

17 May 2010

A Bad Day

I awoke with some trepidation on 21 January 1967. I was a combat pilot flying in the rear seat of the F4C, a twin engined Fighter-Bomber aircraft for the United States Air Force. I had been flying mostly night-time combat missions from the Air Base at DaNang in Vietnam since my arrival in November of 1966. The previous day, 20 January 1967, our squadron started the conversion to day missions and my front-seater and I were among the first to make the change. Needless to say getting accustomed to sleeping at night instead of the day was difficult! Also, on the previous day, we had been tasked to provide fighter protection (MIGCAP) to the bombing strike force going against a railroad bridge target near KEP airfield in North Vietnam. This target was located along the main rail line connecting China and Hanoi and was heavily defended with Anti-Aircraft (A-A) Guns, Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs), and MIG fighter jets at KEP airfield. Overall, it was a VERY dangerous place to fly uninvited! This was the first mission in this part of North Vietnam for my front seat pilot and I, and we were a bit anxious from all the “war stories” we had been hearing from the crews that had done this before! The mission that first day had gone as planned until our flight turned to go out-bound and some FLAK from the A-A Guns struck one of our engines and it had to be shut down. We limped home to DaNang Air Base on a single engine... a somewhat “stressful” event in itself since we were over the South China Sea most of the way and we didn't know if the other engine would keep running or not! Neither of us wanted to go swimming in those shark-infested waters at that particular moment. You may understand now why I awoke with some trepidation on the second day, 21 January 1967!

After breakfast, I proceeded to the Squadron briefing area to see what our mission was going to be for the day. Surprise! It was almost the same as the previous day. There were some minor changes, involving times and our position in the flight, but essentially it was the same mission. We took off about mid-afternoon and proceeded north. The refueling went as planned, and due to our mission our flight was the first one to go into North Vietnam. We proceeded over the target in order to intercept any MIG fighters that might be in the area. This part of the mission was relatively quiet, and we didn't see much until the bombers behind us started making their runs. At that point the A-A Guns really opened up and it looked like a carpet of black puffs below us that contained orange flashes as the shells exploded. We made a large circle around the target area, and as the last bomber radioed it was off the target, we made one more circle to catch any late arriving MIGS that might follow the bombers outbound. At this point we were the only airplanes in the area, and obviously had the attention of ALL the A-A Gunners in North Vietnam! It sure seemed that way!. The FLAK came up to our altitude of about 14,000 feet, and followed us around as we flew. The bursting FLAK shells seemed to surround our flight, and were “close” but were not hitting us. Then something happened to cause the FLAK to zero in on our Aircraft! The black puffs got so close together that it appeared impossible to fly between them and they completely surrounded our airplane! One of the nearby bursts hit BOTH of our engines, and they started sounding like coffee grinders. It was sickening sound... a sound of a machine in its death throes. The pilot in the front started a slow, right turn to the North towards China, while trying to get the engines under control and the fires put out. Time stood still... I don't know how much time passed after we were hit, but somewhere during the latter part of that turn before our heading was back towards the Ocean, the aircraft lost all controls and started a slow roll to the Right. My front-seater told me to “Get Out” and he immediately ejected. I waited until I saw some daylight (wasn't inverted) and started the ejection sequence. There was a mighty push on my bottom, a loud roaring noise, then quiet, the opening shock of my parachute, and I was floating down from about 10,000 feet under a good parachute in the late afternoon, thinking my life is about to change drastically!

Six months earlier, I had been stationed at an Air Base in England. In August of 1966 the USAF had assigned the oldest and most experienced squadron at that Air Base to go to Vietnam. Many of my married friends were expecting children and some were even well into the process of adopting children locally. I was not married at the time and decided to volunteer to go to Vietnam in place of one of them. I knew I would have to go sometime and I might as well "get it out of the way". I never expected to be shot down and become a Prisoner of War. As I floated down in my parachute, the only thing that I could think about was that I should have stayed in England! I knew that I had to change the way I looked at life, forget about flying, and concentrate on the problem at hand... surviving and getting home.

It took about 5 minutes from the time I ejected until I approached the ground. It was a VERY cold ride down! As I approached the ground I could see that I was going to land in some trees high on the side of a Karst ridge. My training took over and when I had come to a halt, I was hanging upside down with my seat survival pack wedged in the fork of a tree about 10 feet off the ground. The parachute was draped over the tops of the tree and its neighbors. My first instinct was to start releasing all the connections to my seat pack and parachute. Then I realized that if I did that I would fall on my head to the ground, and I didn't want that! I got a good hold on the tree and then unbuckled everything, lowered my seat survival pack to the ground and slid down the trunk of the tree. Once on the ground, I collected my wits and promptly drank all the water I had brought along in my flying gear! I was QUITE thirsty! I wasn't injured, and all my parts seemed to be working. I left the parachute up in the tree tops because I couldn't easily get it down. I think this was probably a mistake because it was a huge white marker of where I came down!

