

A RIDGE TOO FAR

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Background

What can I say? Happy Hour had been long and exuberant, and now 07:00 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 South East Asia (SEA). 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 TFWing at DaNang to join the 388th TFW at the Royal Thai Air Force base at Korat, Thailand.

The 35th was one of the most experienced F-4 squadrons in South East Asia (SEA). Although we had about 8 1Lt aircraft commanders, we had been training them for 6 months prior to deployment. The rest of the squadron averaged over 1800 hours of F-4 time and included 8 Fighter Weapons School graduates (Commanding Officer Lieutenant Colonel Lyle Beckers, Major Walt Bohan, and Captains Charlie Cox, Jim Beatty, Joe Moran, George Lippemeier, Will Mincey, and me).

0600 hours, 20 July 1972

We are being briefed on a mission to Route Package 6; bombing the underground fuel storage area located about 12 nautical miles southeast of Hanoi. Our mission is a mini- strike package with 16 of our F-4Ds acting as "iron haulers". That is, eight ships ((call signs "Caddy"(1st Striker) and "Buick" (3rd Striker)) each carrying 12 iron bombs (500 pound Mark 82) with delay fuzes. An additional eight ships ((2nd Striker ("Dodge") and 4th Striker ("Chevy")) would be each be carrying 9 incendiary mix CBU 58s.

The 'plan' calls 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 (radar guided) and Sidewinder (heat seeking) missiles, plus the internal 20mm Gatling gun. Each of the F-4s carried a radar jamming pod. All the aircraft and spares would be flying out of Korat. Support missions would include the mix of Wild Weasels, tankers and Command and Control aircraft.

Weather is 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 warns us about a potential 'new' Surface-to-Air (SAM) missile site just north of Thud/Phantom ridge, roughly half way between Hanoi and the coast line to the east.

After 'wheels-up' the 24 ship strike force and spares are to join up and proceed to 'Purple' Tanker orbit abeam of the city of Vinh out over the Gulf of Tonkin. After mid-air refueling we would cross the North Vietnam coast ('feet dry') North East of Thanh Hoa. Our Initiation Point would be Minh Binh and from there to the target. After the strike we would egress NE then east just North of Thud/Phantom Ridge to feet wet, then South to Purple tankers and RTB (Return To Base - for us, back to Korat).

The Mission Commander, Caddy 1, is Major Walt Bohan and I, Caddy 3, am the Deputy Mission Commander.

The rest of the mission briefing is 'normal - normal'. All 24 aircrews and spares 'step' at 9:15 for a 10:30 takeoff.

(Now here's where the hair on the back of your neck should start bristling - as in: "oh oh", things aren't going "as briefed"!! I know MINE did!)

Shortly after engine start Caddy 4 ground aborts Air Refueling Door Failure), dashes to a ground spare, but it ground aborts also. A ground spare replaces Caddy 4. (Capt. Jim Beatty in F-4D with 500

pounders, who had attended the Caddy flight briefing.) Taxi as 4 ship. At EOR (End Of Runway checkpoint) Caddy 2 ground aborts for a massive hydraulic leak. Caddy Flight takes off on time as a flight of three with the rest of the strike force in tow.

(Did I ever tell you about Jim Beatty's 'world renown' May '72 supersonic Mig-21 gun kill while flying an F-4E out of DaNang. Supersonic? Yep! He and his pitter had pretty sore necks as their F-4E went through 'mach tuck' and hit jet wash just as the Mig burst into flames!! Pegged the G meter!! The jet was down for a few days, too!)

Rendezvous with tankers in Purple orbit uneventful - gas passed in reverse order (i.e. - 4, then 3, then 1) per briefing - except for Caddy 1 who 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 joins Caddy flight. It's an F-4E with CBU's from the 421st TFS, flown by Captain Sammy Small. He tops off after Caddy 4. Caddy 1 can't get his Flight Control Augmentation System (CAS) to stay on line, is VERY sensitive in the pitch axis and can't take any more gas. He aborts, making Caddy 3 the mission commander.

