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Amazing sequel to the shoot down of Gunfighter 69

By William R. Peterson

On 26 June 1967, a pair of MiG-17s circled the skies over southern Hainan Island waiting for the order to attack. Their prey was an unarmed F-4C returning from Clark airbase in the Philippines to the 366th TAC Fighter Wing (TFW) at Da Nang, RVN, call sign Gunfighter. The Chinese had successfully "meaconed" (misguided) Gunfighter 69 off course to create the appearance of an attack by U.S. forces against China.

Major Jim Blandford, pilot, and Weapons Systems Officer Jeremy M. Jarvis had mechanical problems with their navigation gear which delayed takeoff. Major Blandford thought his gear was acting up again, but this time it was the meaconing. Suddenly, the clouds parted and Jim saw the terrain below and knew it was not what it should be. In that instant, without warning, the MiG attack was on. Gunfighter 69 got off a MAYDAY as they prepared to eject, and another call "MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY Gunfighter 69 going down!" Then they were gone from the plane and swaying in their chutes as they fell 5 miles to the South China Sea below.

Unknown to the aircrew, I had launched a pair of F-102 "Deuces" to provide combat air patrol (MiG CAP), to ensure their safety against any CHICOM attempts to capture or strafe them in the water. The Chinese had shot down a USAF F-104 a few years before, using the same ambush techniques, and the pilot was still a POW. Now there was a Chinese ship en route to the scene and much closer than our own Navy search and rescue forces (SAR).

Christina Olds provided Joe III, aka Lightman, with a scan of an original photo she made of her Dad (center) and some friends, including Jim Blandford in the upper right hand corner. The picture is in General Olds' SEA scrapbook at the National Museum of the Air Force in Dayton. It was seen by millions of viewers of the History Channel series on "Dogfights."

At about 13 minutes out of Da Nang, the lead Deuce pilot called in to the weapons controllers at Motel and I told him there were no MiGs in the area. The ambushers were on their way home while other MiGs maintained a patrol over central Hainan Island. To prevent capture or worse for our Gunfighter 69 aircrew, I directed the Deuces to get a visual identification of the Chinese ship. Another minute passed and then he called "TALLY HO!", which means "I see the target." I asked them to absolutely confirm their "Tally Ho" and they did. At that point, lead Deuce asked permission to go in hot. I asked for a "Weapons Check" and he confirmed each Deuce had 24 rockets - 2.75 FFAR. I did not know what the Chinese vessel had, but it did not matter. The decision was made in that instant.

"Lead, this is Motel – you are cleared in weapons hot. Sink the %#6*&@ Chinese boat."

"Roger Motel – going in hot!"

A minute later Lead called back: "Motel Motel Splash one!"

"Roger that!"

The Navy rescue helicopter picked up the aircrew and flew them to the U.S.S. Hornet for a medical check and then they were flown to Da Nang. There being no further threat, I released the F-102 fighters to return to base and reduced the alert to our normal wartime status.

Flash forward to July 2010. I am not a "joiner." I have a healthy social life, but I just did not have a need to join organizations – until I found the TLCB. I could not believe the warm

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Gunfighter 2, continued from page 1.

welcome home – even after 39 years it felt good. There was so much to learn, especially when I thought I knew so much already! In return for all the great posting on the TLCB Mission Board, the MEM, and the web site, I thought the least I could do is contribute some articles. Immerse yourself in TCLB and you will find yourself in a hugely rewarding maturing process. What you get out of a thing is proportional to the amount you put into that thing. My piece on the ambush of an unarmed American F-4C by the Communist Chinese was of special interest to me because I was personally involved in saving the aircrew and killing an unknown number of Chinese aboard a PRC vessel attempting to take them as POWs.