As I sat at the base of the tree, I noticed the opening of what appeared to be a large cave about 15-20 meters up the hill. I carried everything up there and began to take inventory of what I had with me. I then started to explore my immediate surroundings to see if there was an easy way off the hill before the sun set. I hadn't gone far when I heard a gun shot from the top of the hill behind me. I was quiet for a while, but couldn't hear anything else, so I quietly went back to the cave where all my "stuff" was located.

I made it and pulled out my map. At this point in time, I was very much focused on evading capture by traveling out of the area. My immediate concern was to locate myself on the map... Knowing that I was close to KEP airfield really didn't help much, and that was about as close as I could guess! Distances that I covered in seconds in the F4C could take days to travel in this country while evading capture. The map didn't help much either. I needed to get up higher to see the surrounding terrain, but that guy with the gun was on top of the hill! I decided to wait until it got dark then try climbing up a mass of bamboo that was beside my "cave" and appeared to be attached to the side of the hill. It was an almost vertical climb and I couldn't see any other way up. Additionally, my front-seater appeared to have landed on the other side of this hill and I wanted to see if I could get to him. I had my "plan"...

It got dark...REALLY dark! The moon didn't rise until late that evening. I started to climb and got about 15-20 meters up when I heard a noise above me! Was it the guy with the gun? I didn't know. About that time I started to recall all those warnings the survival instructors had given us in school. Bamboo Vipers...!! I made an immediate retreat, but I was totally lost because it was so dark. I didn't know where my "cave" was relatively to me and all my survival gear was in the "cave". It became obvious I had created a VERY POOR plan! It was also getting colder and I decided that I needed to do something to make it through the night. I had a strobe light that was intended for use at night to give a location in the ocean. It was a very bright flash of blue light that could be seen for kilometers at night. I decided to give it a try by covering the flashing part with my hand and letting a bit of the light escape

through my fingers. It worked, and probably alerted every observer in the area, but I discovered I was sitting right in front of my “cave”. I gave up my plan and retreated to the back end of the cave, which was about 30 to 40 meters deep. I blew up my survival raft and used it as a bed. Surprisingly, I slept well...

I had planned to get a new start the next day, but I was awakened in the morning by what I thought was a bugle call! I was instantly alert and heard some voices a distance away coming up the hill. I could almost visualize where they were and soon they discovered the parachute in the tree. Shortly afterward they discovered the cave, and a couple came to have a look. Since I was in the back of the cave my eyes had adjusted to the darkness and I could see everything clearly, but those who came in out of the bright morning sun couldn't really see the back of the cave. More of the troop came into the cave and a couple of them advanced deeper into the cave, while talking among themselves. I was laying down behind a rocky ridge across the back of the cave, and I was very still... hardly breathing. The foremost of the group got to within about 3-4 meters of me and was looking directly at me, while speaking in a very quiet voice. He seemed to be talking to me... I couldn't believe that he had NOT seen me, so I stood up with my hands in the air. In about a blink of an eye, all of the group had disappeared behind rocks and all I saw were gun barrels pointed at me! In retrospect this was a VERY “tense” moment for all of us. The next is a blur, but there was a LOT of shouting and waving of guns. The next I recall I was at the entrance to the cave and I was being disrobed down to my underwear. They confiscated all my survival gear, including the map and my personal gear. I was placed in one of their uniforms, including shoes and pith helmet. This was a problem in that only one of the troop seemed to be approximately my size! Once I was secured and it was obvious I wasn't a threat, they gathered up my gear and we all headed back down the “hill”. As we went down, I became increasingly impressed with just how rugged the terrain was! I probably would have killed or seriously injured myself if I had tried to get off it in the dark!

Once off the hill, we traveled over a level agricultural area for some distance. It appeared that the troop was trying to keep my presence a secret because they seemed to avoid other people or villages. At one point we heard some airplanes overhead, and they had me “get down”. No one spoke English, and I didn't speak any their language, but they certainly effectively communicated their desires... When we arrived in their village, I was placed in a room with a large picture of Mao Tse Tung on the wall. That was my first indication that I had been captured by Chinese personnel. Soon a young girl brought me some tea to drink, an apple and some delicious stuffed pastry. I hadn't eaten in over 24 hours, so these were most welcome! After a while a medic inspected me for injuries. I had some small scrapes during my climbing over the rough rocks, but otherwise was not injured. About sundown, I was re-dressed in my flying uniform and taken out to a large open area with seats. There was a crowd and an elderly gentleman started asking me questions. This was filmed and photographed. At no time was I mistreated by this group. After the “interrogation” I was taken to a truck and driven to another village where I was turned over to the North Vietnamese Army. This was my second indication that I had been captured by Chinese personnel because the “turn over” process was conducted through an interpreter. All of my belonging that had been transported off the hill was inventoried and turned over to the Vietnamese. As soon as the Chinese left all my personal items like my watch, ring, boots, etc, were taken away and distributed to various ranking dignitaries present. I was blindfolded and lead barefooted across a rice paddy to an awaiting truck. This started my journey to Hanoi and 6+ years as a Prisoner Of War.

-Donald Spoon-

POW – 21 January 1967 to 4 March 1973