(I've never been on a mission with this much 'trouble' BEFORE we even get to the target!!)

Due to armament, flight call signs are rearranged. Caddy check in is "Caddy 3 check", "2" (Jim Beatty F-4D with bombs), 4" (Capt. Sammy Small F-4E with CBU's).

(I am often questioned about proceeding with the mission as a 3 ship. Best I can remember there was a Wing policy that covered going on a mission with less than the fraged number of aircraft, armament different from fraged, etc. However, comma, the original Caddy 1 seemed to have been going to target with 3 jets; we had 12 'bombers' and 8 'escorts' right behind us; AND the target dictated delayed fused bombs to expose the POL followed by CBU's to assure the POL caught fire. "That's my story, and I'm sticking to it!")

After drop-off from tankers, ingress proceeds as briefed: feet dry NE of Thanh Hoa, IP (Initial Point) at Ninh Binh to target. Slight weaving along route at an altitude of 18,000 to 22,000 feet.

(Another bad sign! When the flight switches 'Master Arm On', one of Caddy 2's bombs just sorta falls off its rail! Cripes! Hope it doesn't hit those Navy ships!!)

In bound route is eerily quiet. My 'pitter' Lieutenant Mike Nelson and I discuss target area responsibilities again. There is very little activity on the Radar Homing and Warning System (RHAW); only occasional, short beeps from various enemy radars (Ground Control Intercept (GCI), Fansong SAM (Surface-to Air Missile), and the larger Anti - Aircraft Artillery (AAA) tracking radars).

The 'new' Caddy 4, rightfully, since he was not in Caddy's briefing, asks from which direction was roll in and moves to right combat echelon as we approach the target area.

I can see the target area is almost free of clouds - some scattered ones at 8 to 10,000 feet - a heavier, layered deck appears to cover the egress route.

For an underground fuel storage site, this one is fairly easy to identify from altitude due to good intelligence target photos of the dirt roads. As Caddy flight approaches the roll in point, a single 85-mm AAA gun starts shooting in the vicinity of the target area - dense black flak balls widely scattered at 15 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 NE and it looks about right to me from the movement of low clouds and smoke from ground fire. Briefed aim point for Caddy's bombs and Dodge's CBU's was the SW half of the target area, so that Buick and Chevy flights could target the NE half of the target area without being hindered by smoke from Caddy and Dodge's ordinance (and, hopefully, secondary explosions).

Caddy 1 is thundering 'down the chute' at 500+ miles per hour in a 60-degree dive. I stop the wind drift with the 'pipper' (aiming device) directly on the target and 'pickle' off my deadly weapons at 14,000 feet. (Funny how the 'light, sporadic 85 mm flak seems MUCH heavier during the pass!!) All bombs off, I start a hard 6 'G' pull, jink left, and then jink hard right as we bottom out about 7000 feet. I continue in a hard right turn climbing toward 10,000 feet and heading for the north side of Thud/Phantom Ridge.

Coming off target, Mike and I crane our necks against the G forces scanning the ground and skies for SAMs, AAA and Migs. I notice several 37 or 57 mm AAA guns joining in the defense of the target area - but still only at the 'moderate' level. As I look 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, 1/Lt Mike Nelson. As the join up to combat spread formation ensues, I get a look at the target area some 10 - 15 miles away. Black, heavy smoke, with fires visible at the ground, rising to some 18,000 feet as the second wave's ordinance starts to impact. (Sierra Hotel!! We won'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 that if they hit the target, the 'target' really wasn't there anymore - i.e., no secondary explosions. So far on THIS mission, it appeared the mission objective is accomplished and things look pretty good!)

As Caddy 2 and 4 join to combat spread (I'd been turning enough in a high-speed climb to give them cutoff), we see the thickening cloud deck to the East from 5 to 12,000 feet. This observation, plus the intelligence briefing on a possible new SAM (Surface-to Air Missile) site, makes me decide to drop down and egress at 500 feet Above Ground Level (AGL).

