

Dennis Clarke Cressey

Loveland HS Class of 1964

US Air Force

Captain

Weapons Systems Officer

390th Tactical Fighter Squadron

366th Tactical Fighter Wing, 7th Air Force



Dennis Cressey

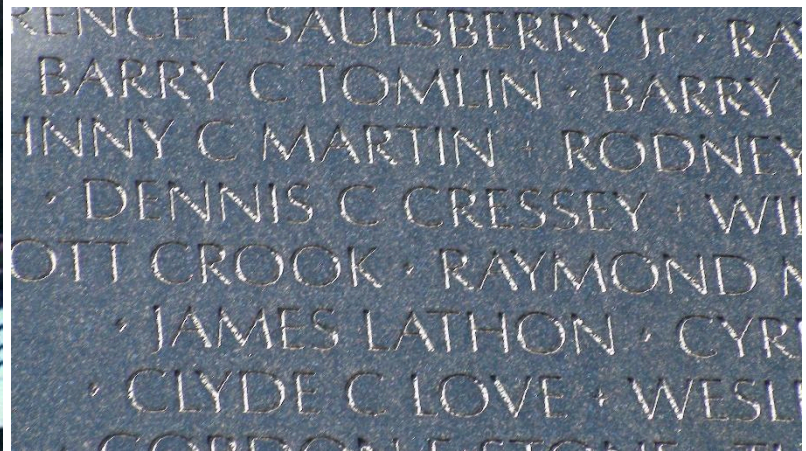




On May 12, 1972, a USAF F-4E Phantom II (serial number 66-0299) from the 390th Tactical Fighter Squadron, 366th Tactical Fighter Wing from Da Nang Air Base, Republic of Vietnam, was sent on a raid into North Vietnam where it was shot down with the loss of both crewmen, CAPT Samuel Y. Adair Jr. and 1LT Dennis C. Cressey.

Recovery of their remains did not occur until November 11, 1974 and the U.S. Government announced that the two crewmen were positively identified on June 26, 1975. 1LT Cressey was a graduate of Colorado State University in Fort Collins, CO in 1968 where he was involved with the Big Brothers program there.

Washington DC Viet Nam War Memorial
Panel 01W, Line 25



A TALE OF AN F4 PHANTOM FIGHTER STRIKE

by Walt Bjerneby, Lt/Col, USAF (Ret)

(Gunfighter 41)

Sam Adair – F4 Pilot

Dennis Cressey – F4 Weapons System Specialist

(Gunfighter 51)

It was around the 7th of April, 1972. I was the squadron commander of the 390th Tactical Fighter Squadron (Wild Boars) in the 366 Tactical Fighter Wing (The Gunfighters) at Da Nang AB, Republic of Vietnam. We were equipped with 20 F4D Phantom aircraft and had some 24 crews, (24 pilots and 24 weapons system specialists), and about 135 airmen to keep the airplanes running. I was 41 at the time, and had been flying fighters since 1954.

This was the period right after the North Vietnamese Army had begun their massive invasion of South Vietnam, shielded by the monsoon's low ceilings and incessant rain. The weather was so bad, with very low ceilings and very poor visibility, that tactical air power could not conduct visual missions, our normal method of close air support and interdiction. We had known they had something in mind since our reconnaissance missions had reported mountainous stacks of fuel and supplies north of the DMZ, yet we could do nothing because of the prevailing rules of engagement.

Thus, it was apparent early on, that they had some military adventure in mind.

Essentially the only information we got from higher headquarters was 'wait and see.' Then the seasonal monsoons started with thick clouds over all of the land. They were solid from about 10,000 feet down to the ground with unceasing heavy rain, the very definition of a monsoon. This of course, essentially negated any form of Close Air Support. We found out what the NVN had in mind all right - invasion! They had been waiting for the monsoon and they came across the DMZ en masse with armor working with their infantry. There were no more US troops up there and the ARVN forces splintered under the combined force attacks without close air support.

Thus we were reduced to flying ground radar-commanded and Loran-navigated bombing missions due to the continuing weather with its heavy rain and clouds down to the ground. These missions were medium altitude level bombing runs above the dense clouds using ground-based MSQ radar control or Loran-equipped RF4C Phantom aircraft as mission leaders.

MSQ (miss-cue) is level bombing controlled by specialized ground radar plus a ballistics computer to compute the drop point. A radar beacon in the lead airplane affords very precise positioning in space to the MSQ radar. A very accurate map locates the target for the computer. One flies a commanded course and responds to minute heading corrections while holding a precise speed and altitude. Tolerances run about + or - 10 feet in altitude, 1 knot in speed and ½ degree in heading. We split the tasks; the guy in the back seat of the aircraft (backseater) handled the throttles to hold the speed while I flew altitude and heading. Minute pressure on the rudders controlled the heading. Finally the controller says "ready, ready, pickle" and the bombs are gone.

