn near broke both of my own legs on the seat straps. One of the PJs opened up with the M-60 machine gun on our two rafts floating in the water below. Even when my eyes refocused, and I figured out it was the gun noise from the door, I still thought a Gomer patrol boat had come blazing on the scene.

“No, Sir, Captain, just sinking your rafts so the Gomers don’t get ’em!”

“Holy cow! That scared the poop outta me!”

“Sorry, Sir, shoulda warned ya’.”

“No sweat—I’m okay now.”

“You want a cigarette, Sir?” Offers me a Marlboro.

“No thanks. Got my own.” Pull out my lighter and Benson & Hedges—they’re soaked—of course.

The PJ hadn’t moved. I sheepishly looked up, grinned, took a Marlboro and let him light it with his lighter. Jeez! Look at my hands shake!

“Uh, Thanks...Thanks for everything!”

Rumbles and hums got louder; vibrations changed to a higher frequency; we started to move away from the pickup site; getting that calm feeling again; I had to get a handle on these mood changes.

Smoked another cigarette, shook hands with the rear deck crewmen. They knew, we can see it in their young faces. They knew how grateful we both were.

Mike and I looked at each and nodded, sharing once again that brotherhood born from being tested in the fires of combat more severely than we had ever been tested before. We came out the other side more appreciative of how much we have to depend on each other and our squadron mates to stay alive. We got *real* close this time, but we have cheated death, or worse—capture, again.

The helicopter’s crew chief, “Plane Captain” in Navy speak, shakes my shoulder, thumbs back toward cockpit and gives me his headset to put on. Looking toward cockpit, I key the intercom and say, “Happy Camper here!” Talking to other pilots, I automatically had to put on a little “bravado.” I suspect this “clever” opening remark was belied by what I assume was a somewhat shaky voice!

Both pilots look back over their shoulders and the aircraft commander said, "Captain, were you the one who blew us a kiss down there?"

I nod and reply, "Yes."

"We were glad to see you, too! First report we got had you in Haiphong Harbor. That's why it took a little longer to pick you guys up. Welcome aboard!"

"Thanks guys, we owe you big time; drinks are on us!"

Laughing, "Sure thing, Captain. We're gonna land on the Long Beach first; get you both checked over. Give your flight gear to the plane captain; we'll get it cleaned up and back to you."

"OK!"

We were headed south by southeast, still among the group of islands off the coast, at about 200 feet AGL—from the engine and aircraft sounds, just about as fast as a big helo can go. Mike and I are both looking toward the west out the gunner's open door to watch the islands and the coastline slowly move away. We break out from under the cloud deck now, and the sun glints off the sea. It's kind of an eerie sight to be this low and slow this close to the enemy's homeland. Fast movers see a much different "sight" picture than the one we're in now!

Plane captain came back again; gave me his headset; showed me the UHF button; and motioned me to the "port," Navy's "left," windows. On intercom, helo pilot said,

“Captain, your buddy with the big balls wants to say hi. He’s been in formation for about ten minutes.”

What I see out the port side is indeed a beautiful sight! There sat a big F-4E, engine exhausts smokin’, sporting Shark’s teeth, bristling with AIM-7 and AIM-9 missiles, flaps half down, at a “healthy” angle of attack, and in perfect combat spread formation. We could make out hand waves from both cockpits.

“Caddy Three, Pistol One. You ‘Panthers’ all right?”

Fumble for the right switch; “Pistol One, we’re doin’ great now! Thanks, Gary!”

Starting to clear the last of the islands, we turn to the southeast and the open seas. “Caddy, see you at the home ‘drome’!”

Pistol 1 accelerated in a left climbing turn and was out of sight in no time. I gave head set back, rebuckled up, looked at Mike and yell, “Retterbush again!”

Nodding, Mike shouts back, “SAR commander?” I nod back and grin with a lot of rapid eye blinking—must be the salt air making my eyes water.

When I asked him about escorting the chopper, he simply said, “If any guns came up from the bigger islands, they’d shoot at me first, and I had those A-7s as top cover.”

As we slowed down for the approach and landing on the nuclear powered destroyer USS *Long Beach*, CGN 9, we saw

one, maybe two carriers off on the east horizon with several other ships spread out for twenty miles or so. When the plane captain signaled to us, we unbuckled and guided down a ramp to the helo landing deck. It's a little after 1345 hours.

Wow, didn't think there were this many people on a destroyer! Better wave! Maybe a "thumbs up," too!

Even over the whine of the chopper, we heard the clapping, whistles, and yells from the crew. Now *that* kinda made Mike and me stand a little taller! I'm thinking, "*Jeez, guys, we're real happy to be here, but we screwed up by getting shot down in the first place!*" They didn't seem to care.

Out of the crowd on the edge of the helo deck came an officer in khakis, obviously the Captain. I get off a snappy salute, Mike followed, and yelled, "Permission to come aboard, Sir!" I think I had seen that in an old John Wayne movie somewhere! Even though he's "uncovered," he almost returned the salute. Instead, he shook our hands, introduces us to a LtJG, Lieutenant Junior Grade, and says he'll talk to us after we're checked out.

We're led down into the ship's bowels to the infirmary, where we strip down, and are given a pretty thorough physical check out. We got a quick "Navy" shower, then are treated for cuts and abrasions. Hmm, how fast were we going when we "stepped over the side?" Mike is treated for a moderate burn on the back of his neck. Next we're given some juice and cookies, and outfitted in boxer shorts, T-shirts, Navy khakis, with our ranks pinned "Navy style" on

the collars, and shower clogs. The rest of our gear is being washed.

The ship's intelligence officer stopped by, asked a few questions—names, call sign, mission, where/what shot us down, problems with rescue (none), and adds his welcome back. We're then guided to the Captain's quarters. He joins us, asked how we feel and provided more juice and cookies. We told him the short version about the mission, shoot down, and rescue. He was a pretty cool guy and said we're going on to the *Kitty Hawk* soon and gives us both some *Long Beach* souvenirs. He shook our hands and quite sincerely said, "Glad to have you both back." Mike and I "gush out" our many thanks for his crew's efforts in our rescue and our cleanup. The LtJG magically appears in time to keep us from embarrassing ourselves and says we need to hurry to the chopper. He assures us our gear will be returned ("Yeah, sure," I think!) on the *Kitty Hawk* and ushers us back aboard the Big Mother.

1500 HOURS—USS *KITTY HAWK*, CVA 63

Zowie! Look at the size of that boat—I mean, carrier, the USS *Kitty Hawk*, CVA 63. Big Mother landed and shut down. Down the ramp again to see, and this time hear, about two hundred swabbies clapping and hollering! There was a *much* larger variety of duty uniforms! Wonder what all those different colored vests and helmets mean? We were still a little confused by the reception, but Mike and I give big arm-over-head waves. Again, an obvious "honcho" stepped out of the crowd. Our "crispiest" salutes go unreturned; permission to come aboard was granted, and we got a strong handshake from the "heavy" who introduces himself as, "The Air Boss." The "Hawk" is obviously between "cycles" (launch and recovery of aircraft). Under escort, he sends us off for more medical checks. This time we get

“high fives” and pats on the back as we are funneled through the crowd on our way below deck. The Navy Lieutenant F-4 pilot escort asked us lots of aviator questions on the way down to a small galley, where we were greeted by more shouts and a big bowl of Navy bean soup and crackers. Then, Mike and I are totally “gyros tumbled” by this time—way too many turns into different sized and shaped “tunnels”—off to the infirmary for a complete checkover. They recleaned and put more salve on our cuts and abrasions. Mike got a new bandage for his neck, we both got aspirin for some soreness creeping into our bodies. Another intelligence officer stops in, so we related our mission saga again, more fully this time, aided by some very good operational type questions from our naval aviator escort. Then off to the Air Boss’s cabin at about 1630 hours.

The Captain greets us at the door—“hatch”—I guess, and leads us across the carpet to a leather couch with snacks and sodas on a teak coffee table. He is a very gracious gentleman, and I instantly decided I would enjoy working for him, *if* I didn’t have to do Carrier Ops! A map is brought in so he could better visualize our route and location of bailout, and so forth. After thirty minutes or so he said, there’re some Air Force exchange pilots about to show up and excuses himself, saying something like, “Time for ‘The Hawk’ to launch some Kick Uncle Ho’s Buttmissions!” I like his style!

As he departs, five or six AF flyers showed up to welcome us aboard. Among them were two F-4 jocks I had briefly run across before, and less than a year later, we would reunite as the initial cadre of newly formed AF Aggressors, 64th Fighter Weapons Squadron, at Nellis AFB. There is “lotsa” kidding around and grinning—some at the Navy’s expense, as I try to find out what it’s like to get

“slung” off a small boat and have to try to land on a “postage stamp” in the middle of the ocean! We are offered and accept a “ship’s tour” for after dinner.

Still in our khakis and shower clogs, we are once again guided through a maze to, someone mentioned, the formal or “Captain’s Mess.” Our lieutenant takes us to the “head” (Ooops! I mean “cranium”) table, introduces us to the Ship Captain, who welcomes us kind of “stony-faced.” As we were shown to our seats I hear “bells” or chimes, which for some reason makes me ask the Lieutenant “Wonder who’s at the door?” He responds with a weak grin. (*Am I punch drunk or just getting my sense of humor back?*) It is 1700 hours—a specific number of “bells” in Navy “ship time,” but I have no idea of the significance.

We stand for the invocation, which hit me pretty hard since our recovery is specifically addressed. The Captain then stands and welcomes us both by name to the *Kitty Hawk* and back from the “jaws of death.” Polite applause and waves of thanks.

We were served, by Filipino stewards, a great meal: salad, steak, potatoes, green beans and cake for dessert, all on a dizzying array of gold-and-navy-blue-trimmed china. It was the best meal and service I’d had in a *long* time. It was way better than meals at Korat, which were even way better than at Da Nang, which were even way better than Bien Hoa, which were even way better than Khe San; which were...you get the point?

After dinner we were taken to our bunks/cabins for the night, where we were given all of our usable gear back. Back into our cleaned “bags,” and we inventory our “stuff.”

Everything had been cleaned up and dried off as much as possible. We were much impressed at this effort from untold minions! About the only things missing were our flares, for which there was a signed hand receipt! Even our .38 pistols and ammo had been cleaned and oiled!

Two pilots (one Navy, one Air Force) showed up for our tour. Off we went up to the “catwalk” near the CAG’s (Commander, Air Group) or Air Boss’s position in the conning tower; down to the below deck hanger for “turning” or repairing, reloading and refueling the jets; a quick look at the armament storage area; and then to the Combat Information Center (CIC), where the combat sorties were planned and monitored. For Air Force guys, the CIC functioned like a Command Post, mission planning room, and intelligence section all rolled into one—and then stuffed into an eight-by-eight-foot room with no windows. One of the on-duty intelligence types drags us to his “station” and gave us a detailed, very interesting rundown on the missions readying for launch. We got to see poststrike photos from a previous strike and prestrike photos for the next “go.” Asking us if we had any “Air Force” information, he explained the ongoing, high level of effort in trying to pinpoint the exact location of Jane “The Pinko Commie Witch” Fonda. Fonda, with no apparent regard for our criminally mistreated American Prisoners of War, was at this time personally spreading support and encouragement to the “poor, misunderstood” North Vietnamese people. I am almost sure that his quest for her location was driven by an overpowering desire to make sure that absolutely no “accidental” harm fell to her from any Navy or Air Force “Yankee Air Pirates.”