(YES, the thought also crosses my mind that a few MIGs might be lurking at low altitude to snipe at us along our egress route. Specially since I had just been on our Wing DCO's wing the day before when he went out north of Thud/Phantom Ridge at low altitude!! Mike was busy fine tuning the radar in search of low altitude 'bogies'.)

I hear a little UHF radio chatter as the following flights come off target, rejoin and start their egress. It sounds like we got lots of bombs on target with good secondary explosions and big fires. Not much activity on the RHAW scopes, but there is a SAM (Surface-to Air Missile) radar warning call from one of the flights exiting the area above 20,000 feet. I am maintaining my easterly heading at 500 to 1,000 feet AGL, in a slight weave with my wingmen in Vee formation. Mike splits his time between the radar scope, visually searching the skies for threats, and checking our geographical egress route. We are cross checking our location by counting the smaller north - south oriented ridges coming off the main East - West ridge. I radio the flight for a fuel check. All 3 of us have good fuel status.

Okay, after the 'next' ridge we'll start a minimum burner climb above the clouds before going 'feet wet' at the coast.

OOPPS!! I see water - the coast - SHOOT! - we've gone "a ridge too far"!!

Caddy 3, joined (and partially blocked) by Caddy 2, transmits, "LOOK OUT, THEY'RE SHOOTIN', 2 o'clock low!!!"

"Well, well, well!! Isn't this a fine kettle of fish you've gotten us into this time, Ollie!!"

(My apologies to Laurel and Hardy!)

(Hmmm. Yep, there are the gunners! We've gone a ridge too far to the East, too near the Cam Pha coastal gunners who reportedly have 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 57-mm gun since the barrels look so long probably no more than five hundred meters away must be in the "real - time zone", i.e., no lead is required!! All they have to do is put the cross hairs on our plane and shoot!!)

The above thoughts occur in the 5 nanoseconds it takes for me to jam both throttles into full afterburner ('AB' . . . or 'reheat' as the Brits would say), and pull HARD into a climb - apparently the same amount of time it takes one of the 57 mm rounds to travel the short distance from the barrel to my trusty

F-4! Just as I pull, we feel a powerful jolt and a right yaw. I guess we are too close for the 57 mm fuse to arm before it hits 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.

"Mike, you okay?" "Yep, I'm ready when you are." "Okay, Mike, hang on. We gotta try to get feet wet."

Caddy 2 (Jim Beatty, in his terse, nasal tone) says, "Lead you're on fire!" (Later he tells us the flames were as long as the airplane!)

I switch our radio to Guard frequency.

"MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY! Caddy 3, on fire, trying to get feet wet north of Cam Pha!"

Above a lower deck of scattered clouds now; can see I'm right at coastline. About 450 knots airspeed, slowing; about 3000 feet, slight descent; Right Overheat Light comes ON! Shoot! Okay, left engine out of burner - can't feel much difference in thrust - pull left engine to idle. Left Generator is out; PC 1 Hydraulic Light is on; Stick is getting heavy; Right Overheat Light still on; "SHOOT"; Right throttle back to full military power; Reset Right Generator and Cross 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, Mike, not yet."

Pleading quite earnestly to my rugged 'steel stallion', I whisper, "Hang in there a little longer, Baby; we're just passing the coastline."

Losing altitude and speed, but 'feet wet', valiant F-4D, Phantom II, tail number 65-0265 starts to 'give up the ghost'. She starts a small, but increasing in amplitude, oscillation in the vertical. Our radios are 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 Mike to stand by for ejection.

(All of the above - from being hit to ejection - transpires in about 90 to 120 seconds - enough time to cover 10 to 15 miles and get 3 or 4 miles off shore. I could talk for an hour or more on the sequence of events - switches, instruments, warning lights, cockpit discussions, visual sightings, etc. The point is that a MAJOR temporal acceleration occurs in most stressful situations like this. Adrenaline, heart rate, all your sensory perceptions go full pegged.)

What IS TRULY AMAZING is that our Air Force training (and all U.S. Military training) gives each of us the capability to successfully respond to crisis situations like this. Mike and I did things correctly, without hesitation, to handle each little nuance as the major emergency progressed. So will you!!)