For instance, I did not know my work one afternoon in Vietnam was the subject of a New York Times article. They did not mention me by name but it was a one of a kind deal – hard to miss – the loss of a Phantom jet shot down by the Chinese in self defense over Hainan Island. Nonsense! They electronically lured the Phantom off course by means of a technique called "meaconing" into a place where two MiG-17s were waiting to implement a shoot-down technique they had practiced especially for this occasion.

But then I wrote my article for the Mekong Express Mail, hard copy journal published in the December 2009 MEM, which led to the online reprint of the article on the TLCB Web site. Now, after widespread MEM distribution and worldwide access via the internet, I discovered that people were interested in the events of Gunfighter 69. On July 16th 2010, I received an email: "Dear Bill: This is hoping that you will receive this email. It was returned as undeliverable from the first email that I tried sending. It is self explanatory. I'd love to make contact with you, as the pilot of Gunfighter 69 was my older brother, Jim Blandford, and I had heard the story from him. If you receive this, we would love to hear from you. Thanks and best regards, Joe Blandford."

I never knew the Gunfighter 69 aircrew names until I got involved with the MEM article, and after 42 years, here was the brother of the Phantom pilot locating me and asking if we could get together. Well yeah! – But it is a big world, where was he? The thought of de-briefing the mission with the family caused me to think about the fate of the aircrew. First things first; I had to locate Joe. If people tell you it is a small world, believe them. I found Joe living and working on Kent Island, MD – my home for ten years, and Joe was only about 40 minutes from my current home. Joe made my research easy by introducing me as "the man who saved my brother's life in Vietnam."

Three days later, Joe, his wife Marilyn, and two sons Charles and Robert met my wife Jean and me at their family business on the island. We talked for three hours about every detail we could think of and some incredible results came from that meeting. We resumed our debriefing and discussions two weeks later when Joe's third son, Joe III, flew in from California for some family business and brought some items of keen interest with him. Joe told many stories, and the sons chimed in with their own recollections, painting a picture of an Air Force fighter pilot all of us can be proud of. In essence, Jim Blandford rotated to the States and continued his career with

This is the face of the former enemy today. This is Wang Zhu Shu, a national hero and a pilot who ambushed Major Jim Blandford and 1st Lt Jeremy M. Jarvis over the South China Sea south of Hainan Island. It was not their day to die, nor was it his. Pilot Wang was decorated for his skill, service and dedication to the People.

a promotion to Lt Col, serving until his retirement at MacDill AFB, Tampa, FL. A large number of nieces, nephews, other pilots, and friends gave testimonials to Lt Col Jim Blandford. Jim retired in 1977 and died of cancer in 1999. His wife Lisa died in 1997.

Over the course of several weeks, friends and relatives like Lt Col Jeff Templin, USA son-in-law to Jim, provided me the Blandford Family Tree and a sense of the fun side of Jim Blandford. Jeff relates the tribute the city of Tampa paid to Jim: "I worked with the Honor Guard from MacDill for Jim's funeral, and with the help of a few retired GOs and Order of the Daedalians, the Mayor of Tampa granted my request to have a 21-gun salute within the city limits."

Col Ben Fuller, USAF, an F-105 jock, recalled the ferry flights to/from Clark AFB. He attested to the fact that they were not carrying the 20 mm gun and that they used Doppler nav radar to cross check their normal equipment. Ben was flying a Wild Weasel mission one day, dive bombing SA-2 SAM sites, flying against the Kep Airfield and attacking the Northeast railroad when he suffered some battle damage. Unable to make it from the far side of Hanoi all the way back to Takhli RTAFB in western Thailand, he opted to try for Da Nang. He said, "When I landed, the first guy up the ladder was Jim, who was stationed there. Wow, what a surprise. I didn't even know he was there much less flying missions in the F-4." They both went on to complete their "100 (missions) North."