Loran (short for Long-Range Navigation) missions are done by flying the wing of a loran-equipped aircraft and dropping in the same manner. At the time these missions were about fifty-fifty in clear or in weather conditions at altitude. It was just plain work for the wingman, especially at night, hanging in tight on the wing wondering how long this was going on. Both methods are rather stultifying to a fighter pilot. You never see any results, either.

Then at last, the monsoons had cleared and the brilliant blue sky was all-present but for scattered fleecy cumulus clouds at lower altitudes. The weather-shield the NVN had depended upon to keep the air power off their backs as they crossed into South Vietnam had lifted and we could now see the ground - and then - instead of being limited to medium altitude level bombing runs into the clouds using MSQ radar and Loran drops, now we could really get to work going after Charlie, performing our squadron's primary mission of close air support.

We of course also had other missions, air power being very flexible. One of the other 'arrows' in the quiver' was interdiction, striking personnel and materiel before they arrived at the front. Intel sources indicated that a NVN infantry force had come down by train to the end of the tracks near Dong Hoi and would be loaded onto trucks for further travel south that morning. Thus the 390th was 'fragged' to strike the transshipment point. Mission orders specified a force of 8 F4s and the ordnance, 6 CBU-52 cluster bombs for each aircraft.

'Frag' is short for fragmentary order, a subset of the air campaign order. 'Being fragged' is of course being scheduled according to that order. Essentially each frag is a set of mission orders covering a 24-hour period. Note that one item might be a designated target, another establishing a response force 'just in case', a third item to work with a Forward Air Controller. As you can imagine the daily 'frag' amounts to a lot of paperwork. A mission order by itself designates who does what with whom at what time, a route if needed, the target and the ordnance to be used. The 'frag' came in at night and the 'frag shop' broke out the info and communicated it to all concerned.

We met two hours before start-engines and briefed the mission, starting with a weather briefing covering the flight from takeoff to landing. Next all the stereotyped steps - start, taxi, arming, takeoff, join up, landing, dearming etc. were glossed over to conserve time for the mission-specific details. Route, timing, lookout, target info, sight settings, weapons release altitude, egress, emergencies, aborts, fuel monitoring, minimum and emergency fuel levels at various stages; these all can change depending on where one is going and what level of threat is involved.

That down, we went to the intelligence shop and got the hot info and the latest orders of battle, then to personal equipment to don our G-suits and harnesses, check out our Smith and Wesson Combat Masterpiece 38 Special revolvers, bullets, and our Escape and Evasion package, similar to the old 'blood chits' used in WW2. Basically they contained items of value and multi-lingual sheets promising a reward if we were aided in getting back home. Last we stuck a pair of water bottles in the lower pockets of our G-suits. The pint-sized plastic flasks were now frozen solid after a night in the fridge; they would melt fast enough in flight. It had been found that having water immediately available after a parachute landing mediated any shock and enabled quicker proper reaction. Also one was always somewhat dehydrated after the flight and needed a cold drink. (Aviator's breathing oxygen is moisture-free to prevent the O2 system from icing upstairs where it's cold, so it's like breathing Death Valley air, only colder.)

Even though it was still pre-dawn, the temperature was warm and the air very humid. Da Nang is a harbor city and our Nomex flying suits were tightly woven and thus not very 'breezy'. It wasn't a long walk from operations through Intel to the P.E shop and thence to the airplanes parked in their hemi cylindrical concrete shelters, but I was perspiring.

• A quick review of the aircraft Form 781, listing its condition and I signed for it, accepting it for flight. I take a moment to talk to the crew chief, tell him a bit about where we're going and what we will be doing. Selfish, really; it's for his morale and that is good for the squadron as he will spread it around.

The assistant crew chief has started the MA-1 gas turbine power unit and puts electrical power to the airplane. The MA-1's high-pitched whine is one reason my hearing cuts off at 3,000 Hz. Lee, my young rear-seater, had already climbed up into his cockpit and started aligning the INS (inertial navigation system). He was now under the aircraft checking the ordnance and its web of arming wires. These latter enable us to carry the bombs safely and then drop them armed to go off. Each small propeller on each bomb fuze (nose and tail) is restrained by its own wire in flight. An arm switch in the cockpit has 'safe, nose, tail, both' positions. Dropped safe, the fuzes will still have the wires in place and theoretically will not go off. However, dropping is always a chancy thing. The other three positions will withdraw the appropriate wires upon bomb release. After so many turns of the propeller/s (selectable in terms of seconds of fall) the bomb fuzes are armed and will go off upon ground impact. One does not want the bomb armed too close to one's airplane; historically there have been cases of bombs detonating upon arming. That is not good within say 1000 feet . . .