(Mike and I weren't 'perfect' in our performances, but we were pretty good! And I'd also have to say we were a little lucky! But the bottom line is - We are well trained in a great air machine!)

(The Caddy wingmen tell us later that they saw: the 2 AIM 7s 'cook off', launch, and go ballistic; our F-4 pitch up into the clouds at about 1500 feet AGL and come back out in an inverted spin; and the jet exploding on the karst on 'Elephant Ear' island.)

"Okay, Mike, BAILOUT!!!"

1205 hours, gomer time, 20 July 1972.

OOPS! So much for my timing of the oscillations!! At about 3 G's, 1000 feet AGL, and 400 knots airspeed, with my chin on my chest, I pull the ejection seat handle between my legs. I see a bright orange glow in my peripheral vision as my hands come up to crotch level. I sense major temperature and noise changes as the aircraft canopy comes off. I get a quick, powerful jolt in the butt as the seat

starts up the rail; I perceive one slow (I THINK it was slow) 360 degree forward tumble; the drogue chute straightens the seat's trajectory

(From canopy off to drogue chute deploy, everything seems gray - we are either in the low clouds or my eyes are deprived of oxygen, i.e., 'gray out'. I'm not really sure, since our wingies do not see the actual ejection. They do pick up our white chutes on their next pass; so I think we were in the clouds!)

Instantaneously, the seat straps release, the 'fanny kicker' straps boot 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, "AARRGRRUUMMPHHHHH!" "That wasn't terribly pleasant," me thinks to meself!!

Okay! I look 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, 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'm not very far above the water. Look, 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 survival radio from vest; raise antenna; switch from 'beeper' setting to 'voice'. I see Caddy 3 Bravo in his chute and closer to the water than me.

"MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY. Caddy 3, 2 chutes, about to splash feet wet." I hear a garbled response from somebody airborne. Hey! Water's getting close! I shove 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'), the LPU's!! (Life Preserver Unit - 2 under- arm flotation devices.) I pull both knobs and both spring to life - fully inflated.

Feet together, look at horizon - SPLASH!!!

'Hmmm. . . . water is 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 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 roll over on my back and 'scootch' back into raft. Okay what's next?! Oh, yeah! I pull on the lanyard until I get the survival kit into my raft.

Didn't see anything moving near us on the water or on these little islands - that's a good thing. Not drifting much, but I toss 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 3, 2 souls feet wet, over", er, " on twenty-eight, twenty-eight!"

"Roger, Caddy 3, Copy all, Stand by!"

HALLELUJAH! Somebody reads 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's Mike! We are about 100 meters apart in gently swelling seas, amongst about 20 or so small, vegetated islands. Each about 20 feet high, bushes maybe 3 or 4 feet high on top. The islets are eroded somewhat at the water line kind of like a narrow waist. It is quiet where we are - we can talk in conversational tones across the water. We hear occasional heavy gunfire from beyond the coastline about 3 miles away. Mike and I confirm that each of us is okay - no major injuries, no bleeding. Okay, let's talk about what we're gonna do

"Caddy 3, Caddy 3, Come up primary Guard freq." YEOW!

Switch radio; "Caddy 3, Up on Guard!"

"Caddy 3, This is Pistol 1, On scene SAR (Search And Rescue) Commander. We think we have you located. Stand By and come up 'freq.' to check in at the briefed times. Over."

"Caddy 3, Copy, Standing By. Out."

Mike suggests that if we're not picked up by dark, we'll need to hide on one or maybe separate little islands after sinking our rafts. Yep, that sounds 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 finish 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 or 3,000 feet. Smoke trail - F-4; 6 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 3, we have 'Tally Ho' on two."

"Caddy 3, copy."