About 2100 hours, we proceeded to the LSO’s (Landing Safety Officer) position on the port side of the flight deck

“landing area.” You know! The LSO is the guy in the World War II carrier movies wearing the goggles and holding two bright flags in his hands, parallel to the horizon, as he stands on the end of the ship, signaling to the shot-up and injured Navy pilots trying to land? Well, it was now all done electronically, since the aircraft were approaching the deck at more than twice the speed of their prop-driven predecessors. First, we got our LSO safety briefing, covering catastrophic mishaps from which our only hope of survival is to throw our pink bodies off the side of the ship onto a pitifully small net some fifteen feet below. (Some added advice from the LSO: “Don’t be first in the net, but whatever you do don’t be last!”) And then scramble from the net and the ensuing jet fuel fire to refuge in a small ammunition storage room! I think the Navy must get extra pay for stuff like this!

We then had the truly awe-inspiring experience of watching some twenty fighters make night (and I mean darker than a spelunker’s cave when the batteries give out—no moon, no horizon, nothing to aid one’s depth perception) traps on “The Hawk.” We watched A-7Es, A-6Es, KA-6Ds (buddy tankers), and F-4Bs slam onto the deck. (One of the F-4s provided some additional “thrills” by having to perform a “bolter”—where a plane’s tail hook misses the wire and the jet wallows off the end of the canted deck in full afterburner for another try at approach and landing!) The “finale” is an RA-5C Vigilante whose “perfect” trap made the aft of the carrier settle about four feet when it “hit” the deck! This was easily my second most terrifying experience on this day!

After the recovery, we were taken to one of the nicer junior officer’s quarters, where two of the three inhabitants are temporarily off ship. There “happens” to be a bottle of

rum and sodas set out which must have been very old, 'cause the stuff is evaporating faster than we can drink it. By mere chance, comma, however, comma, every few minutes a quiet knock on the “hatch” provides entry to another combat veteran with a small satchel containing a dram or so of liquid manna. One of the AF exchange guys came by and “barters” for our AF survival vest—seems they held more of the “right stuff” than the Navy issue vest! A small, subdued party broke out with much swapping of stories and sea tales—most of which began with, “Now this is no poop...” One particular story related that night confirmed *all* my suspicions! Seems the Navy’s Flight Surgeon equivalents had recently studied combat flight stress by hooking up sensors and recorders to a group of naval aviators for a period of time. One of the “findings” revealed (no surprise to me!) that all the sensors “spiked” at the same levels during night carrier landings as were recorded during SAM evasion maneuvers! It is my humble contention that night carrier landings fully explain and justify the outrageous behavior of Naval Aviators when “on the beach”! Better thee than me! 'Nuff said!

Having single-handedly (OK, OK, I did have some help) devoided the ship of its “mission whiskey,” Mike and I retired to our bunks about midnight. Sleep for both of us that night is fitful—for the obvious reasons, but also because every two hours or so there would be a lengthy sequence of clanking of heavy chains followed by a long mournful “swoosh” followed by clanking...You get the picture.

0700 HOURS, WEDNESDAY MORNING, JULY 21, 1972,
ABOARD “*THE HAWK*”

After wolfing down a hearty breakfast (where do they keep all this good food onboard ship?), Mike and I were ready to

get back to Korat. Bundling up our gear, we are handed a set of strange looking, “Navy standard” TAD orders (read: TDY). We are escorted to the CAG’s cabin for a brief “good-bye” from the Air Boss. We were presented some nice “Hawk” souvenirs—baseball caps, lighters with our names engraved, pins and decals, and then we hustled to a C-1 COD twin engine prop job. We were summarily “slung” off the front of the boat with only slight “sinkage” before a slow, repeat, slow climb can be eked from the roaring engines.

About an hour later, we “crash” landed at Ton Son Nhut Air Base outside of Saigon. We know immediately that we are back in the war zone by the wretched stench permeating the passenger terminal, all the Military Police on guard, and the throng of “suspicious” looking natives (read: Viet Cong infiltrators). We encountered some truly frightened and scary looking combat grunts waiting for their “Freedom Flight” back to “the world.” Some of these GIs looked as if they were *really* “on the edge”! Hmmm. Wonder what Mike and I looked like?

After about a two-hour wait and some questioning from noncombat, nonsupport pax terminal toads about these two wild-eyed, grungy-looking AF flyers with Navy TAD/flight orders (me and Mike), we board a T-39 for Thailand. We landed about 1530 hours at Korat, shutting down in front of Base Operations. Waiting on the ramp were some thirty people, including, surprisingly, about ten enlisted troops. This time when we stopped at the top of the steps, saluted, and shouted, “Reporting for duty, Sir!” our salutes were returned. As we reached the tarmac, I saw a heavy drive up, leap from his blue sedan, and approach us straight on. Uh-oh! He looks like he’s about to jump into our “stuff”! Then I see that he recognizes us as his wingies from the mission on

the nineteenth of July when he led us on a “MiG hunt” during egress at low level along Phantom Ridge. He growled a welcome back and departed. Whew! After that, lots of hand shaking, shoulder punching and friendly kidding breaks out as we head for the “bread van” with our gear in tow.

The enlisted troops among the greeters were the two crew chiefs for tail #265 and some of the ejection seat, parachute, and survival kit guys. Before we went into the Squadron Ops building, we talk to them about the jet and how the equipment “worked like a charm.”

At 1630 we reported to Wing HQ for our “shootdown” debriefing. It lasted until 1800, and was scheduled to resume at 0900 the next day. Mike and I “slide” back to 35th Ops for a coupla cold ones and stood at the bar for about two more hours, relating the saga of the previous day’s activities.

That evening while celebrating our rescue with our fellow warriors, Mike and I decided we needed to “take care” of the aircraft, ejection seat, parachute, and survival kit troops as best we can. We are able to ascertain the preferred libations of those directly involved and provided a suitable quantity of the highest quality booze-berries to the troops involved. It is a “tradition,” doncha know! We even mailed a sizable sum to the *Kitty Hawk* to take care of the Big Mother crew!

Next morning, we debriefed until noon. There is some paperwork to formalize the disposition of AF equipment—the jet, all the armament, our pistols and ammo, our survival gear, and our flight gear. We found out the next day that all

of our equipment including the guns had to be “shoot-canned” due to corrosion! Saltwater is nasty stuff!

There was one thing that came out of our lengthy debriefing that affects the whole squadron. I heard—for the first time—that Mike had some difficulty with his survival radio. Seems like he had gotten it from his vest while in the “chute,” pulled up the antenna to turn it on, but didn’t get it put away properly before impacting the water. Once in his raft and after we had verbally—across the gentle waters of the Gulf of Tonkin—checked on each other, he got the radio back out to switch out of “beeper” mode to “voice.” Well, the antenna had been bent on impact, so it was merrily beeping away all this time. He could hear it when he turned the volume up, and, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t get the antenna down to shut it off! He figured out that it was blocking our voice capability on primary Guard frequency and got a little frustrated. Sooooo, he pulled out his government issue, six rounds fully loaded, .38 caliber revolver (about to be put to use as a “remote survival radio shut-off device”), and, holding the radio over the side of the raft by its antenna, shot it in the heart! There *were*, as one might suspect, several other options available, such as turning the option select switch to one of the voice positions, which shuts off the beeper and requires pressing the transmit key to talk. Or removing the batteries from the radio, or simply dropping it to the bottom of the sea, to name just a few. There were many furrowed brows in the debriefing room as Mike relates his, perfectly logical at the time, actions. Corrective action for this little “oops” was a Saturday morning two-hour survival equipment refresher course—mandatory attendance by all 35th TFS flying personnel. Mike took major, somewhat good-natured, crapola from his squadron mates for his “faux pas”!

Now, if you recall, Mike and I were able to talk in conversational tones across the water; we were fifty to one hundred meters apart in plain sight. I was aware that I was experiencing extreme emotional swings. Mike shot his radio! I did not hear it! I did not hear him shoot his gun! No doubt in a deep, dark nadir of fear and despair, I had not heard the firing of a .38 caliber pistol—unbelievable! I guess my ears had decided to join my rectum in slamming shut!

The first two flights after our shootdown taught me a little humility. On July 22, I flew a Functional Check Flight (FCF) or “test hop” on a jet coming out of maintenance. I was surprised, caught off guard, at my nervousness. My next combat mission was on July 25 to I (eye) Corps (northernmost part of South Vietnam). In both cases, while waiting to taxi, I had to put my hands on the glare shield, bend my head down, and take several deep breaths. Once we taxied, everything seemed to fall into place. My standard habit patterns snapped back onto the brain—held clipboard. The “elephant” was crammed back in my helmet bag, and the rest of the mission was just like all the others—hours of relative “boredom” punctuated every once in a while by a few seconds of sheer terror.

I flew seventeen more combat missions, including three to RP-6, after the “rubber rafting excursion.” Turns out I was still just as “brave,” as tactically savvy, as accurate with my bombs, and as timely and accurate in making airborne decisions as I had been before. I was very happy about that!

In my two tours, I had accumulated 360.4 hours of F-4 C/D/E combat time, 257 total combat sorties, 137 over North Vietnam, 17 (okay, you nitpickers, 16 and a half) into Route Package 6. I flew my last combat mission (to date, at least) on September 1, 1972. I spent the next six weeks as

the Chief of Weapons at Da Nang, which was operating as a remote “combat turn” base for missions in northern South Vietnam, “same-same” as Bien Hoa had been doing in the south. In mid-October I returned to Kunsan “By the Sea” in time to take my Squadron Officers School final exam (honest!), pack up, catch my own personal “Freedom Flight” home to my family, en route to the 64th Aggressors at Nellis.

Bottom line: All that repetitive, often pain-in-the-butt training will save your life when your brain cramps up in a crisis. Pay attention!

SOME WORDS TO LIVE BY

“Train like you are going to fight.”

“We’re not here to make friends...”

“Fly, fight, win!”

“There are no atheists in a SAM break”

“It may be a cruddy war, but it’s the only one we have!”

Oh, yeah, I almost forgot...

“DEAD BUG!”



TWO MIG KILLS
MY FIRST MIG-21, SEPTEMBER 12, 1972
GARY RETTERBUSH

I was the pilot of Finch 3, an F-4E Phantom II. Finch flight was a flight of four Phantoms led by the Squadron Commander of the 35th Tactical Fighter Squadron. The 35th TFS was permanently based at Kunsan Air Base, Korea, but was on temporary duty to Korat Royal Thai Air Base, Thailand, to assist in Operation Linebacker I.