• We are loaded with a long centerline tank holding 600 gallons of JP-4 jet fuel and long Multiple Ejector Racks (MERs) on each outboard pylon holding 3 CBU-52 cluster bombs for a total of 6, at about 785 pounds each. The CBU 52s are too long to be hung one behind the other, hence we could only load 3 per rack. The left inboard pylon has 2 AIM9D infra-red heat-seeking missiles, about 165 pounds each, and hanging below the right pylon is an electronic counter-measures unit, a jammer. Inside is sophisticated circuitry designed to fox the enemy's antiaircraft missiles. Lee has its control panel in his cockpit, along with the inertial navigation system (INS), the intercept radar controls and the bombing system that can incorporate both the radar and INS. Under the fuselage back by the trailing edge of the wing, half-snuggled in their wells, are 2 AIM-7E Sparrow radar-guided missiles. They are hefty, about 8 feet long and weighing 800 pounds each.

• Our weight as we sit there is comfortably under the F4D's maximum gross takeoff weight. Not to worry though; even at maximum gross takeoff weight of 58,000 pounds those 2 J79 jet engines in afterburner will get us airborne at about 185 knots in less than 4400 feet of roll, even at 100 F. Gives a crew a fuzzy warm feeling, knowing that.

• Of course the crew chiefs had already prepared the bird for flight, but regs said I had to scrutinize the aircraft myself. (Enforced common sense, actually.) Very very seldom, in 22 years of fighter flying, did I ever find anything they had missed. I did find a small box-end wrench on two separate occasions, but nobody claimed them. Thus they're in my tool chest today.

• Up the ladder and pause to check the Martin-Baker H-7 ejection seat with its integral parachute. First of all, the top seat safety pin is in place and the lower D-handle guard is raised. One would not want to be ejected up into 12" of concrete ceiling. Lots of seat mechanism, not much to check, except that it's all linked together and the other pins removed. That done, duck

under the raised canopy and step onto the seat cushion and go down into my 'nest'. Seat height and rudder pedals adjusted to me. Next don the leg restraints. They may keep my legs from being broken by a 600 knot air blast in a high-speed ejection. We didn't used to have them; they are a result of sad experience, just like the Martin-Baker ejection seats themselves.

The chief helps me hook up the chute straps into my harness Koch fittings, then the shoulder straps hooking into the seat belt itself. He watches as I connect to the oxygen, communication and anti-G hoses. That done, he gives me a clap on the shoulder - I nod and grin -thanks to him as he slides down the ladder and removes it. His assistant has already got Lee all set.

I think for a moment about the men all working to get these planes ready for flight and then launch them. They are on 12 hours shifts, six days a week, and rotate a bit so they can get a day off to relax or whatever. I can't promote them; I can't give them extra time off; all I can do is thank them, make sure they know they are appreciated, clue them in as to what's going on, listen to their troubles, both operational and personal, and do what I can to help them out. I've been around long enough to know the regulations and almost as important, the unwritten avenues of help. Plus I'm not held back much by formalities. What can 'they' do, send me to Da Nang?

I fish my Nomex/leather gloves out of my thigh pocket and slip them on. They fit tight and I make sure they are fully on by pressing my forked fingers together, hand to hand. Loose gloves are a pain in flying. Gloves are also essential since flash burns can immobilize your hands.

Helmet on, oxygen and intercom check. Lee is loud and clear and I start around the cockpit. Left aft to right aft in an arc. Up the center column to the instrument panel. All controls set as required. Check altimeter within limits (+/- 75 feet). We're coming up on check-in time, 30 minutes before takeoff. Lee's handling the radio. The clock finally reaches the preset check-in time.

"Gunfighter 41 flight check in." "42." "43." "44." We are all ready to start - if anyone had a problem they would have said so.

Almost instantly I hear "Gunfighter 51, check in." They are our companion flight - we're taking 8 aircraft in two flights of 4 on this mission. They will be right behind us all the way through the mission so we'll just ignore them for now.

"Bluebird, Gunfighter 41 and 51 flights ready to start engines." Bluebird is the 366 Tac Fighter Wing Command Post. That was part of my purview prior to getting command of the 390th. It was interesting and at times exciting but I do not miss that 24/7 job. Then I had a hot-line telephone from the Command Post right next to my bed. All too often it rang in the middle of the night. Usually the outcome was satisfactory. Now and then it was not. Of course this squadron commander job is pretty much 24/7 too but now I don't mind at all. I think it is the finest job in the USAF. You are still part of the action and you call the shots. I've trained my entire career for this job.

"41, no changes. Have a good flight."

"41 flight, start engines." Again the triple response.