"Caddy 3, This is Pistol 1. Hang in there; we're working on a pick up. Come up in 15 (minutes)"

Pistol 1 is Major Gary Retterbush, Escort Mission Lead from the 35th TFS. With over 2000 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 Gary ALWAYS delivered - in flight discipline, in bombs on target, and in smoothly guiding his squadron mates in 'pointy end of the spear', common sense tactics. He's a little guy, dark wavy hair, maybe 5' 8" and 155 pounds, but 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 3 trips to the tanker. ABCCC (the airborne command and control center for the AF, a.k.a. 'Big Brother') tried to send him back to Korat by replacing him with a scrambled 2 ship (from DaNang, I think), but he refused - "Since he had a 'Tally' on the downed crewmen and would need to 'verbally' guide the rescue chopper in."

When I ask him about escorting the chopper (comes up later), he simply said, "If any guns came up from the bigger islands, they'd shoot at me first, and I had those A-7's as top cover."

If you EVER run across him, please buy ALL the drinks (even if they are cans of 'Ensure') and send me the bill - I'll reward you handsomely!!

Back at the 'Tonkin Gulf Yacht Club' (small rubber boat class), Caddy 3 Alpha and Bravo (me and Mike) are staying busy selecting favorable little islets for potential use if we are not rescued before night fall. We secure our survival kits to the raft; go 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 Viet Nameese and government-issue 'script' money; a drivers license from DaNang; part of a letter from my wife; and a head band I wore under my helmet (no skull caps in those days) to catch the sweat. {The F-4 air conditioning system moved lots of air, but only marginally cooled from the ambient air temperature on the cool end.} The headband was cotton, blue and red patterns with 'Love' in the center and 'Viet' and 'Nam' on the sides. Inappropriate attire, no doubt, if a 'guest' of the NVNese. Tightly wrapped with 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!!)

. take my helmet off for a while, but remember about heat and fluid loss, even with the broken to overcast cloud deck above, put it back on; drink some canned water; I start to notice some soreness in my back, my neck and insides of my thighs. Mike says he thinks his neck is burned a little and is a little sore, too.

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 know 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 Nausea, shivers, 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 half way 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! "bbrrrrRRRRrrr" Oh, SHOOT, he just hosed something over there with his 20 mm Gatling gun!! Hope he got whatever it was! Well, he's not coming around for another pass - that's good news, I guess

(We find out later that four gomers in a wooden boat were paddling in our general direction. Probably just fishermen, but unlucky ones this day. They jump out of the boat during the first pass by the F-4E; the boat is cut in half by the F-4's bullets on the second pass.)

Haven't heard anything since last 15 minute check in - how long have we been here 'playing sailor' in our rubber dingies 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! MIG's FROM THE SOUTH??!! 4 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 - 4 A-7'S with 16 Rockeyes, 8 Zuni's and 4 thousand rounds of 20 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-7's continue in a turn underneath the cloud deck and go to an orbit somewhere to the north.

"SAR leader, this is CADDY 3, over."

"Caddy 3, this is Pistol 1; starting to look good again; come back up in 15 (minutes)"

"Caddy 3, Roger."

Mike and I are definitely on a high now. We talk a little about the possibility of a Navy pick up; A boat?? Probably not here. We're only about 50 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 - okay.

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 saw toothed wings at about two hundred feet AGL!! Beautiful sight, but why

"Caddy 3, Pistol 1. Caddy 3, Pistol 1"

"Pistol 1, Caddy 3 is up!"

"Caddy 3, Navy chopper south east about 5 minutes out. Stand by with Smoke!"

"Caddy 3, ROGER THAT!"

Mike and I had drifted to within 50 feet of each other for a while, but knew we needed a larger distance between us for easier pick up. 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 50 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 3 or 4 miles away!

Okay, about time for smoke. A wave to Mike and we both pop our red-orange smoke flares. Looks like a "Jolly" (Air Force's 'Jolly Green Giant' HH-53 Rescue Helicopter), 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 3, This is Navy 'Big Mother' Rescue, How copy?"

"DARN YOU LOOK GOOD! Caddy 3 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 20 minutes worth of fuel. They are so heavy they are afraid they can't hold a hover for the pick up. Our smoke indicates that there is about 15 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 15 or 20 minutes. (Maybe 'we' shouldn't 'go' there!)