Finch flight was part of a large strike package of aircraft flying in the general area of Hanoi, in Route Pack VI, North Vietnam. The strike force consisted of F-4s carrying bombs, F-4 strike escort to neutralize the MiGs, F-4 chaff bombers to degrade the enemy's radar, F-105 Wild Weasels to troll for SAMs, and F-4 hunter-killers, who flew with the Weasels to drop general-purpose bombs and CBUs on the SAM sites.

While we were heading to the target, several North Vietnamese MiG-21s jumped the strike force. The MiGs came from high and behind my flight and dove down through us, firing their missiles as they came. It was a rather chaotic time!

During the maneuvering that followed, our flight broke apart, and we ended up as two elements of two F-4s. I maneuvered to the 6 o'clock position behind a MiG-21 and Dan, my backseater, got a good radar lock on the MiG. Conditions were excellent, almost textbook. I fired two Sparrows, which did not guide. They simply went ballistic and did nothing except alert the MiG pilot I was behind him.

I had a lot of overtake and continued to close on the MiG. I changed my armament switches from Sparrow to Sidewinder. As soon as I was within range, approximately 9,000 feet, I got a good tone and fired three missiles. They either didn't guide or their proximity fuses didn't work. The last missile went close to the cockpit and got the MiG pilot's attention! He broke hard, and I followed and continued to close. I got in position to use my 20mm cannon and fired a couple of short bursts at the MiG. Some of the bullets hit the MiG's left wing near where it joined the fuselage, and the MiG started burning immediately. I was now closing way too fast and did a high-speed yo-yo maneuver, which once again put me in position to fire another burst from my gun. These hit in and around the cockpit, and the aircraft pitched up. I saw the pilot slumped forward in the cockpit. The aircraft then stalled and snapped down as I flew past it. I watched the burning MiG until it hit the ground and exploded in a cloud of smoke and fire.



TWO MIG KILLS
MY SECOND MIG-21, OCTOBER 8, 1972
GARY RETTERBUSH

I was the leader of Lark flight, a flight of four F-4E Phantoms flying cover for a flight of four F-4Ds on a bombing mission near Yen Bai Airfield in North Vietnam. I was also the mission leader of this very small strike package.

After we refueled from the KC-135 tankers on the ingress route, one F-4 in my flight had a mechanical problem. I sent that airplane and a wingman home. Under the rules of engagement at that time, I should have aborted the mission, since I had only two fighters in my flight, but I chose to continue the mission.

As we approached the border of North Vietnam, "Disco" warned us that a MiG was scrambling, and we were probably its target. As we continued inbound, Disco gave us frequent warnings of the MiG's progress and location. It was indeed coming our way.

The engagement was almost like a GCI in reverse. Disco announced the MiG was at our 10:30 high. Sure enough, my

backseater, Bob, pointed out a silver glint in the sun as the MiG turned down on us. I called a "hijack" and had the fighters jettison their external fuel tanks and light afterburners as we turned into the MiG. A few seconds later, I had the F-4 bomber flight break as the MiG came closer to the bombers.

The MiG dove down trying to attack the breaking bombers. I was on his tail, but at a very high angle off. The book said the Sidewinder would not guide to the target if the angle off at the time of firing was greater than 45 degrees.

I fired two Sidewinders at the diving MiG but didn't expect either of them to guide because the angle off was far beyond the limits. Both missiles went ballistic as anticipated. I then tried to jettison the rest of my missiles, including the three Sparrows. I was yelling for Bob to give me a caged gunsight because the reticle was completely off of the windscreen due to the high angle off and the high Gs we were pulling. Bob got the gunsight locked. I very quickly did a little Kentucky windage estimate, pulled the pipper way out in front of the MiG, and high and fired a short burst from my Gatling gun.

To my pleasant surprise, the bullets hit the MiG in the fuselage near the left wing, and it immediately burst into flames. The pilot didn't hesitate and ejected immediately. Then came an even bigger surprise; he had a beautiful pastel pink parachute! I circled him one time and then regrouped the flight for our trip home.

The entire engagement was visible from the Yen Bai North Vietnam airfield tower if anyone was in it at that time.

The engagement lasted only a minute or two from start to finish. When I landed, I checked the gun and found that I had fired only ninety-six rounds, including the exciter burst, which was probably about half of the bullets fired.

I was extremely pleased that I had a gun camera for this mission; it had checked out well going in. When I removed the film pack, it looked like it had functioned correctly. I gave the film to the gun camera guys and told them to really take care in developing it. About an hour later they came to me with the results and a great film, but all of it was flying straight and level after the refueling. I tested the gun after leaving the tanker, and the camera apparently continued to run after the test firing. All of the film was used long before the dogfight began. So, unfortunately, I did not have the great MiG kill camera film that I had hoped for.



THE F-111 IN LINEBACKER I AND II

ROGER CARLETON

In August 1971, I was assigned—not willingly—to the 474th TFW flying the F-111A (aka McNamara’s folly) at Nellis AFB, Nevada. I say “not willingly” because I was previously flying the F-100D “Super Sabre” and had done a one-year tour in Southeast Asia from November 1969–October 1970. No single-seat aviator wants to go to a dual-place aircraft, especially one where you sit side-by-side (this arrangement was courtesy of the US Navy before they dumped the F-111). A tandem seating arrangement would have made it impossible to use the aircraft carrier’s elevators, as the aircraft would have been too long.

The transition to the F-111, or Aardvark, as it was commonly known, was uneventful. However, many things about the jet and training program left one with the sense that the full capability of the aircraft was not being realized. I personally did not like the side-by-side seating arrangement because it was difficult for the pilot—commonly called the aircraft commander—to see anything from his 3 o’clock to 6 o’clock position. The right seater, usually a navigator, had to operate the attack radar, so his focus was usually heads down in the scope. The navigator

also controlled the armament control panel on his side of the cockpit. The pilot controlled only the Master Arm switch. I am 99 percent certain this arrangement was for the delivery of nuclear weapons. It would take specific actions by two crewmembers to arm and release a weapon.

Unlike other Air Force fighters, there were no ejection seats in the Aardvark. Instead, the entire crew compartment, or capsule, would separate from the aircraft once an ejection handle was activated and the pyrotechnics fired properly. Before my squadron deployed to Southeast Asia, the wing lost an F-111. Two crewmembers were killed because the pyrotechnics (think of these as a fuse that enabled the crew capsule to separate) failed to function. Our F-111s were grounded for about a month until a fix was identified, and all the aircraft were inspected. I never did fully trust the ejection system. Thankfully, I never had the occasion to pull the handle for a nylon letdown.

The F-111 was a variable swept wing, all weather, supersonic aircraft equipped with both an attack radar and terrain-following radars (TFR). TFR is a technology that allows very-low-flying aircraft to maintain a relatively constant altitude above ground level. The F-111 employed two TFR radars in its elongated nose as well as the larger attack radar dish. Each TFR system was “stand alone” such that if one failed, the pilot could select the second system. Prior to deploying for Linebacker, we never flew TFR in the weather during stateside training sorties. Additionally, the primary means of weapons delivery was either straight and level or “toss bomb,” using the analog computer. The aircraft was capable of dive-bombing but we never trained for that mission.

The F-111's radar was optimized for ground attack; consequently, the radar was useless for detecting any air-to-air threats. The attack radar served two primary functions on combat sorties. First, we used it to update the INS prior to crossing into North Vietnam because the INS had a tendency to drift, thereby degrading subsequent target acquisition. Second, during the actual bomb run, the right seater would use the radar to locate the offset aiming point, so the weapons release computer would provide steering information to the actual target.

What the F-111 could do best was go fast at low level to fly underneath enemy radars, thereby minimizing detection from an integrated air defense system. The flight control system had been optimized for this flight regime and worked very well. The aircraft was rock solid at 200 feet AGL and 500 KCAS. The downside was the F-111 community did not have conventional weapons to take advantage of this unique capability. For example, if the aircrew selected the minimum release setting of 125 milliseconds between MK-82 500-pound high drag munitions, alternating from each side of the aircraft, there would be a "gap" between the effective frag patterns once the bombs hit the ground and exploded.

I mentioned earlier that the F-111 pilot could sweep the wings from 16 degrees—normal for takeoff—to full aft at 72 degrees. There are plusses and minuses for each setting. Certainly using the forward setting, 16 degrees, provides the most lift for takeoff. After takeoff and at altitude, most pilots would place the wings aft to 26 degrees for cruise. Starting the descent to TFR altitudes, the pilot would sweep the wings further aft for the high-speed target run. There was, however, a huge difference once the wings were swept aft of 45 degrees. At 45 degrees and further aft the flight controls—ailerons and rudder—were limited. This meant

that the pilot could not aggressively maneuver the jet should the need arise to avoid AAA or SAMs. I'm confident that most pilots used a wing sweep setting that did not limit flight control effectiveness while still retaining the ability to go as fast as possible.

The aircraft design incorporated four pylons that pivoted with the wing sweep. Two pylons on each side closest to the fuselage possessed this functionality. When we carried the standard load of twelve MK-82 high-drag bombs, two pylons would have a BRU-3/A rack attached. (BRU stands for bomb release unit.) For the high-altitude missions in Laos, we'd carry twenty-four MK-82 "slick" bombs using 4 BRU-3/A racks. Each BRU-3/A rack could carry six 500-pound bombs. We carried an ECM pod on the fuselage centerline. The 474th had many problems with the BRU-3/A racks and the armament control system. There were incidents where pilots depressed the pickle button and the racks *and* bombs separated together from the aircraft. Dropping "duds" in RP-6 does not endear the aircrew to the F-111 system. This issue should have been identified and solved during rigorous stateside training.

In September 1972, the 474th TFW received orders to deploy their F-4Ds to Thailand to relieve the 49th TFW. The 49th needed to return to Holloman AFB and prepare for a Crested Cap deployment to Europe. The 429th and 430th fighter squadrons were selected to deploy, while the 428th remained at Nellis AFB. My squadron, the 429th TFS, was first out of the chute with twelve F-111s. The route of flight was from Nellis to Guam to Takhli RTAB, Thailand. The wing had sent a few experienced crews to Takhli to prepare for combat operations. I was one of twelve aircrews that prepositioned at Guam, so when the F-111s arrived and were refueled, we launched for Takhli. After a six-plus hour

flight from Guam, the first six Aardvarks arrived in country for combat operations slated to begin that very night.

Unfortunately, the 430th TFS lost a jet, #7078, and crew the very first night, September 28, 1972. Ranger 23 took off, heading for North Vietnam, and never returned. The mission planning was not adequate because the F-111 flying at night absolutely depended on very accurate navigation data and accurate radar predications. Those critical elements were lacking, as the F-4Ds had little use for them. The left seater had been on the Combat Lancer deployment in the late 1960s when three of six deployed F-111s were lost. There were many dejected aircrews after this loss on the first night. What happened? Was it a system failure or operator error? A safety stand-down was necessary to get our kit in one bag before again heading north. Much later, a review of all data associated with this flight determined Ranger 23 most likely descended into heavy rain, experienced “scope blanking”—a phenomenon no one had ever experienced—and flew into mountainous terrain. (The following paragraph discusses “scope blanking.”)