The crew chief is standing out front at ten o'clock. The big 50 pound fire bottle is close at hand - just in case . . . He knows it's just about time for start. I check with Lee and he's ready, too. Engine master switches on. I look directly at the chief and he perks up. I raise a hand and give the wind-up signal. He signals the assistant chief and the MA-1 noise rises as it reaches

starting power. The starting air hits the airplane. I feel the slight vibration as the right engine begins to spin. Right is always first; it has to do with checking the utility hydraulic system pressures. #2 tach shows rotation within 15 seconds - good. At 10% RPM right ignition button down and hold while advancing right throttle halfway up and a snap back to the idle stop. Fuel flow checks ok. Look for oil pressure - it must show within 30 seconds or the start must be aborted. Light-off is, indicated by a slight rumble and the exhaust gas temp rising. Ignition button released. Check oil pressure rise before 30 seconds are passed. 45% - chop signal to cut the starting air. The MA-1 noise drop significantly as engine rpm increases to around 65%. The breeze past the cockpit due to the induced airflow through the shelter is welcome. Check hydraulic pressures. Both okay.

"Lee, OK to switch the generator on?" Making sure the power flux wouldn't unsettle the INS. That would necessitate a realignment of the INS which could delay us as much as 3 minutes.

"Ok to switch it on."

Right generator on, amber RT GEN OUT and BUS TIE OPEN lights go out.

The crew chief raises a hand for the spoiler check; I move the stick one inch left and back and he signals OK. If the spoiler - a narrow flap that kills lift on top of a wing - for a bank that direction snapped full up, we'd have to abort and get it fixed. Aborts are tiresome but thankfully rare. Good maintenance is the reason. Our NCOs - noncommissioned officers - older men - have trained and guided these late teenagers and young twenty year olds into skilled and dependable men. Our lives depend upon them; ours and the ground troops who in turn depend upon us for close air support. This mission, however, is one of interdiction; hitting the enemy before they have reached the combat arena.

We go through pretty much the same procedure with the left engine. Its hydraulics checks okay, its utility pressure being slightly higher than the right. Left generator on, all trouble lights out. I wave my left hand outboard, thumb extended from my fist, the signal to disconnect the ground power unit.

External air and external power are disconnected. The MA-1 is shut down although with both engines now at idle its whiny idling noise was inaudible. The breeze is substantial now. IFF (transponder) to standby, radio altimeter on and check, anti-skid off (it wouldn't do to have it activate in close quarters and disable the braking.)

Now the crew chief and I check the speed brakes out and in, flaps and slats operating correctly, the flight controls for full and proper travel in response to his hand signals. Thanks to the F4's design I can't see any of these controls except the slats. Set the horizontal stabilator for takeoff.

Seat pins removed and stuffed in the left thigh pocket.

"Ready to taxi, Lee?"

"Rear seat ready to taxi."

"Gunfighter 41, button 3". The triple acknowledgment comes back, short and snappy, as it should be. Radio chatter is kept at a minimum. Extraneous calls might block an important one.

The UHF radio chuckles to itself as Lee selects Channel 3. (The UHF command radio has 18 preset and selectable channels, plus Guard channel, with its always-on receiver, and an auxiliary receiver with 20 channels which must be set at the shop.) The command radio also

has an automatic direction finding selection,, We use it to rendezvous with other aircraft, etc.

Lee waits a few seconds for 3 to clear - it is Da Nang's ground control channel, and generally pretty busy - and says "Gunfighter 41." Back come 2, 3, 4.

"Da Nang Ground, Gunfighter 41, taxi four."

"Gunfighter 41 flight taxi runway 17 altimeter 2990 wind 150 at 10. Use caution, others taxiing to 17." Note that all these numbers are sounded individually for clarity - 2990 is transmitted and acknowledged as 'two niner niner zero'. This practice is the result of lessons learned - the hard way. For the same reasons all transmissions are voiced in a calm deliberate manner - usually. Sometimes not, but there better be a good reason for the difference. One reason is that here at Da Nang the traffic can be so heavy that the tower may give directions to several flights without ever pausing for breath.

"Gunfighter 41 flight copies runway 17 altimeter 2990 - 4 taxiing now." I hear Gunfighter 51 call for taxi; they will wait for us to clear the area before moving. It is tight quarters here in the squadron's parking area. About like driving a truck down the center of a two-lane bridge.

I give the 'thumbs out to each side' signal for the chocks to be removed. The crew chief raises his hands to marshal us out of the shelter. The assistant is standing beside him with a handful of safety pins from the seats, missile and bombs. I apply power and get the 30 ton machine moving. The crew chief and his assistant give us a departure salute and I return the honor. I tap the brakes to make sure I have some the instant I sense motion and then pull the power back to idle. I engage the nose gear steering with my right pinkie finger and coast around the ninety degree turn to the taxiway. The tires, as usual, have flat spots from just sitting there and as the bird turns they get out of synch and the Phantom sort of waddles down the strip - lop, lop, lop . . . It's hot here, about 80F or so now and 29 tons will soon iron out those spots. Not like at 40 below where they last quite a while.