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 hook up 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 (ParaRescue Jumper) 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 2 pilots' faces with big grins; BIG two armed wave from me; 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, cut off dungarees, black snorkel and diving goggles; 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 onto my harness and off we go up the cable lift. Strong hands grab me from behind and tumble us both onto the deck. *(SEE! I'm already speaking 'Navy'!!)* Somebody grabs me again; picks me up; guides me to a web seat; buckles me in - all the while asking me how I am; where does it hurt; am I sick, etc. A couple of guys are working on Mike, putting a light bandage on his neck.

I become 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 am inundated by a HUGE rush of gratitude welling up from deep inside - toward someone, toward everyone, toward God, Buddha, Whomever. It slowly dawns on me just how tightly wound up I have been for the past hour. Mike and I give each other a 'thumbs up', and I notice the other Navy crewmen nodding to each other and toward the cockpit. I can feel some of the tension ebbing from my shoulders. I check my watch - it's working, but it says 1315 hours - that can't be right! It's been AT LEAST 3 hours!! I can feel myself starting to relax a little, and I take 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 JUMP so hard I darn near break both of my own legs on the seat straps When one of the PJ's opens up with the 'gas operated, air cooled, belt fed, 50 caliber, 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 get louder; vibrations change to a higher frequency; we start to move away from the pick up site; getting that calm feeling again; I have GOT to get a handle on these mood changes

.

Smoke another cigarette; shake hands with the rear deck crewmen. They know!! - we can see it in their young faces - they know how grateful we both are.

Mike and I look at each and nod - sharing once again that brotherhood born from being tested in the fires of combat - more severely than we had ever been tested before - and coming 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, 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 says, "Captain, were you the one who blew us a kiss down there?"

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."

"Okay!"

We are heading south southeast, still among the group of islands off the coast, at about 200 feet AGL, and 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 (i.e., fighters) see a much different 'sight' picture than the one we're in now!!

Plane captain comes back again; gives me his head set; shows me the UHF button; and motions me to the 'port' (Navy's 'left') windows. On intercom, helo pilot says, "Captain, your buddy with the big balls wants to say 'hi'. He's been in formation for about 10 minutes. "

What I see out the port side is indeed a beautiful sight!! There sits 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 can make out hand waves from both cockpits.

"Caddy 3, Pistol 1. You 'Panthers' all right??"

Fumble for the right switch; "Pistol 1, 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 accelerates in a left climbing turn and is out of sight in no time. Give head set back; re-buckle up; look 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

As we slow down for the approach and landing on the nuclear powered destroyer USS Long Beach (CGN 9), we can see 1, maybe 2 carriers off on the east horizon with several other ships spread out for

20 miles or so. When the plane captain signals to us, we unbuckle and are 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 hear the clapping, whistles and yells from the crew. Now THAT kinda makes Mike and I 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 comes an officer in khakis - obviously the Captain - I get off a snappy salute (Mike follows) and yell, "Permission to come aboard, Sir!" (Think I had seen that in an old John Wayne movie somewhere!) Even though he's 'uncovered', he almost returns the salute. Instead, he shakes 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 get 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 stops by, asks 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; asks how we feel and provides more juice and cookies. We tell him the short version about the mission, shoot down and rescue. He is a pretty cool guy. He says we're going on to the Kitty Hawk soon and gives us both some Long Beach souvenirs. He shakes our hands and quite sincerely says "Glad to have you both back." Mike and I 'gush out' our many thanks for his crew's efforts in our rescue and our clean up. 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.

USS Kitty Hawk CVA 63 1500 hours

Zowie!! Look at the size of that boat, I mean, carrier! (The USS Kitty Hawk CVA 63)

Big Mother lands and shuts down. Down the ramp again to see - and this time hear - about 200 swabbies clapping and hollering!! (MUCH larger variety of duty uniforms! Wonder what all those different colored vests and helmets mean??) Still a little confused by the reception, Mike and I give big, arm over our head waves. Again, an obvious 'honcho' steps out of the crowd. Our 'crispiest' salutes go unreturned; permission to come aboard granted; and strong handshake from the 'heavy' who introduces himself as, "Doc Townsend, 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 Lt. F-4 pilot escort asks us lots of aviator questions on the way down to a small galley where we are 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') to the infirmary for a complete check over. Re-clean and more salve on our cuts and abrasions; Mike gets a new bandage for his neck; aspirin for some soreness creeping into our bodies. Another intelligence officer stops in, so we relate 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' cabin at about 1630 hours.