Elaine Corder, Jim's daughter, read my account of the battle to save her Dad, "Gunfighter 69." She wrote about what happened stateside:

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Assistance returns to Udorn

by MacAlan Thompson

It has been several years since the TLCB has undertaken a project in Udorn, not that we did not want to. In order to complete a project anywhere, there must be a need, the money to satisfy the need, and someone to carry it out. Two out of three does not get it. Early this year, through the efforts of Mac Thompson, we were able to bring all three together. The following is Mac's report on Assistance motion 08-10 and how he brought all three things together and made some kids happy in Udorn.

Some TLCB members will ask, why return to Udorn? Well, this was a good time for an assistance project, and we have not been active in that area for several years because TLCB had nobody in the area ready to tackle the jobs. This was the time to crank up some help up there.

There is a school located in Ban Nam Som, which is about an hour and a half hour drive northwest of Udorn up towards the Mekong. Mike and Niyom Cosenza were interested and willing to help with this project. They made a visit to the school in December 2009, and saw that it had many needs and did not seem to receive much in the way of assistance from the provincial government. The government typically provides baht 10 per student per day for lunch; however, for whatever reason, that money is no longer provided, thus forcing the teachers to buy and grow food for the children. They can no longer afford to do this.

The teachers dealt with the problem directly and organized the children to take care of many of their own needs. To help feed themselves, students grow vegetables and raise fish in a local pond. The teachers also trained one male student to cut hair and he is now the official barber for the boys. They trained a female student to provide the same service for the girls. These teacher and student efforts show a real desire for improvement and success.

Mike and Niyom Cosenza knew an American man very well in Udorn. When this man died in 2009, he bequeathed about $3,500 to the Consenzas to provide for "good works" in the Udorn area. The Cosenzas decided that using some of the funds to support this innovative school would be a good use of the funds, so they made an initial distribution at the school on Christmas Day. The total came to about baht 38,000, approximately $1,550. They considered the needs of the school and the children. They bought the following items:

Three-stage play and assembly area project. Photos from the author.

Mike Cosenza plays Santa. His wife Niyom helped, and Hans, a long-time friend, helped pay for the bicycles.

- Plastic chairs (60)
- Bikes – six, done by a drawing, one per class (baht 7,400)
- Educational Games, Kindergarten – baht 1,000

The bequeathed money also funded the following items for 83 students:

- Shoes – one pair each
- Socks – two pair each
- Jackets – baht 9 ,800

The Consenzas were hopeful that the TLCB would provide funding for the following items:

- Cement for a dual-use, large play and assembly area in front of the school flagpole
- Water pump, pipe, and fittings for the school garden

To grow the project further, Mike met with the proprietor of a local Home Mart outlet, which is a similar, but smaller version of our U.S. Home

See **Udorn**, continued on page 4.

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Gunfighter, continued from page 2.

Hi Bill, I am Jim Blandford's daughter, Elaine Corder. We lived in Sherman, Texas, at the time Daddy was shot down and I was thirteen years old. It was a Saturday morning and I was leaving for the lake and some skiing when the phone rang and I answered. A reporter was calling about the incident – it was the first we had heard of it. Mother got on the phone and raised heck with the guy for his insensitivity. It is still a very vivid memory. Daddy shared some of the story but generally did not talk about it very much. I was not expecting to ever hear more about what happened, so it was with great interest and strong emotion that I read the report of the encounter. After 25 years as a hospice/palliative care/oncology nurse, I have worked at the VA for almost a year and have regular contact with veterans. I have learned a whole new appreciation for what our veterans do and give, for their service and the bravery most of us never even think about. Seeing in the situation my father and his crewmate were experiencing, in print, was powerful beyond anything I expected. Because of your valor, I had many more years with my father, who was one of the most remarkable, kind and nurturing souls I have known.

This is Wang Zhu Shu's MiG-17 which fired the cannon rounds that destroyed the unarmed USAF F-4C. The Chinese writing on the jet is Chairman Mao Ze Dong's handwriting "Serve for the people," a very famous slogan throughout China. Our source in Shanghai emailed this and other pictures to us in July of this year specifically for this story.