As more F-111s and personnel arrived in Thailand, the wing instituted a local flying schedule to acclimate aircrews and planes to the new environment, vastly different from the dry Nevada desert. What we found was very unsettling because of the potentially deadly impact it had on the TFR system and, by extension, the aircrew. The large water droplets associated with monsoon weather patterns in Southeast Asia attenuated the TFR radar! The way the automatic TFR system worked needs a bit of explanation. The pilot could set a clearance plane above the terrain of 200, 300, 400, 500, 750, or 1,000 feet. He could also select a soft, medium, or hard ride. Generally, almost everyone I

knew used the medium-ride setting. The system also incorporated a Low Altitude Radar Altimeter (LARA) that looked straight down. When flying on auto TF over a desert, a lake, an ocean, or dry lakebed, there would not be any terrain for the radar to detect—there would be no radar returns. The system would then use the LARA for the set clearance plane. In the F-111A that we were flying, auto TF only guaranteed terrain safe separation for bank angles not exceeding 10 degrees. In addition, the navigator had the ability to load or use only one radar offset location. Later during our deployment, we received an urgent fix, allowing up to six preplanned offsets to be loaded prior to takeoff. Finally, yet importantly, the pilot had an E-scope that went out to ten miles that conveyed key information as to the operation of the TFR system. The E-scope displayed a solid line representing the set clearance plane. As long as there were returns on the E-scope underneath the set clearance plane line, the pilot knew the TFR system was detecting mountainous terrain. However, if the scope started going blank at ten miles working back to zero miles, one of two things was happening. First, the auto TF system was going into LARA override because the F-111 was soon to overfly a flat surface. This was not very likely unless you were egressing “feet wet” over the ocean after hitting a target. Second, and more deadly in the mountains and karst formations of Laos and western North Vietnam, the aircraft was most likely flying through a heavy downpour and the large water droplets were attenuating the TFR’s radar energy. Not good. If the pilot did not notice this occurrence and take action by climbing to a minimum en route altitude, the system would default to LARA override, and the chance of hitting a solid rock mountain increased exponentially. For the pilot, situational awareness was paramount. Hitting the ground or a mountain would ruin your day. All of us learned to have a no kidding MEA memorized for our route of flight.

After the stand-down, the 474th returned to combat operations October 5.

Our sister squadron, the 430th TFS, almost lost a jet during a RP-6 sortie October 12^t. The North Vietnamese fired four SAMs that missed but scared the hell out of the aircrew. With only SA-2s and SA-3s, the likelihood, or probability, of a SAM hitting an F-111 flying TFR was low. However, any SAM firing definitely garnered your full attention. A few days later, my squadron, the 429th, suffered our first loss and the second for the Wing.

The 429th TFS lost a jet and aircrew on October 16. The frag order specified four MK-84 2,000-pound “slick” bombs for a target west of Thud Ridge and fairly close to Hanoi. The pilot had very few hours in the F-111, as he had previously been an ATC instructor pilot before being assigned to the 474th TFW. Making a “toss bomb” delivery at night in a high-threat AAA and SAM environment is no piece of cake, even for an experienced aviator. The pilot and navigator planned to ingress from the northwest at low level and high speed. Once the navigator had locked onto the radar-offset point, the pilot would deactivate the TF system, depress the pickle (bomb release) button, and begin a climb following the steering bars to the target until the computer released the bombs. Now the problems begin: How does a pilot get back to low altitude and engage the auto TF system and get out of the high-threat environment? The aircraft is now at a relatively high altitude, where North Vietnamese radars can track it and pass information to the shooters—either AAA or SAMs. We’ll never know for certain what transpired; however, the North Vietnamese stated the very next day that they had shot down an F-111. Both officers were married—adding to the tragedy of the loss. After this combat loss, the 474th was never again fragged

for any weapons in Route Pack 5 or 6 other than 12 MK-82 high drag 500-pound bombs.

F-111 tactics and procedures are as follows. After the loss of Ranger 23 on the first night, each aircrew had to leave a map with the mission-planning cell, depicting route of flight and navigation turn points. We also had to name each turn point and then attempt to call Moonbeam, a C-130 command-and-control aircraft, upon our arrival at each point. The F-111 had both a UHF and HF radio. We preferred to use the HF for these reports, so the UHF would remain on strike frequency. This was a pain in the ass, especially in RP-6. Aircrews also learned rather quickly that the bad guys could see the explosive carts firing the ejector plungers to propel the bombs off the BRU-3/A racks. They would then point their AAA salvos ahead of the aircraft's expected flight path—think of a shotgun hunter trying to hit a pheasant. You shoot where the bird is expected to be based on the time of flight of the shot versus where he is now. Our procedure, especially in the flat delta in RP-6, was to paddle off the auto TF and aggressively bank the jet in order to change the aircraft's flight vector by 30-45 degrees. Never be predictable if you have an option.

In late October, Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho were close to a negotiated settlement, so combat sorties to RP-5 and 6 were curtailed. Our combat sorties in North Vietnam were all south of the 20th Parallel in RP-1. Additionally, the 474th flew high altitude missions over Laos, carrying twenty-four MK-82 "slick" bombs or sixteen CBUs (cluster bomb units where a radar fuse opens the clamshell at a specified altitude above the ground and small fragmentary bomblets are released over a wide area), using a technique known as beacon bombing. In beacon bombing, a ground transmitter placed by "friendlies" emitted a frequency

compatible with our attack radar. Once the beacon was acquired, the navigator would put in the range and bearing to the target. After that occurred, it was simply a matter of the pilot following the cockpit steering bars until the weapons computer released the bombs. These high-altitude sorties over Laos were vastly different—and less stressful—than flying into North Vietnam. The higher threat sorties to RP-1 allowed an egress over the Gulf of Tonkin after striking the target. So as not to have the US Navy become agitated at an unknown bogey approaching their ships high speed at night, the crew first “squawked” using the IFF, turned on the aircraft external lights, and made a call to Red Crown, the Navy’s controlling agency. Getting hosed by friendly fire was not a good way to end the sortie.

The night of November 6, the 430th lost another F-111 and crew in RP-1. This was the wing’s third loss. Of note, this was the eve of the presidential elections in the United States, so units were urged to conduct a max bombing effort. Typhoon Pamela was situated off the Vietnamese coast, so weather was terrible. I flew that same evening and could not get to my assigned target in RP-1 as the E-scope kept blanking out due to the TFR’s energy being attenuated by the heavy rains. I dumped my bombs on a secondary target—most likely Mu Gia Pass—from a high altitude.

Thirteen days later, November 19, the 430th TFS lost another jet and aircrew on a mission to RP-1. This was number four. Then on December 1, pieces of the wreckage washed ashore about thirty miles north of Da Nang in South Vietnam. Subsequent investigation of the wreckage showed the wings were swept all the way aft to 72 degrees. Before this loss, aircraft #092 had been written up by aircrews that the LARA was not working as advertised! Reportedly, a few days prior to the accident, another 430th crew went “feet

wet,” and when they turned on the exterior lights, they discovered the F-111 was fewer than one hundred feet above the ocean when the LARA said they were at 500 feet. YGBSM! There is no indication to the crew that the LARA has failed internally. The best guess based on investigation of the wreckage is that the aircraft flew into the ocean and was destroyed.

Back to the pack, December 18 1972! President Nixon has had it with the North Vietnamese slow-rolling negotiations. All 474th aircrews attended a mass briefing where new, less restrictive rules of engagement (ROE) were outlined. Targets previously off limits, such as those within ten miles of downtown Hanoi, were now on the Air Tasking Order, or frag. As this was to be a maximum effort, no search and rescue (SAR) missions were contemplated for the first three days. The missions assigned to the F-111s were to support the B-52 strikes. Yes, the Buffs were at last going to hit targets in North Vietnam. The 474th sorties were to hit known GCI and SAM sites fifteen-to-twenty minutes prior to the B-52's first time on target (ToT)—hopefully to reduce the Buffs' losses.

The integrated air defenses over North Vietnam took a heavy toll on the Air Force. On the night of December 19, the 430th TFS lost a jet and aircrew—number five. A B-52 was also lost that same evening. The spirit of Christmas was *not* in the air. Instead, it was very heavy AAA, multiple SAMs, and MiGs.

December 20 is the night I darned near bought the farm. My target was Kep Airfield, along the northeast railroad leading to China. Recce photos depicting bomb damage assessment showed the runway was still in use. The special instructions prevented me from egressing feet

wet after dropping my bombs. That would have been my preferred route, as it was the shorter distance to safety. Evidently, the US Navy was not interested in seeing anything other than their own aircraft approaching the carriers at high speed.

Here's a short synopsis of that night. Because of our internal fuel load, there was no need for either pre- or postflight aerial refueling. I stayed at a medium altitude until starting a gradual letdown over Laos. All aircraft systems were a "go." As we normally did approaching the border, my navigator and I selected the weapons and release intervals before I selected Master Arm "on." The North Vietnamese GCI radar sites were detecting me and other F-111s as we made our way to assigned targets. The chatter on UHF Guard became intense approaching North Vietnam. Teaball was calling out bandits—MiGs—and I could see in the distance lots of AAA and a few SAMs rising into the night sky. When the B-52s were within range, you'd often see four or more SAMs fired at the approaching heavies. Once in North Vietnam airspace, I had descended down to 200 feet AGL and was flying 500 KCAS plus. My flight path took me north of Thud Ridge toward Kep Airfield and the northeast rail line extending into China. Approaching Kep, I climbed to 500 feet AGL and slowed down (did not want to but the restriction on the MK-82 fins was about 480 KCAS) until bomb release. When all twelve bombs were on their way to the target, I changed heading more than 30 degrees—the auto TF was intentionally paddled off—pushed the throttles up and started a descent over the rugged terrain to 300 feet AGL, where I engaged the auto TF. Unable to egress over the Gulf of Tonkin, I turned around and headed back over the northeast railroad. Approaching the gap in the mountains where the railroad was located, all hell broke loose. The RHAW gear was

screaming at me, 23mm and 37 mm AAA was too damned accurate, and Teaball was calling out blue bandits (MiG 21s). I instinctively banked the jet to the right, flying closer to the Chinese border, hoping for a little less AAA—to heck with the buffer zone restriction along the Vietnamese/Chinese border. How the gunners missed us is still a mystery, but one I'm thankful for. Turning northwest and now down to 200 feet AGL across the relatively flat terrain, Teaball was calling out blue bandits in reference to "Bullseye," downtown Hanoi. I thought we were in close proximity, and sure enough, a short time later I saw the exterior lights of two MiG-21s about 7,000 to 10,000 feet above us going in the opposite direction. Finally, on my way back to Thailand, I saw a B-52, Orange 03, hit by a SAM, followed by a tremendous fireball. My personal records are sketchy, but I believe the Air Force lost six B-52s this night. In retrospect, having the Buffs fly predictable paths to their targets using "bomber stream" tactics with elements approximately ten miles in trail was not tactically sound. Once the B-52s had dropped their bombs and made a turn off target, their ECM coverage became degraded, thereby providing SAM operators the ability to track targets. Shortly thereafter, B-52 tactics were changed significantly.