Carefully down the row of Wonder arch (who thought that up?) shelters and a double ess turn to the main taxiway. Nobody's in our way and we make it down to the arming area where some more of our troops are waiting. There is a man waiting at each parking spot and one by one we line up, facing in an innocuous direction - just in case a missile decides to fly. Hands outside now - men are going under the aircraft. The NCOIC is watching his men check all 8 airplanes for malfunctions - leaks, flat tires, etc while the armorers remove the safety pins from the racks, bombs, missiles etc. When done they all scamper to the edge of the marshaling area and the NCOIC gives me a thumbs up. (Once again I think damn, we got good troops!)

I take the radio - "Da Nang Ground, Gunfighter 41 and 51 flights ready for takeoff."

"Gunfighter 41 and 51 flights, Ground, contact Da Nang Tower for takeoff clearance."

"Gunfighter 41, 51, flights, button 4, go." They check in and I point to the canopy, drop my hand and nod my head and sixteen canopies come down and lock simultaneously. We do that because A, it looks sharp and B, it promotes precision in flying.

Both flights check in on button 4. Then, "51's ready"

"Da Nang Tower, Gunfighter 41 and 51 flights, ready for takeoff."

Gunfighter 41 and 51 flights, Da Nang Tower, taxi into position runway 17 left and hold on C141 clearing far end."

"Gunfighter 41 flight into position and hold." "51 roger."

We move out onto the 11,000 foot long runway. It has arresting gear at both ends and in the middle, either one capable of stopping a fully loaded F4 at 190 knots in about 1,000 feet.

Very handy if anything untoward happens. Of course the Martin-Baker H-7 ejection seat is capable of throwing one high enough to get a good chute - even when the aircraft is standing still on the ground. Another warm fuzzy feeling. Not like the 'olden days' when if anything untoward occurred below about 1000 feet or nearing the end of the runway on takeoff you were in a pickle and fast action and luck your only hope.

We line up in fingertip, like the fingertips of your hand, with 2 on the left and 3 and 4 on the right, all with wing tip clearance. 51 flight is doing the same thing 500 feet back. We will make single takeoffs 10 seconds apart since we are carrying live ordnance. It wouldn't do for something deadly to fall off right in front of another airplane. You see, when the main wheels leave the runway the ground/air switch senses 'air' and if there is a system malfunction one or all bombs could drop off right then.

I give the run up signal - hand up, index finger extended, winding it around in a tight 'circle the wagons' gesture, and lock my brakes. I run up #1 and check the engine gauges - all okay, back to idle, check 2 and back to idle. 2 has followed suit as well as 3 and 4. 51 Flight saw our smoke and duly checked their engines. Now we wait for the 141 to get off runway 17L.

"Gunfighter 41 and 51 flights, C141 is clear, after takeoff turn left heading 150 degrees, contact Da Nang Departure channel 5 passing 2000 feet."

"Gunfighter 41 flight, after takeoff left turn 150 contact Da Nang Departure channel 5." 51 repeats the clearance.

"Gunfighter 41 and 51 flights read back correct cleared for takeoff - break break - Rascal 2-0 eight F4s departing runway 17 left cleared to land."

I have the brakes still locked and run both engines back up to 100%.

"Gunfighter 41 rolling." The other 7 airplanes note the position of their clock's second hands - for 10 second spacing. That's just in case something falls off the airplane in front.

Off with the brakes and simultaneously into both afterburners. The nose bobs up as the brakes come off and then as the afterburners light off it drops again from the sudden increased thrust and concomitant greater acceleration and we are off. The runway is pretty smooth yet we can feel the vibrations increasing in frequency as the airplane accelerates. Airspeed is alive at 70 release the nose gear steering button and steer with the rudders. Not much at all needed today but with rain and stiff crosswind it would be a different matter. Coming up on 150, back with the stick to stretch the nose gear and assume a 10 degree takeoff attitude. 190 coming up and the mains leave the runway and the pavement rumble ceases. Gear handle to up and we continue to accelerate as I monitor the gear indicators - and everything else around the cockpit in quick flicks of vision inside and out. 3 "up" indications and the gear light is out. Passing 250, flaps to up and monitor the indicators. Coming up on 300 knots throttles out of AB, exhaust nozzles closing down and back to about 97% to facilitate join-up and start the left turn to 090 degrees, now level at 2000 feet.