And as I look over the stacks of emails sent to me by family and friends of the Blandfords, I will take you back to that day in their family business office on Kent Island, Maryland. We are seated at their conference room table and I am reaching out to a large white board where I have described the TACC – NORTH Sector on Monkey Mountain, the array of ChiCom forces focused on the intruder, and the flight path of Gunfighter 69 alone, unarmed, and unafraid. As I change colors of dry pen to red, I trace the flight profile depicting the Chinese ambush when suddenly Bob Blandford rushes into the room saying "I've got pictures!"

Did he ever! He had sent a copy of the MEM issue with my "MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY" story to Beth working in their China office, and she searched and found several photos of interest and found that the pilot and his biographer were alive and well, living in Shanghai!

In Shanghai, Beth was able to discover that there was a blog dealing with a situation that sounded similar to what she had read in the MEM. She followed the blog trail to some text and photographs of Mr. Wang Zhu Shu. Shortly thereafter, she was able to confirm that the photographs were indeed authentic and the man shown in retirement was in fact Pilot Wang Zhu Shu, a highly decorated Chinese national hero. She also determined that Wang lived in the Shanghai area. On our behalf, she pursued additional photos and more information about both Wang and the blogger. Then mysteriously, all her access to Wang and the blogger was denied. This poses a threat to her, her credentials, and anybody associated with her. The Blandfords were due for a business trip to China during the last two weeks of September. While we still have unanswered questions, we believe this trip could be associated with Beth's activities and made to look sinister. In no way are we going to place the Blandfords at risk for the sake of a story. Perhaps Wang will volunteer.

As I looked at these photos, freshly in from China, I was struck by Jim Blandford's words sent to me by his brother Joe:

> He had taken the F4 to Clark in the Philippines for maintenance. He had aborted a couple or three flights due to various equipment malfunctions prior to the flight on 26 June 1967. He was feeling some degree of pressure to get back to Da Nang and get back into action, and even though his navigation instruments did not check out completely, he chose to take off and return to Da Nang.

Joe arrived in June 1966 and this was June 1967, so he was coming up on his one-year tour requirement and he was at the "100 Mission North" as well. He wanted to finish up and come home. Joe continued,

> The circumstances leading up to his getting off course were not clear, but he felt that there were some discrepancies in the radar signals/coverage that were possibly caused by unusual atmospheric conditions, leading him to erroneous position information. He had told me that he thought he was making a radar controlled approach, but when he broke out of the overcast, there was no runway that he expected to sight. He recognized that something was wrong and he was not where he was supposed to be. He hit the ABs, climbed out, and shortly thereafter, he was hit by the MIGs. As far as I know and as far as the story goes, he never actually saw the MIGs. He said that all at once, he heard the explosion, all the warning lights and alarms came on and he realized that he had been hit and ordered ejection for him and his rear seater, Lt Jeremy Jarvis.

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All Choked Up at Alpha

by Bill Tilton

Below me was the familiar green canopy of the Lao jungle, interrupted just to the South by the jagged outcropping we 23rd TASS forward air controllers (FACs) knew as Chokepoint Alpha. It was suddenly of *special* interest because I was pressed forward against the shoulder harness of the Cessna O-1 Birddog that had been carrying me back to Nakhon Phanom only seconds ago. This told me the engine had quit running and the plane was being influenced mostly by gravity. Maybe I would soon be at the mercy of whatever evil forces lurked in that dangerous area.

The setting for my alarm was the the jungle trail system, known collectively as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, actually a network of dirt roads that led from the North Viet port of Vinh, down through passes at Mugia and Ban Karai, and even above Nape', down the west side of the Annam mountain chain, crossing Colonial Route 9 at Tchepone, and then leading back into Vietnam in the fabled Central Highlands. While new spurs and bypasses appeared overnight and sometimes even during the day, in 1966 the general system consisted of the main route from Mugia Pass and the "New Road," known then as Route 912, through Harley's Valley and Ban Loboy water crossing. These two main truck routes joined a few kilometers North of Chokepoint Alpha. The combined routes went through the heavily-bombed karst of Alpha, bent sharply west for a few kilometers, then turned south again to go through the soft mud of Chokepoint Bravo.