The sixth and last F-111 lost is a relatively good news story, as both the pilot and PWSO came home as POWs (comment: PWSO stands for pilot weapons system operator; the Air Force put recent UPT graduates into the right seat, much to their chagrin). On December 22, Captain Rob Sponeybarger and First Lieutenant Lt Bill Wilson, 429th TFS, were fragged thirty minutes in front of me on the Bac Mai railroad depot southwest of Hanoi. My target was the Gia Thong storage area, just north of Gia Lam airfield, northeast of downtown Hanoi. Sponey made a call that his jet was hit, and he was shutting down one engine. He nursed the

Aardvark to the rugged terrain west of Hanoi, where they ejected because the spreading fire had caused the flight controls to become “mushy.” The capsule worked! Once on the ground, Sponey and Bill decided to separate in order to increase their survival chances. Sponey was captured Christmas Eve, and Bill made it to New Year’s Day before the North Vietnamese located him. In fact, an A-7D dropped Bill a survival pod filled with supplies on December 31.

President Nixon called a bombing halt December 30 for the areas around Hanoi and Haiphong Harbor. Peace talks were scheduled to resume January 8, 1973, in Paris. A newspaper clip I still have states that from December 1 to 30 1972, the duration of Linebacker II, the US Air Force lost twenty-seven aircraft, including fifteen B-52s. Ninety-three airmen were killed, captured, or missing in this maximum effort operation.

On January 8, 1973, crews from the 428th TFS arrived and the 429th aircrews start heading home. For the 430th TFS jocks, this was great news, for their 179 day TDY deployment had turned into a PCS assignment. Therefore, they’d earn credit for a short tour. For the 429th, we went go home for a short rest, and most of us would return so the 430th could return to CONUS.

The final scorecard for Linebacker I and II shows the 474th paid a high price during combat operations. We lost six F-111s and five crews (ten officers). The 430th TFS lost four jets and four crews, while the 429th lost two jets and one crew. I’ll leave it to historians to judge airpower’s effectiveness in Southeast Asia. If asked, my inputs would focus on two areas. First, train in peacetime the way you intend to fight in combat. Wring out systems and weapons before heading to war. This was not done in the F-111

community, and we paid the price in losses due to inadequate weapons as well as system inadequacies. Second, gradual escalation to “give peace a chance” is a sham. We lost too many aircraft and aviators either killed or captured during many years of “going downtown”—into North Vietnam—and bombing pauses. Only the massive bombing during Linebacker II convinced the North Vietnamese to return to the bargaining table. As a very senior officer so aptly stated, “Once Air Power was allowed to do its thing, we kicked their butts.”



EXCERPT FROM MY ENEMY—MY FRIEND DAN CHERRY

arely has the expression “Full Circle” been played out in such a dramatic way as in the story behind *My Enemy—My Friend*. On April 16, 1972, it would have been impossible for (then)

Major Dan Cherry and (then) Lieutenant Nguyen Hong My to predict how their lives would intersect thirty-six years in the future after meeting for the first time in the skies thirty miles southwest of Hanoi, Vietnam. When they met for the first time in aerial combat, they were each top-tier fighter pilots serving their countries during time of war. Each pilot, flying the best aircraft at their disposal, was locked in a fight to the death at 15,000 feet. One would be the victor and one would be the vanquished, but they would live to meet again in the future, and their lives would be changed once again. In this two-part story you will learn how this story has touched many lives. This is how it started, and no one knows how it will end.



On April 16, 1972, at the 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron based at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand, the phone began to ring in my trailer at 0200.

“Major Cherry, this is the command post. You need to report to the main briefing room at oh-four-thirty.”

What’s going on?” I asked, half-asleep. “I’m on the Laredo schedule later in the day.”

“You’ll find out when you get here; just don’t be late.”

“Yes sir.” I hung up the phone and reset my alarm in hopes of getting some more sleep. No chance. I could feel the excitement building. To change the entire flying schedule

and to be called in the middle of the night meant it had to be something very unusual.

I walked into a briefing room at 0430 full of F-4 aircrews from all the squadrons at Udorn, and the map up on the briefing board clearly showed planned routes all the way to Hanoi. This was the biggest strike into the heart of North Vietnam since the bombing halt of 1968. Like everyone else, I felt excited but a bit apprehensive, too. Rarely had any of us in recent years encountered the threats of MiGs, heavy anti-aircraft fire, or surface-to-air missiles. But this mission was going to be much more dangerous than we had become accustomed to.

I searched the briefing board for my name, and there it was. The 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron Panther Pack, call sign Basco. I was flying Basco 3 with Jeff Feinstein in my backseat. My good friend, Fred Olmsted, was our flight leader, with Stu Maas in his backseat. Basco 2 was Steve Cuthbert and Danny Souell. Basco 4 on my wing was Greg Crane and Gerry Lachman. I smiled. We had flown together before, so I felt good about our chances for a successful mission.

Our mission was to escort another flight of bomb-laden F-4s from Korat Air Base as they proceeded to their target in the Hanoi area, but apparently Basco was a last minute add-on. The hard reality was we had no tanker support scheduled and less than a full load of missiles. Such circumstances were highly unusual for a mission into the heart of North Vietnam. As a result of the tanker shortage, our aircraft were configured with three external fuel tanks to give us the range and endurance needed to get to the target area and back safely.

My eyes followed Fredo, watching for any signs of anxiety as he led the briefing. Fred Olmstead had already been credited with one MiG-21 kill, but this morning his emphasis was on mutual support and the admonition that no MiG kill in the world was worth losing a wingman. He explained his aircraft was equipped with a top-secret device that enabled his WSO, Stu Maas, to interrogate the MiG's onboard radar transponder and to positively identify the MiG as hostile as soon as he had radar contact. Fredo went on to emphasize the Air Force had such confidence in this new technology that the rules of engagement had been changed to authorize us to shoot beyond visual range. I knew this technology gave us a huge advantage, but there would be more than fifty friendly airplanes in the same general area of our assignment. The last thing I wanted to do was shoot down one of my buddies.

We all discussed the new high-tech advantage at length and decided because the equipment was new, and none of us had actually used it in a combat situation, we wouldn't trust it enough to fire without a positive visual ID on the bogey. We agreed to stick together as a four-ship but we would break up into elements and fight in two-ship formations if necessary. In the briefing, we talked at length about fuel conservation and the fact that we were going to be a long way from home without any scheduled tanker support. Fredo emphasized we must watch our fuel closely and jettison our external fuel tanks at exactly the right time. "Our Bingo is eight thousand pounds," he said, "and as soon as the first centerline goes dry, we're going to jettison them, and we'll all do it together." There were very strict airspeed and G limitations for jettisoning that tank, and it had to be done at slow speed before crossing the border into a high-threat area.

Briefing over, it was off to the personal equipment shop to pick up harness, g-suit, helmet, and survival vest. I jumped in the “bread truck” shuttle van alongside the others and headed to my aircraft. That’s when I first saw her. Phantom 550. There was nothing unusual about her appearance. Just one of our typical F-4Ds except for the PN on the tail. Seeing those letters, I knew she came from another squadron. She looked good in the early morning light, and Jeff Feinstein and I checked her over closely. We noted five missiles loaded, three Aim-7 Sparrows, and two Aim-9 Sidewinders. The other missile stations were taken up by ECM pods to help ward off the surface-to-air missiles we were sure to encounter.

With the preflight complete, Jeff and I climbed into the cockpit and strapped in. I turned the battery on, checked the intercom with him, started the engines, and the big Phantom came to life. What a powerful sound she made! Two J-79s winding up; generators switched online; cockpit lights flashing; and then the radio check. “Basco Flight, check in,” was Fredo’s call. “Two, three, four,” came our team’s response. We were ready to taxi. Chocks were pulled, power revved up, and Phantom 550 rolled to the end of the runway for a last-minute check from our maintenance crew.

Inside my gut, the butterflies and rapid breathing had begun. It was a familiar reaction, like the feeling a football player gets just before the first hit of the game. As a pilot, I knew it was normal to be apprehensive of dangers ahead, but I shook off the feeling and turned my eyes toward my crew chief. With an enthusiastic thumbs up and a salute from him; a “cleared-for-takeoff” call from the tower, Basco flight pointed four noses down Udorn’s runway 12. At 0730 Basco Flight lit the burners and roared off into a hazy early morning sky. Each airplane was configured with a 600-gallon

centerline tank, two 370-gallon tanks, two Sidewinder heat-seeking missiles, three radar-guided Sparrow missiles and two ECM pods. With all that fuel and armament onboard, each F-4 weighed over 50,000 pounds.

After take-off and join-up, we proceeded north into Laos, reached the rendezvous point over the Laotian village of Ban Ban, and began to orbit while we waited for the strike flight to arrive. The minutes dragged by with no sign of the Korat flight, so we began to calculate our options if our primary mission was canceled. If we waited much longer, our low fuel state would preclude any combat action.

Finally with our fuel at a critical point, Fredo decided to proceed with our secondary mission, which was to patrol for MiG targets of opportunity in an area approximately thirty miles southwest of Hanoi.

Our centerline external fuel tanks began to run dry, and remembering the very stringent G and airspeed limitations for jettisoning that tank, Fredo pulled his nose up, and the rest of us followed. We climbed, slowed down, and punched off all four tanks in unison. Then the noses came down, the power came up, and we turned to put Hanoi on the nose as we picked up speed for our dash into North Vietnam.

As soon as we crossed the border into North Vietnam, we picked up surface-to-air missile (SAM) and anti-aircraft radar strobes on our radar warning gear. The enemy was locking on to us as we searched visually for SAM launchers and on the radar for MiGs. The Navy had the primary responsibility for the coastal areas. We didn't want to infringe upon their territory, so we turned due south midway into North Vietnam. We flew in a tactical spread formation to an area we called the "Fish's Mouth," an area where Route 7

extends into Laos, all the while searching for any bad guys. When we reached Route 7, we turned 180 degrees and headed north toward Yen Bai airfield west of Hanoi.

That's when it started. Stu Mass in the back seat of Olmsted's airplane picked up two bandits on his radar at twenty miles. "I've got two bandits on the nose for twenty" was Stu's radio call. We turned slightly, putting the bandits on the nose. Then Fredo called, "Let's get rid of them, Basco." Eight external wing tanks immediately separated from our Phantoms. We increased power to gain more speed. Stu maintained his radar contact and called out the range as we closed to fifteen...ten...five, and then we picked them up visually.

"There's a MiG-21; there Dan!" Fredo exclaimed. Sure enough, two silver MiG-21s passed over us on a reciprocal heading about five thousand feet higher than we were and Olmsted called for a hard right turn and we cranked it around, trying to keep the two MiGs in sight. I was on the outside of the turn leading the second element, so I fell behind on the turnaway from me. Halfway through the turn, my wingman Greg "Baby Beef" Crane called out a third MiG at 12 o'clock level to me climbing into position behind Olmsted's element. It was a camouflaged MiG-21 closing fast. Apparently the North Vietnamese had set a trap using the two silver MiGs for bait. The camouflaged MiG stayed low, and as we started our turn, he climbed and accelerated, hoping to roll in behind us as we chased the silver bandits.