I glance left and back; there is 2, cutting us off, still slightly low, moving in to join on my left wing. 3 and 4 are further back, maybe a mile off and apart, cutting us off nicely, sort of holding an 45 degree angle off. All 8 are now airborne and cleaned up so I call "Gunfighter 41 and 51 button 5, go." All 7 F4s acknowledge. I turn the radios over to Lee and start looking around. He checks them all in on UHF channel 5 and then calls "Da Nang Departure, Gunfighter 41 level 2000 heading 090."

"Gunfighter 41 squawks flash." He's cross-checking that the blip on his radar is really us.

I do so, selecting Ident momentarily on the transponder.

"Gunfighter 41 contact, clear of traffic, cleared tactical."

Lee acknowledges and as briefed calls out "Gunfighter 41 flight go Marlin."

All 7 aircraft acknowledge and he selects 303.0. 30-30 - easy mnemonic

He checks them in and Sam Adair, flying 51 with Dennis Cressey in the backseat, advises "51 in trail."

My guys are in close formation, maybe 5 feet of wingtip clearance, so we can give each other the once-over. There is nothing out of the normal so I kick them out to loose wing with a left-right of the rudder and start letting down. We're about 10 miles off the coast now so I start a lazy turn around to the north northwest advancing power to maintain 420 knots (483 mph).

Lee's dialed the first turn point into the INS and I'm getting steering to it now on the HSI (horizontal situation indicator).

The sun was a bit of a pain at first, twelve o'clock right at the horizon, but now its back about 4:00 o'clock (12 is straight ahead) as we settle down heading 330 and cruising at 420 and 200 feet above the ocean. There's a mild chop with scattered white caps and a slight swell.

Our two flights of four were now about forty miles east of the coastline heading northwest at low altitude and 420 knots, down below the NVN radar screen. Sam Adair, 390th squadron weapons officer (our tactical expert), is 10 seconds back with 51 flight. Dennis Cressey is in his rear seat. He and Denny crew together a lot. We fly by paired crews; inter-cockpit communication improves rapidly with familiarity.

The weather where we are is clear, sky very blue, with scattered cumulus clouds at maybe 3000 over land towards the verdant hills. The sea was a deep royal blue, with a regular swell trending toward land. There was a slight southeast wind, just enough to kick up a slight chop and scattered whitecaps. The swelling cumulus clouds are a bold white against the bright blue of the sky and contrasting with the vivid sunlit green of the land on the horizon. We were fairly low, maintaining that 200 feet altitude using the radio altimeter, in a loose fingertip, flights in trail. That slight chop with the scattered whitecaps told me that sea clutter on their radar would help mask our presence.

I was following our flight plan, using the INS for steering point to pre-plotted point, when my eyes, constantly alert for bogies, spotted some dark shapes in the low altitude sea-haze, on the surface about ten miles ahead off at about eleven-thirty. Five ships, soon resolving into five light gray US Navy destroyers, steaming north-northwest paralleling the coast in 'line ahead', maybe five or so ship lengths separation in trail. They were cruising along fairly speedily, each ship sporting a sizeable white bow wave, white against their battle-grey hulls. As we got closer, passing about half a mile out on the sea side of them at roughly their masthead height, I saw each ship was flying a pair of huge US flags from their foremast yardarms. I had no idea the Navy used battle ensigns just as did the Royal Navy. The red and white and blue of our national flags stood out boldly in the early morning sunlight. That sight really gave me a thrill - what a glorious sight to see on our way to do battle! Even better; if any crew had to go for a swim, there was the Navy!

We got to our third navigation point and turned inbound to the target. Once squared away on course I eased my flight down to just under 100 feet above the water and pushed the speed up to 480 (550 mph), knowing Sam and his flight were doing the same behind us. I reset the alarm point on my radio altimeter to about 75 feet. This altitude put us under the NVN radar

coverage, at least according to Intel's 'radar order of battle' information. Sea clutter makes up for the sea's lack of terrain; as all but the slightest of waves reflect back radar energy, thus 'cluttering' the scopes. At the next waypoint we would turn to the initial point - IP - for our target, a large barracks complex maybe an eighth of a mile square where the NVN soldiers had spent the night.

I looked right and left and checked my wingmen again; they were right where they should be. Young air crew all, not much F4 or even fighter time, but as eager as young hunting dogs!

"Five minutes" was the call from the rear seat. Five minutes to the initial point. At 8 miles a minute, 40 miles. My guy-in-back - GIB - was a young lieutenant, Lee Boner. Most of my aircrews were young lieutenants; there were only seven of us older 'geezers' in the outfit. Myself, two majors and four captains, all six in their thirties. Quite a change from my F104 squadron with its seven majors and more captains than lieutenants. There was a reason for that; the F104, especially with our squadron's all-weather mission, required experienced pilots.