Captain (Navy Full Colonel) Doc Townsend greets us at the door. . er . . '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, for whom I instantly decide I would enjoy working - IF I didn't have to do carrier Ops!! A map is brought in so he can better visualize our route and location of bail out, etc. After 30

minutes or so, he says there's 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 Butt' missions!" I like his style!

As he departs, 5 or 6 AF flyers show up to welcome us aboard. Among them were 2 F-4 jocks I had briefly run across before - Captains Tim Mikita and Joe Oberle. (Less than a year later, Tim, Joe and I 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 Lt. takes us to the 'head' (Oops! I mean 'cranium') table; introduces us to the Ship Captain, who welcomes us kinda 'stony-faced'. As we are shown to our seats I hear 'bells' or chimes, which for some reason makes me ask the Lt., "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 hits 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: waves of thanks.

We are 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. Best meal and service I'd had in a LONG time. It is way better than meals at Korat; which is even way better than at DaNang; which is even way better than Bien Hoa; which is even way better than Khe San; which is You get the point??

After dinner we are taken to our bunks / cabin for the night where we are given all of our usable gear back. Back into our cleaned 'bags', we inventory our 'stuff'. Everything has been cleaned up and dried off as much as possible - we are much impressed at this effort from untold minions! About the only things missing are our flares for which there is a signed hand receipt! Even our .38 pistols and ammo had been cleaned and oiled!

Two pilots (one Navy, one Air Force) show up for our tour. Off we go 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 CIC (Combat Information Center) where the combat sorties are planned and monitored. For Air Force guys, the CIC functions like a Command Post, mission planning room and intelligence section all rolled into one - and then STUFFED into a 8 X 8 foot room with no windows.

One of the on - duty intelligence types drags us to his 'station' and gives us a detailed, very interesting run down on the missions readying for launch. We get to see post strike photos from a previous strike and pre-strike photos for the next 'go'.

Asking us if we had any 'Air Force' information, he explains the on - going, high level of effort in trying to pinpoint the exact location of Jane "The Pinko Commie Witch" Fonda. Who, 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 Viet Nameese 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 proceed 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 W.W.II carrier movies wearing the goggles and holding two bright flags in his hands parallel to the horizon standing on the end of the ship signaling to the shot up and injured Navy pilots trying to land?? Well, it is all done electronically now, since the aircraft are approaching the deck at more than twice the speed of their prop driven predecessors. First, we get 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 15 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 have the TRULY awe inspiring experience of watching some 20 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 watch A-7E's, A-6E's, KA-6D's (buddy tankers), and F-4B's SLAM onto the deck. (One of the F-4s provides 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 a RA-5C Vigilante whose 'perfect' trap makes the aft of the carrier settle about 4 feet when it 'hit' the deck!! This is easily my second most terrifying experience on this day!!

After the recovery, we are taken to one of the nicer junior officer's quarters where 2 of the 3 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 comes by and 'barter's' for our AF survival vest - seems they hold more of the 'right stuff' than the Navy issue vest!! A small, subdued party breaks 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 (Surface-to Air Missile) 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 (okay, okay, I did have SOME help) devoiding the ship of its 'mission whiskey', Mike and I retire to our bunks about midnight. Sleep for both of us that night is fitful - for the obvious reasons, but also because every 2 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.

Wednesday morning, 21 July 1972, 0700 hours, aboard "The Hawk".