I rolled out of my turn and headed directly for the Camouflaged MiG giving my Weapons System Officer (WSO) Jeff Feinstein running commentary on the MiG's position so he could try to acquire him on radar. The MiG pilot saw us and turned hard left, directly into a cloud. The tops of the

clouds reached 15,000 feet, and we were skimming them at 450 knots when the MiG disappeared. I thought to myself, "I'll never see him again," but I figured I might as well go in the clouds after him. We might get lucky and acquire him on radar or spot him on the other side of the cloud bank.

After what seemed like hours in the clouds searching for the bandit on radar, I became nervous and pulled up. The threat of SAMs around Hanoi was significant, and our primary defense was early visual acquisition in order to take evasive action and outmaneuver the missile. The more time we spent in the clouds, the less chance we would have to see a missile coming at us. Finally, we popped out on top of the cloud bank and searched the horizon in all directions. We didn't see a thing. I thought we had lost the bandit for sure.

In the meantime, Olmsted and his wingman were still in hot pursuit of the other two MiGs. I made a hard right-hand turn in the direction I had last seen Olmsted heading. As we rolled out of the turn, my hawk-eyed wingman, Baby Beef Crane, spotted our MiG again. "Two o'clock high. He's right above you, Dan," Greg called. There he was, at 2 o'clock and 5,000 above us in a climbing right turn. I picked him up visually, went to max afterburner, and pulled up to get into firing position. As the nose of Phantom 550 tracked toward the target, I had a beautiful set-up for a heat-seeking Sidewinder shot. The sun was behind us, and there was nothing except the MiG and the blue sky in front of us. I pulled the nose out in front of him, selected heat to arm the missiles, and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. I squeezed again...still nothing. Rechecked the armament switches...all O.K...squeezed again...nothing...squeezed again...still nothing. Despair. I was in perfect position—a situation I had waited for all my life—and I had a bad fire-control system.

I maintained good position behind the MiG as he climbed above 25,000 feet over the top and started down in a diving spiral, trying his best to get away. Baby Beef was out about a thousand feet, in perfect fighting wing formation. I knew he must be wondering why I had not taken the shot when I had the chance. At that point, my confidence in my aircraft's fire-control system was shattered! When Greg called out—"I'm taking the lead, passing on the left"—I acknowledged, "Roger Beef, you've got it," I rolled around Greg into fighting wing formation as he lined up the MiG in his sights and started firing his missiles. His first Sparrow malfunctioned and fell away like a bomb. His next one went into a corkscrew spiral and missed the MiG by a mile. Greg and Gary Lachman couldn't get a radar lock-on and consequently were firing in the bore sight mode with the radar slaved to the axis of the aircraft. Beef smoothly tracked the MiG in his gun sight—keeping him highlighted in the radar beam—and fired his last missile. It tracked perfectly, heading straight for the MiG. Exactly at the critical point in time prior to missile impact, the MiG pilot performed a break maneuver by turning hard into the attack. The Sparrow cruised right by his tailpipe without detonating.

Pushing my fears aside, I calculated my next move. I knew his hard break maneuver dissipated all his energy, and we would maintain the advantage. Just one obstacle stood in the way of a kill—our lack of fire power. All we had left were my three Sparrows and no assurances they would fire. I made up my mind to stay at his 6 o'clock and vowed he would not get away from us. Even if my Sparrows didn't fire, I would chase him until I hit "bingo" or a minimum fuel state, and then run for home. I also remember thinking, "If my missiles failed to fire, I could try to ram him." In hindsight it would have been a foolish move, but it accurately reflects my aggressive, must-win attitude at the time.

I radioed Greg that I was taking back the lead. No answer. "Basco 4, break left!" Still no answer. We were both in max afterburner (AB), so I couldn't easily overtake him, and he was too far out in front for me to risk the shot. I certainly didn't want to hit him by mistake. I continued trying to pass and take the lead, calling him again to break out of the way so I could shoot.

"Break left, Beef. I've got him wired!" I yelled into the radio.

I called to Jeff in the back seat, "I've got the pipper right on him, Jeff. Lock him up!" Immediately, Jeff performed his radar magic, and the analog bar popped out on the edge of the gun sight, indicating a good radar lock-on.

It seemed to take forever for me to pull up to line abreast with Greg, but when I did regain lead of our two-ship formation, I clamped down on the trigger. Whoosh! To my amazement, the big AIM-7 Sparrow smoked out in front of us. We were in a right descending turn, accelerating through 500 knots and closing on the MiG as the missile fired. It did a big barrel roll and appeared to travel too far out in front of him. I realized it was just pulling lead. The missile rapidly closed the 4,000 foot distance and impacted the MiG in the area where the right wing joins the fuselage, exploding in a huge fireball. "Got him! I got him!" I shouted.

The explosion blew the right wing completely off the MiG, and it immediately went into a hard spin, trailing fire and smoke. After one turn of the spin, the MiG pilot ejected, and his parachute opened directly in front of me. I quickly turned away to avoid flying through the chute. I also wanted to be sure that Jeff could see the MiG pilot and his airplane going down in flames. There were too many pilots who failed

to get credit for their kills because no one else witnessed them. We had a lot of good witnesses that day.

The whole experience had a dreamlike quality about it. "This is like in the movies," I thought. There we were, smoking by this guy just as his parachute opened. We must have been almost supersonic with the afterburners cooking, and I knew we were no more than a hundred feet away when we passed. Even then I got a good look at him and distinctly remember his black flying suit and his white parachute with one red panel.

We could still hear Olmsted's element. He must have been close to us, but cloud cover kept us from seeing him. Within a minute of my victory, he locked on to one of the silver MiGs. The MiG leader had rolled inverted, headed for the ground, and run away, but the wingman seemed disoriented. Fredo knocked off the outer half of the MiG's right wing with his first missile, and the MiG went into a hard descending left turn. Fred pulled up to gain separation, descended, and fired a second AIM-7. His second missile hit the MiG dead center. It exploded in a huge fireball, leaving nothing but fluttering debris. I'll never forget Fredo's radio call to our controlling agency. "Disco, this is Basco. Scratch another MiG-21."

By this time we were low on fuel and I had one thought, "Let's get the hell out of here before more MiGs show up!" We did not have enough fuel or missiles to fight again that day. We dove for the deck, leveling off just above the treetops, and headed for Udorn. Checking our fuel state, we considered trying to find a tanker, but there were too many guys egressing North Vietnam that really needed the gas. We did our best to economize our fuel consumption and pressed

for home. Remarkably, we all landed safely with less than a thousand pounds of fuel.

I was proud to be part of Basco flight that day. Our leader had shown great courage; the flight members had been thoroughly trained and briefed; and we did exactly what we said we would do. We had flown the entire mission with our original fuel load, shot down two MiG-21s after a five minute dogfight—without help from radar controllers—and arrived home safe and sound.

In 1972 I had no way of comprehending that my destiny would be linked to the MiG-21 pilot that I had just shot down. Not in my wildest imagination could I have ever thought that this Phantom II “550” and I would meet three decades later and that it would guide me back to Vietnam in 2008 to meet the Vietnam People’s Air Force pilot, Lieutenant Nguyen Hong My.

Thirty-six years later we would meet on a live TV show in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, where our lives would be altered again. For more information visit www.myenemymyfriend.com



THANK GOD FOR THE F-4 PHANTOM AND J-79S!
APRIL 1972
GREG CRANE

The mission was a flight of four F-4s, two fighters in the lead and two RF-4s as three and four. The purpose was for the RFs to take pictures and record the exact location of the Than Hoa Bridge with their LORAN D equipment so B-52s could bomb it. The fighters had a full load of bombs as well as missiles for the flight. During the mission briefing, the RFs stated they wanted to come in from the south, and they had to be on an exact heading of 360 at 15,000 feet and 480 knots ground speed. The only way the fighters could match that speed was to drop the bombs on the way inbound. We also decided the best way to protect them was to put the RFs in the lead with the fighters on the wings flying in resolution cell with our electronic jamming pods on. Resolution cell was a formation where the four-ship varied altitude and position to confuse the three radar controllers in the vans that guided the SA-2s.

The Than Hoa Bridge was one of the most heavily defended targets in North Vietnam. I had been there before, but always in a large “gorilla pack” with multiple flights of F-4s and Wild Weasels to take care of the SAMs. On this day

there wasn't going to be any of that support, just the four F-4s. As we crossed the border into North Vietnam, the fighters dropped their bombs on targets of opportunity, and we moved to the wing position and put the RFs in the lead. The initial reaction from the enemy was light, just radar probes probably in an attempt to figure out where we were headed. As we turned to the north on our inbound heading, the lead recce went heads down into the viewfinder of the camera so he could attain the parameters set for the target run. The pods came on and four steadied himself on three's wing while two and I began the weave for the resolution cell. The basic formation was four on three's wing and two on the outside left wing, while I was on the right side of three, who now was in the lead.

About twenty-five miles out we began to receive AAA fire from the 37mm, 57mm, 85mm, and 100mm guns. Light at the start, the closer we got to the target, the heavier the AAA got, but it appeared to be blanket firing and not radar controlled. As I looked over at three, his head was still down in the viewfinder. All I could think of was their motto "Unarmed and unafraid."

Between fifteen and ten miles from the target, the North Vietnamese started to launch SA-2 missiles at us. In less than thirty seconds, we had four missiles go through the flight between two and me on the left side. All four went off above us 3,000 to 5,000 feet with a large flash and the yellowish brown smoke to follow. It appeared that our jamming pods were working. Suddenly, there was a large flash and explosion in my airplane, followed almost instantly by the airplane making a violent, uncommanded maneuver. The whole event was very disorienting, and I couldn't tell what was going on, but it was obvious we had taken some sort of hit. Later, the other three flight members would all

report it was a direct hit from an SA-2, and I had been totally engulfed in the fireball. After a period of time, which I believe was just a few seconds, I regained my composure and when I looked outside I was hanging in the seat straps. The airplane had gone from heading north at 480 knots to heading south, upside down about 30 degrees nose down, out of airspeed.

I asked my backseater, Rick Rohrer, if he was OK. He said, "Yes I'm fine."

My reply, "Don't eject; hang in here with me."

His comment was, "I'm not going anywhere."

I instinctively pulsed the stick, and the nose of the airplane moved up and down, so I knew we were still flying. Next I looked inside the cockpit to see an ugly sight. Both red fire lights were on right in front of my face, one engine was dead, both generators were offline, and all forty-eight lights on the telelight panel were on. Rick said all ninety-two circuit breakers in the backseat had tripped.

As we analyzed our situation I made some clever radio call like, "I've been hit."

Number two was quick to radio, "I have you."