My backseater was very sharp; as a matter of fact there wasn't a dullard in the squadron. Lee called out "thirty seconds" then "port turn 2-9-0 in five - four - three - two - one - mark!" Such precision is necessary at over 800 feet a second at such low altitude. Prominent vertically developed land marks are few and far between; low lying ones are very hard to see in time.

High speed low-level navigation is much easier with two heads 'watching the store.' I have done it both ways - two heads make it much easier and safer. Lee monitored the map and the INS and kept us on course. I kept us out of the waves and watched out for everything external. Of course, per doctrine, so were 2 and 4's backseaters, looking inward and aft of the flight for bogies and other threats.

I executed the turn, glancing right and left to make sure my people didn't dip low. They closed up a bit to make the turn at 100 ASL, as briefed, and then as I rolled out on course, the INS steering bar centered, they slid back out into route formation, in this case about 100 feet apart. I eased the throttles up until we were at 550 knots (630 mph), still down under 100 feet. (550 knots, by the way, is about 90 feet per second faster than a Colt automatic pistol's 45 caliber bullet.)

I saw the coast coming up and called for our own armament check. Lee called off the steps and I executed them, finishing up by flipping the armament master switch to ARM. We were all set to drop all 6 CBU-52s a tenth of a second apart at a single two-second depression of the pickle button atop the control stick.

Since the barracks complex consisted of wooden buildings, we weren't carrying our usual load of 12 Mk 82 500 pound bombs. Each plane was carrying six CBU52 cluster bombs, squat ugly 800 pound olive drab cylinders, stubby-finned; each holding some 335 grapefruit sized spherical bomb lets. Both flights together would dispense over 16,000 bomb lets on the target.

These are anti-materiel bomb lets, weighing about 2 pounds each, scattering incendiary fragments of flaming metal. The bomb containers were radar-fuzed, the fuzes themselves round-nosed cylindrical devices about the size of a one-pound coffee can, capable of being set for various altitudes. Ours were all set for 1800 feet above the ground in order to achieve a solid pattern. When the fuze functioned, the container would split in half longitudinally and spew the bomb lets into the air stream. Little ridges made the bomb lets spin rapidly and thus each bomb let's internal centrifugal fuze would arm for detonation on ground contact. The spin also made

them migrate through the air like a curve ball. If deployed too high, say 3000 feet, the pattern would have a hole in the center, thus they were set at 1800 feet and the flights' patterns would all overlap.

I judged the point to start our climb so as to cross the coast at least 4000 feet up, out of the light flak danger area. One wants to keep the flak's time of flight above 2 seconds if possible. We were going up to 14000 feet for the dive attack, so we had to climb anyway. I just didn't want to give some 23 or 37 mm flak gunner an easy target. As we got to our pop-up point I went to afterburner and then eased the power back to one-half AB as I slowly rotated for the climb. I checked my men; they were right where they were supposed to be. Passing about six thousand, I dipped the left wing to signal my number two man to cross under. Three and four slid out to let him in and then they moved forward of me, spaced out about a hundred fifty feet between ships and now extended out forward on a ten o'clock line, just as I had briefed them.

I looked out at one thirty and about forty-five degrees down and there was the barracks complex, I was just where I wanted to be. No flak was visible - yet. I pressed on up, climbing up to 14 thousand feet, still at 550 knots.

The target slipped back to two thirty and I called "Gunfighter 41 in hot!" and rolled the airplane over smooth and fast as I pulled the nose around and down put the top of my canopy on the target. Once there I quickly rolled upright, the wings level, diving steeply as planned, about 70 degrees, then as my sight angle to the target approached forty five degrees I pulled the nose up and began jinking slightly - short sharp movements - to get the sight piper where I wanted it, off-set into the forecast wind. I forget what the wind was supposed to be, but the wind offset was about 25 feet per knot, upwind of course, since the wind vector would move the bombs downwind..

The flak was coming up now, plenty of it, apparently 23 mm cannon fire, filling the sky below with small black puffs as each shell self-destructed. It reminded me all too much of the Navy films of the kamikaze attacks at Okinawa - Except this flak was aimed at us. For a sec, I wished I'd picked 10 thou as a release altitude instead of 8 - but Lee was counting off the altitude backwards "- ten - nine - ready - pickle and pull!" The bombs rippled off, Six thumps, as the ejector cartridges fired them away from the bird - clearly felt - and as the last one left, my thumb released the pickle button and I pulled six G; the nose was coming up to the horizon at about 4000 AGL and once there we rolled sharply into a hard right 4 G turn to the egress heading. Wings level, I looked out to the right and there was two, three and four; we were all line abreast doing 700 knots (800 mph) at 4000 feet getting out of Dodge City.

'We're all here - great!' was my thought as my head twisted left and right to clear the area.