After wolfing down a hearty breakfast (where do they keep all this good food on board ship??!!), Mike and I are 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 are presented some nice "Hawk" souvenirs - baseball caps, lighters with our names engraved, pins and decals, and then we hustle to a C-1 COD twin engine prop job. We are 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' land at Ton Son Nhut Air Base outside of Saigon. We know immediately that we are back in the war zone by: the retched stench permeating the passenger terminal; all the Military Police on guard; and the throng of 'suspicious' looking natives (read: Viet Cong infiltrators). We encounter some truly frightened and scary looking combat grunts waiting for their "Freedom Flight" back to 'the world.' Some of these GI's look as if they were REALLY 'on the edge'! (*Hmmm. Wonder what Mike and I look like??*)

After about a two hour wait and some questioning from non-combat, non-support 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 land about 1530 hours at Korat, shutting down in front of Base Operations. Waiting on the ramp are some 30 people, including, surprisingly, about 10 enlisted troops. This time when we stop at the top of the steps, salute and shout, "Reporting for duty, SIR!", our salutes ARE returned. As we reach the tarmac, I see a heavy drive up, leap from his blue sedan, and approach us straight on. Saluting again, Colonel Vojvodich salutes. Oh 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 19th of July when he led us on a 'Mig hunt' during egress at low level along Phantom Ridge. He growls a welcome back and departs. 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 are the 2 crew chiefs for tail #265 and some of the ejection seat, parachute and survival kit guys. Before we go into the Squadron Ops building, we talk to them about the jet and how the equipment 'worked like a charm'.

At 1630 we report to Wing HQ (Headquarters) for our 'shoot down' debriefing. It lasts until 1800, and is scheduled to resume at 0900 the next day. Mike and I 'slide' back to 35th Ops for a coupla cold ones and stand at the bar for about 2 more hours relating the saga of the previous day's activities.

That evening while celebrating our rescue with our fellow warriors, Mike and I decide we need 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 provide a suitable quantity of the highest quality boozeberries to the troops involved. It is a 'tradition', doncha know! We even mail a sizable sum to Captain Tim Mikita on the Kitty Hawk to take care of the Big Mother crew - he assures me he did!!

Next morning, we debrief until noon. There is some paper work to formalize the disposition of AF equipment - the jet, all the armament, our pistols and ammo, our survival gear, our flight gear. We found out the next day that all of our equipment including the guns had to be garbage - canned due to corrosion!! Salt water is nasty stuff!!

There is one thing that comes out of our lengthy debriefing that affects the whole squadron. I hear - 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 pulls out his government issue, 6 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 ARE, as one might suspect, several other options available: Turning the option select switch to one of the voice positions which shuts off the beeper and requires pressing the transmit key to talk; Removing the batteries from the radio; Or simply dropping it to the bottom of the sea, to name just a few.

There are many furrowed brows in the debriefing room as Mike relates his, perfectly logical at the time, actions. Corrective action for THIS little 'OOOPS' was a Saturday morning 2-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 50 to 100 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 heard NOT the firing of a .38 caliber pistol - UNBELIEVABLE! I guess my ears had decided to join my rectum in SLAMMING SHUT! Which does bring up an important point - my first bowel movement (a.k.a. - dump) since just before the mission briefing on Tuesday was the morning of Saturday, 24 July, just before the 'refresher' training - just thought you would want to know that! I believe this is called 'ending a war story on a 'poopy' note'!

The following is a reflective, 'lessons learned', wrap up, post operations sort of thingy.

The first two flights after our shoot down taught me a little humility. On 22 July, I flew a Functional Check Flight (FCF) or 'test hop' on a jet coming out of maintenance. I am surprised, caught off guard, at my nervousness. My next combat mission was on 25 July to I (eye) Corps (Northern most part of South Viet Nam). 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 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 17 more combat missions (including 3 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 Viet Nam, 17 (okay, you nitpickers, 16 and a half) into Route Package 6. I flew my last combat mission (to date, at least) on 1 September 1972. I spent the next six weeks as the Chief of Weapons at DaNang, which was operating as a remote 'combat turn' base for missions in northern South Viet Nam, '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, enroute 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 (Surface-to Air Missile) break"

"It may be a cruddy war, but it's the only one we have!"

Oh, yeah, I almost forgot

DEAD BUG!!!