We were still upside-down with very little airspeed and all kinds of problems confronting us. Luckily, the Gulf of Tonkin was close by, and I started a shallow dive as I righted the airplane and headed for the coast. Once I rolled out on an easterly heading, first one fire light and then the other went out. I continued the dive to get airspeed to try to

relight the dead engine. I remember it taking me an inordinate length of time to determine which engine was dead. I didn't want to put the wrong engine in the cutoff position before restarting it. As we reached the beach we bottomed out between 3,000 and 4,000 feet, and the engine had restarted. I reset both generators, and they both came back online. Rick reset the circuit breakers, and the individual lights on the telelight panel went out. As we climbed out, I turned south to divert to Da Nang. As I looked in the cockpit, all the lights were out and the airplane seemed to be running fine. Number two rejoined and started to look me over from the outside. After about ten minutes he said, "Lead, you are fine, no fluids leaking and no holes."

Of course, being very clever I said, "Are you sure?"

His comment was short and sweet, "Yep."

We continued on down the coast, and I decided that since all that had happened, I would take the approach end barrier at Da Nang. My wingman landed first, and then I took the barrier as planned. Upon exiting the airplane and doing a walkaround, I saw that nothing was wrong. Not a single hole, no leaks, nothing. It was towed away and about two hours later a senior NCO walked into the fighter squadron and said, "Captain, there's nothing wrong with your plane." He had that cynical look that only senior NCOs can generate. I called the Udorn Command Post and asked what they wanted me to do.

The Wing Commander got on the phone and said something like, "The recces said you had quite a day. You OK? Bring it home."

We preflighted the airplane, still expecting to see some damage, but when there was none, we fired it up and headed back home.

Two days later after being in North Vietnam on another mission in the same airplane, fifty miles from Udorn, the engine that had failed earlier exploded. A huge fireball came out the front and back of the airplane, and oil came out the bottom. When maintenance tore the engine down, they said the overpressure caused by the missile going off had pushed the main shaft of the engine and displaced the main bearings out of their races.

Thank God for the F-4 Phantom and J-79s.



BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU ASK FOR!
BILL MACFARLANE

After completing F-4 training at George AFB in Victorville, California, in August 1972, I volunteered for Southeast Asia and was selected to attend the first F-4 Air-to-Air Top-Off class at Nellis AFB, Nevada, in September. Upon completion of that training and a short leave to drop off my wife and new daughter in Alabama, I headed to Southeast Asia.

While attending jungle survival training, Henry Kissinger made his famous (but incorrect) statement, "Peace is at hand." Being a young, gung-ho first lieutenant, I was a little disappointed that my one-year combat tour might just be a one-year remote tour.

Upon arriving at Udorn RTAFB toward the end of October, I was assigned to the 555th TFS (Triple Nickel). After normal indoctrination training and an orientation sortie, I began flying combat missions, some over North Vietnam, but missions north of the 20th parallel into Route Pack 6 (Hanoi/Haiphong areas) were no longer authorized since the end of the Linebacker I campaign.

In early December, the peace talks broke down and on December 18, the Linebacker II campaign started. The campaign was to be a maximum effort lasting about three days, so the policy at Udorn was to not fly the new “green beans” in the effort. Well, the campaign didn’t end after three days.

On December 22, Bob Hope’s USO Christmas Show was at Udorn. The plan was that there were to be no F-4 launches during the show because a previous show had been somewhat drowned out by the intense noise from the F-4 afterburner takeoffs, and the video was unusable for the annual television show. As new guys (at least in the Nickel) were still not flying in the campaign, I attended the Bob Hope Show. A weather delay (due to target area weather around Hanoi) delayed the morning launch, and right after the show started, F-4s began launching. Sensing that Bob was going to be pretty pissed, I was surprised to see him raise his golf club and aggressively wave it over his head, cheering loudly for the F-4s. During the show, Lieutenant Colonel Jim Brunson, the Triple Nickel squadron commander, shot down a MiG-21 and arrived back at Udorn with a brief fly-by around the time the show ended. A group of us made our way over to where his F-4 was parked, and obviously a big celebration grew into a conflagration with the Bob Hope show going on. I walked up to shake the boss’s hand and congratulate him and told him I wished I’d been with him. He kind of surprised me by saying he wished I could have been too. I thought it was a nice thing to say, probably a result of the exciting atmosphere at the time.

On the twenty-fourth, a thirty-six-hour Christmas stand down occurred. Sometime before missions were to restart on the twenty-sixth, I looked at the schedule posted in the normal spot in the Nickel hooch and to my surprise, my

name was on it, flying the number two position on the boss's wing. The mission was a strike escort to the Hanoi area. I believe our call sign that day was Desoto (possibly Buick).

Although flight discipline in the Nickel was always extremely tight, I recall that everything seemed to be a notch higher that day. I remember initially being more tensed up about not being able to preingress refuel as quickly as necessary as anything else. My backseater that day was Lieutenant Bob Carley, an experienced, very proficient WSO and an overall great guy. Bob had hopes to get picked up for pilot training after his SEA tour but was tragically killed in Europe in an F-4 training loss shortly after his arrival in-theater. After refueling, we formed up behind a large flight of A-7s; I can't specifically recall if there were eight or twelve of them. As the strike package began ingress, I recall things being pretty quiet on the radio without any MiG or SAM threat calls from Red Crown. As the number two weapons system operator, Bob was glued to checking the formation's 6 o'clock. Suddenly, a huge explosion occurred maybe a half mile in front of the outside right A-7, who was directly in front of me by around one-to-one-and-a-half miles. Apparently an SA-2 (probably unguided) had either prematurely or intentionally been detonated early, and the large ugly orange/brown cloud was a result of the unburned rocket fuel. Everyone was now expecting more launches to follow, but none occurred. I remember the outside A-7 doing a small jink to avoid the cloud and as we passed it level at 3 o'clock for maybe a quarter of a mile, Bob was a little startled as he had been completely glued to his visual duties. I explained quickly what had happened, trying to minimize cockpit chatter.

Once over the target area, the strike package dropped their bombs from medium altitude and began to maneuver for their egress, turning back toward Thailand. I vaguely recall the boss advising the A-7 lead that our escort role was over, as they had split up fairly dramatically into smaller flights. We continued in for a short while and with no MiGs on our radars or warnings from Red Crown, the boss called for a 180-degree turn to start our egress. I concentrated on flying the best fighting wing I could as we made the fluid turn, trying to check 6 if possible.

Just as we started to complete the turn, John Dubler, the WSO in the number three F-4, screamed for us to "Break left!" for SA-2s. Lieutenant Colonel Brunson started a hard break turn as I slid to his inside about five hundred feet down his wingline. John continued to call for us to break left as at least two SA-2s were guiding on us. The calls made it clear to me that we were doing a last-ditch break and as the boss continued his hard left break, I struggled to keep him in sight as the sun was directly behind him. I had an overwhelming urge to look back, but knew I couldn't without losing visual on the boss or even worse, hitting him. It was an eerie feeling. It seemed like forever, but after probably fifteen to twenty seconds of the break turn, John called that the SA-2s had detonated.

We regained some airspeed we had lost and resumed course for Thailand. Somewhat surprisingly, no additional SA-2s were launched at us. I guess they were saving them for the night B-52 missions. As we approached Udorn, I remember commenting to Bob that I was now a River Rat (flown into Route Pack 6 over the Hanoi/Haiphong areas). We went to the intelligence debriefing area after the mission, and during the debriefing I remember an F-4 or RF-4 crew from another squadron, when they heard our call

sign, asking who had been shot down. We said no one, but it had been pretty tense for a while. John Dubler stated that the two SA-2s had detonated directly behind and slightly above me as we were breaking. My excitement at being a River Rat was momentarily deflated by the realization at just how close we had come to disaster; without question, John Dubler's calls had saved us.

I flew to Route Pack 6 again before Linebacker II ended on December 29 and we kept going North (not Route Pack 6) for a while before the peace treaty was signed. But, as challenging and exciting as many of the missions were, I'll always have pretty vivid memories of December 26, 1972.

On a side note, on of December 27, one of the other Udorn F-4 squadrons (13th TFS) flying strike escort lost an F-4 (Desoto 03) to a MiG-21 (crew survived/POWs) and on December 28, Major Harry McKee and Captain John Dubler of the Triple Nickel shot down a MiG-21. I probably ended up with the fewest Route Pack 6 missions of any River Rat, but in my limited experience, I gained some insight into the unbelievable dedication and courage of those aircrews who flew into that threat arena on a day-to-day basis.



40 CENTS GOES NORTH BUCK BENDER

This was an eight-ship, F-4 gaggle to bomb the Vinh North Vietnam airfield early one Sunday morning. The target weather was overcast, clear skies above, so the plan was to crater the runway, flying straight and level, using Loran coordinates to locate the target. SAMs heavily defended the target, so it was to be two flights of four, in pod formation, attacking from different directions. We went low level most of the way, pulling up in pod shortly before the target, and did our thing. The first SAMs didn't appear until we were egressing. However, several came up through the undercast, so we called for a SAM break and pushed over. I noticed my wingman was a touch late to get started down. I made a mental note to mention that in the debrief.

We headed back to Udorn, all eight of us in echelon on initial, and called tower with "forty cents worth of nickels on initial." We all, except, perhaps, number eight, thought that was really cool.

We debriefed, later, and I didn't have to mention the late push, because the wingman's WSO got out his tape recorder and played back "Don't push yet, I've got a great

shot of the SAM coming at us.” He had just purchased a movie camera and was trying it out.

Fortunately, no harm, no foul, but, as I recall, movie cameras were not allowed after that unless the mission called for it.



WOLF FAC STORIES SCUD YATES

While I was a Wolf FAC, the wing decided I had flown too many hours in a month and sent me to Bangkok. I got on the train at 6:00 p.m. that night and suffered a twelve-hour ride with pigs and chickens running down the aisles, arriving at my wife's place at about 8:00 a.m. This was my second tour, so I had to bring her over, or I might have lost her. I had called ahead and the wedded bliss was warm and wonderful. We had not seen each other in months. Sleep followed until I got a call before noon. The Wolf shop passed the word that we had lost a plane. The crew should have not been flying together because their training levels were not matched at all. The DO had changed the schedule after I left.

I was in shock, and because I could not get on the train back until 6:00 p.m. or book a flight, Kathy and I had a few drinks while I smoldered. I arrived at Ubon at 6:00 a.m. the next day, got to the office to find the DO had another line-up mismatched. That mission was to a very bad area that neither of the guys in the plane was knowledgeable about. I didn't even know the guy in the front seat, and the backseater was a pilot acting as an IP but was not even

through his training program to be a full-up Wolf. My career was in shambles already, and I had had little sleep, but I needed to stop the DO from killing our whole team. I barged into his office and started an attack on his actions in a less-than-respectful manner, stating, with colorful language, he had caused the loss of the plane yesterday and had set up the one flying out there right now for the same fate. He was not impressed with my assessment of his mother's marriage status and he had me in a brace against the wall and called the MPs to come arrest me. He was discussing the prosecution I was going to face at my court martial when a call was passed to him that the Wolf he had scheduled had just been nailed and they had bailed out. I could hear what was said, so I relaxed, and he let me walk out of the office.