I had briefed the wingmen to extend around in an arc centered on the target before coming down and thus they attacked on headings thirty degrees apart from me and each other; that angular spread and the patterns of the cluster bombs ensuring good target coverage. It also incidentally put them line abreast during the egress, making the post-attack rejoin a snap.

We kept the speed up, mindful of the half-dozen SA2 missile sites behind us, until well out to sea and then turned south for Da Nang, climbing up to a comfortable altitude. First a fuel check and then we did our battle damage checks, a close and careful inspection of the other guys' airplanes for holes that didn't belong there. The compartment drain holes in the belly did confuse things a bit at first, but we learned them quickly. No new holes were seen. I kicked the flight out to tactical by using rudders to wag the tail and we settled down for the cruise home.

The Navy was still down there, this time heading south. Nice to know they were available if some of us had had to get out and swim.

Sam's flight eased up abreast; he had bombed right behind us and none of his people got hit either. We weren't all that far out from Da Nang so I took the flight to the Command Post channel and Lee called in.

"Bluebird, Gunfighter 41 flight, RTB expended. All ships Code One." Code One - the bird can fly again; Two, minor maintenance needed, Three - heavy maintenance needed.

"Welcome back, 41, and good show." (That 'welcome back' still sounds good to me.)

"41 going to tower, Bluebird."

"Roger that. Bluebird out."

51 leader was talking to Bluebird as we left the channel.

The entry to the pattern, pitchout and landing went normally. It was hot as usual once on the ground and the ship's air conditioning could no longer feed us air at 40 degrees F without the several hundred knot airflow through its heat exchangers. De-arming and insertion of safety pins went as usual and at last we were free to taxi to our parking spots. One more 'counter' under our belts. Not that that meant much except as a personal thing. You had to go North 100 times to get credit for a full tour. I only got to go North 15 times because the 390th's primary mission was close air support, working with ground troops in South Vietnam.

The Intel debrief was short as we hadn't seen anything unusual. Sam's number four man confirmed the 48 cluster bombs had simply swamped the barracks complex which had disappeared in an initial wave of bursting charges and then a rolling cloud of smoke. He and his GIB had gotten a good look as they swung around to the egress heading. But that was the only feedback we ever got from that mission. Nevertheless it was a memorable one on a beautiful day after all that miserable monsoon weather earlier. My mind still bears that image of our ships and their battle flags against the blue sky, white clouds, green land and deep blue sea.

Soon after this mission, Sam Adair and Dennis Cressey left the 390th to join the 366th Wing's Fast Fac unit. We all missed them. Both were excellent aircrews and fine officers. On May 12, 1972, I was in the Wing Command Post looking over the pertinent 24 hour flying schedule posted on the active board when I noticed that Sam and Dennis's flight was not logged in as having landed. Immediately I realized that something was very wrong as elapsed time since their takeoff told me that their fuel was expended an hour or so ago. I called the attention of the controllers and they also gulped, just as had I, and got to work. Radio and telephone contacts with the ground and airborne radar sites and the airborne command post were fruitless - no one had had recent contact with Gunsmoke 01.

The quest expanded. Some hours later we got information from the 8th Tac Fighter Wing over at Ubon Air Base in Thailand that one of their flights had seen an explosion, fireball and column of black smoke on Route Pack One, the area extending some 40 miles north of the DMZ. We reluctantly reached the conclusion that Gunsmoke 01 had been shot down and Sam and Dennis were lost forever.

Their mission was typically flown at 500 knots (575 mph) and 500 feet above the ground, constantly weaving irregularly from side to side in sharp, unpredictable turns. They were looking for man-made changes in RP-1, typically vehicle parks, fuel and material storage dumps, plus the various locations of weapons such as antiaircraft, field artillery, missile sites and radar sites.

But high speed and unpredictable motion is not enough to afford perfect protection. We had a semi-joking theory that despite everything one could do there was always the possibility of "The Golden BB" that would strike precisely if it was 'your turn' and down you would go. The probability of a hit could be miniscule, but that does not mean zero. If it wasn't your day - too bad for you. It could have been something as simple as one young North Vietnamese private pointing his AK47 blindly upwards and emptying all 30 rounds. Or possibly Gunsmoke 01 just happened to fly straight at a ready 37 mm anti-aircraft gun. You see, very few fighter aircraft have any significant armor at all. The F4 has none. And at 850 feet per second 500 feet up there is very little time to cope with serious damage. Sam and Dennis knew this and willingly accepted the challenge. Both were a loss to you, to us there at Da Nang, to me still, and to the USAF. Sam Adair and Dennis Cressey were treasured friends! I will never forget them! Unfortunately I am a man who does not believe there ever is closure!

Postscript: Dennis and Sam Adair's remains were recovered three years later. They were retrieved in Laos, which in 1972, was Communist held territory. Dennis and Sam are buried together in a common grave at Arlington National Cemetery. True Heroes.