It turned out the guy in the front seat was someone the DO knew who had flown a few backseat rides as a high speed FAC during his first tour at Udorn. He had arrived a few weeks earlier with a deployed F-4 unit. The pilot didn't come back to the Wolf shop after both of them were picked up. When they were on the ground, he panicked and almost caused both of them to be caught and/or killed. The IP said if he had found him in the jungle, he would have shot him. The result of this screwup was that scheduling was back in my hands, at least until the shop got dispersed to the squadrons.

Later, I had the deployed pilot come to me once as a flight leader of a four-ship diverted from Pack 6 to dump their bombs in Route Pack 1. I briefed that I had a good target but it was well defended. He said something about it was nothing to them, as they were real big guys who flew up north. I marked supplies above the Dong Ha Ferry, taking hundreds of rounds over and around me. He started his roll-in only to abort, saying he, "lost the target." The rest of the

flight rolled in and bombed well. He started down again and pulled off high again, making some other excuse. His guys went through in sequence again and were heavily hosed, jinking like mad. His turn came again and he pulled off very high and dumped his bombs in the boonies, calling "Bingo" and "join it up." The guy was too cowardly to make a pass.

I called him a pussy in the bar a week later, but he would not take a swing. At the Nellis bar years later he came with a Guard unit for Red Flag and someone started pounding on him in the bar. His own unit jumped in and took a few shots on him instead of helping.

He is probably a fine lawyer now.



I HOPE THEY'RE GRANDPAS TOO MARTY CAVATO

I was an F-4 Phantom II pilot with the 555th TFS, the “Triple Nickel,” based at Udorn, Thailand, from May 1971 to November 1972. In late October 1972, eighteen months into my tour, with less than a month to go, I was flying single ship as a Laredo Fast FAC, Laredo 12, over the southern part of North Vietnam. Little did I know that it would be a day I would never forget. We had been airborne for two or three hours, putting in several strikes on targets in Route Pack I, the southern part of North Vietnam just north of the DMZ. Returning from yet another refueling, we once again entered North Vietnam. I happened to be flying an F-4E that day. Laredo FACs seldom flew the “E” model with the internal 20mm Gatling gun, since those aircraft were usually assigned to the guys flying MiGCAP. The F-4E’s deadly Gatling gun had proven its value in air-to-air combat several times. Two of our fellow Nickels sent a MiG-21 down in flames on September 9. We were glad to be flying the F-4E that day; you just never knew.

The day was picture perfect weatherwise, sunny skies and a scattering of bright, puffy, cotton-ball cumulus clouds. We entered North Vietnam with full fuel tanks, a few

remaining white phosphorus “Willie Pete” marking rockets, a full 20mm Gatling gun and no strike aircraft to put on targets. We decided to use the time waiting for strike flights to arrive by doing visual reconnaissance, looking for targets of opportunity. Letting down to a lower altitude just north of the DMZ between “Bat Lake” and the town of Dong Hoi, we flew over a dirt road that paralleled Route 1A along the coast and inland five miles or so. We were flying south to north toward an area we called the SAM orchard because of another Laredo mission. On that mission, we directed a flight of F-4s with LGBs on a stockpile of SAMs stacked like cord wood hidden in an orchard. The results were spectacular.

We flew along the dirt road for a short time, seeing nothing of interest, when suddenly, in the middle of the road, they came into view. Aerial warfare is generally an impersonal thing. Targets that we were usually sent against were “hard” targets: trucks, guns, railroad yards, airfields, supplies, buildings, and the like. Once we dropped an LGB on a 57mm gun position that was firing at us and knew that the gun crew had been killed when the bomb exploded and the muzzle flashes ceased. But, we never saw the gunners. Even when we worked with a FAC in Laos or South Vietnam against troops in contact, the altitudes and speeds we flew and the usual presence of a jungle canopy prevented us from seeing the enemy. That is why it was so startling to actually see them on the road that day.

It took a while for it to sink in. There was an enemy column in the middle of the road. We flew over them from behind and then turned around to make another lower pass. As we got nearer and lower, we could see that they were indeed soldiers, all wearing green uniforms, marching in a column. I estimated there were thirty or so of them. As we

passed over them, I fully expected them to scatter along the side of the road, unshoulder their rifles, and start to shoot at us, but they just continued marching. We pulled up again and as we circled around to make another pass, I climbed up to make sure we were actually in North Vietnam. Yes, there was Bat Lake well to the south and Dong Hoi in view to the east along the coast. My GIB confirmed by checking our coordinates. We had a brief discussion of whose troops they were and quickly concluded that they could not be anything but North Vietnamese regulars, since they were in uniform, in broad daylight, well inside of North Vietnam, and marching north. As we turned to make another pass, my GIB asked "What do you want to do?" I rolled back toward the column and watched my gun sight's bright red pipper, set for a strafing pass with the Gatling gun, slowly work its way up the road toward the column from the rear.

When I arrived at Udorn in May 1971, we were flying only in Laos and South Vietnam, the bombing of the North having ceased several years earlier. However, we still had our losses. Lost in August that year, leaving behind his new bride, was my classmate and old USAFA roommate, who had taught me to ski. In late 1971 we began flying sporadic sorties "Up North," and in April 1972, Operation Linebacker began in earnest and we went to North Vietnam nearly every day. And our losses mounted. AAA, SAMs, and MiGs all took their toll. In May the best fighter pilot in our wing had even been shot down and killed by MiGs; and his GIB spent twenty-three days on the ground in North Vietnam before those glorious Jollys and Sandys brought him home. In mid-June I had the heartbreaking duty of calling the girlfriend of one of my best friends and listening to her cry as I told her that he was shot down that morning and was MIA. Later in June, my GIB Tony and I were flying as a Laredo FAC in Route Pack 6, west of Hanoi, searching for the crew of two downed

aircraft. We watched two F-4s in the four-ship flight that was providing MiGCAP for us get blown from the sky by MiGs. Shortly after that flight, Tony was flying another Laredo mission when he was shot down over North Vietnam and became a POW, and his fellow Laredo crew member was killed. In July, while flying MiGCAP, I listened on the radio as one of Udorn's squadron commanders and his GIB took a direct hit by a SAM and were killed. In September two of my best friends were shot down over North Vietnam, thankfully rescued, once again by those glorious Jollys and Sandys. God bless them. And in early October, just two weeks before this mission, after a going-away party the previous night, two of our Laredo FACs did not return from their last mission before going home. I didn't know it then but I would be there with Pete's family when he finally returned home to be buried in Arlington National Cemetery some thirty years later. And while we were enduring all of this, in Paris they argued about the size and shape of the table for peace negotiations.

In the cockpit there was silence, except for our breathing, when my GIB once again asked "Marty, what do you want to do?" By now the pipper had reached the column as they marched and marched and marched. They were marching north, away from South Vietnam and the DMZ.

I thought to myself, "They're marching home." In less than a month I, too, would finally be heading home. Home. As my gunsight's pipper passed through the whole column and reached the end, I pulled our F-4E up sharply and turned west.

I finally answered my GIB, "They look tired; they're marching north. They're going home. I'm tired too. I'm going home soon too. Let's just let them go home." I climbed west

toward Udorn, and as I looked back over my shoulder at the brown ribbon of road cutting through the green orchard, I watched the column of enemy soldiers, still marching north, slowly shrink from sight.

One of the greatest joys in life is the joy brought by family, and perhaps the greatest family joy of all is the joy brought by grandchildren. As I write this, our family recently celebrated Christmas Eve at our home, including most of our eight kids and our two granddaughters for a big dinner and the opening of presents. At some point in the festivities my four-year-old granddaughter came over to me. I hadn't seen her for a few weeks. She put her arms around my neck and hugged me and said, "I've been missing you, Grandpa."

I hugged her back. "And I've been missing you too, Sweetie."

I seem to think about that column of soldiers on the road more and more often as time goes by. I hope they're grandpas too.



COMING HOME JOHN B. (SKIP) HALL

With just under a thousand hours of combat hours in “Double Ugly,” two (plus) full combat tours, including two tours with different “fast FAC” outfits, I find there is no shortage of memorable exaggerated highs and lows for me. In fact, a great deal of the experience is as clear as if it happened yesterday. We did crazy things because it was a crazy war. We were ill trained and ill equipped when we got there, and if we got good at it, it was because of on-the-job-training (OJT) and a fighter spirit out of place with the task. A relevant question is how many of those over 450 sorties actually contributed to any clear objective, especially considering such things as the absurdity of target lists being formulated at a weekly breakfast by the president back in DC. If you agree that there were crazy losses in the air war, read “We Were Soldiers Once...and Young,” the account of the Ia Drang Valley battle. It just may make you cry.

For those of us who stuck around for thirty years or more, it's safe to say that the Vietnam experience shaped us in many ways. Over a twenty-year period, the aviator veterans of Vietnam built the best air force in the world: realistic training, readiness, precision, discipline, force

integration, jointness, and so forth. From a combat capability standpoint, the forces we employed in Desert Storm had virtually nothing in common with the forces we employed in Vietnam. That absence of commonality extended beyond combat capability and has left me, now thirteen years retired from the Air Force, with the most vivid and lasting impression of my thirty-three years of service.

A typical trip home from a one-year tour in Vietnam was to take in-country transport to Saigon, a C-141 to Travis AFB in northern California, a military-supplied bus to the San Francisco Airport, and then on to home, next duty assignment, vacation spot, or wherever. As the war waged on, it became common practice to carry a small bundle of civilian clothes on your lap for the C-141 leg. When arriving at Travis, the troops (and these were not all airmen; you might find a bunch of troops from the Ia Drang battle) quickly used the men's room to change into civilian clothes. While they were required to travel in uniform on the military aircraft, they did not wish to be caught dead in a uniform while out in the civilian community. The practice became so widespread that large changing rooms were identified at Travis for this purpose. While we all have heard stories about civilian disdain for our "soldiers," trust those of us who were there; this disdain was undeniable, widespread, and even extended to "buds" from back home.

Contrast that with the coming home of our troops from Desert Storm: You could not get the troops to stop wearing those Desert Cammies everywhere they went. "Welcome Home" celebrations and parades, time off to reconnect with families, welcome signs in every storefront. A DS/DS vet in his cammies had a hard time buying his own drink at the local pub. And so it continues to this day. The support for our troops is so widespread and visible that it probably

embarrasses many of them—save the “hero” term for heroes and just let me do my job.

It struck me while still on active duty that this contrast had nothing to do with the troops themselves; all the contrasts were the result of factors many levels above their pay grades and factors that had nothing to do with the combat performance of our troops. They served for different reasons; some for country and flag, some for the profession-of-arms—for the uniform, some in Vietnam because they were forced to, and yes, some because they had no place else to go. But when real bullets start flying, they all seem to serve for each other, one day, one battle, one sortie at a time.

After living through this incredible injustice to our Vietnamese troops and remembering it so clearly, this Vietnam combat vet finds great gratification in the way our country has come to appreciate our “soldiers.” It’s always fair to debate the politics, military objectives, and national security interests at stake for any fight we get into, but none of that has anything to do with the troops in the trenches. Give them a little respect, the tools they need to do their jobs, and take care of their families. For me, it’s the number one lesson of Nam.