In May of 1966, a huge 2000-pound bomb hit right on the road at Bravo and traffic through there stopped for two months. If you were in the 23rd TASS at that time you are now entitled to wear a Presidential Unit Citation as a result. You can thank Glenn Bremenkamp, a fellow FAC, who was directing a flight of four fighters, either F-4s or F-105s. Each had two of those powerful bombs, and they were dropping one at a time. A bomb that heavy and lethal must be dropped from a pretty high altitude, and hitting a 12-foot wide road is not likely. That day the first seven bombs were so far astray that when the last fighter announced his final roll-in on the target, Glenn hardly bothered to watch. However, the result was spectacular—the bomb went deep before it detonated, and must have hit right beside the road. From photos, we estimated the crater to be seventy feet across, and it had started to fill with water before Glenn had to return to base (RTB).

On the other hand, the chokepoint at Alpha was actually one

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FAC's view out the front of the O-1. What was lush green scenery one minute was hostile jungle the next.

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Choked, continued from page 7.

of our big failures. It went through a narrow valley through the karst, which is a jagged and often spectacularly beautiful limestone formation, often featured in Chinese paintings of mountains. I am sure this place was picked because there was no room for detours. But craters here were shallow, and most bombs just hit up on the sides of the escarpment. We joked that we were crushing limestone for them to fill craters with, but in fact that was exactly what was happening!

One evening we heard Cricket Control calling "Hound Dog" over and over, apparently without making contact. Cricket Control was an airborne command post that provided coordination in this operating area, known as Steel Tiger. I believe Hound Dog was an armed reconnaissance AC-47 gunship, but

I call this self portait "Steely-eyed Defender of the American Republic." Hidden behind my left shoulder are the fuel selector valve and the left tank fuel gauge.

that part I am not sure about. What I know is that next morning we found the remains of a C-47 just up the New Road from the junction of the two main routes. If we had briefed them we would have advised to stay well clear of that intersection. All that was intact was the distinctive C-47 tail. The rest of the plane had been consumed by fire and I do not believe there were any survivors. When the trucks or troops were moving through here the danger could be intense.

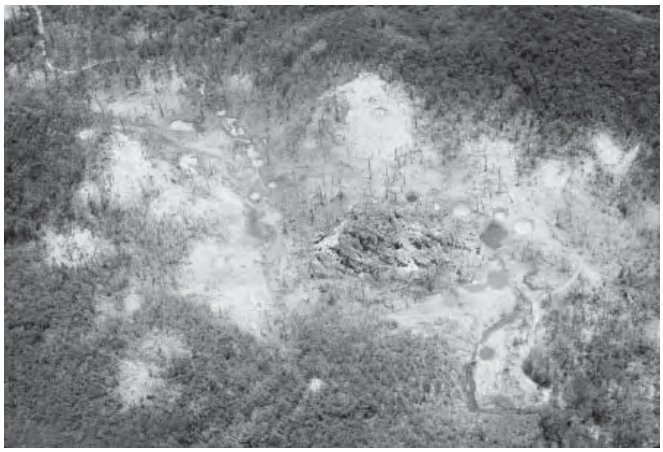
On this particular day I had been the "high man." Because of the long trip and rugged mountains in the region of most of our targets, 23rd TASS pilots flew in pairs. Lead was called the "low man," who did most of the visual reconnaissance and directed the air strikes. Number two was the "high man" who maintained radio contact with the squadron or with Invert radar at Nakhon Phanom, with Cricket Control when that was available, and with arriving and departing strike fighters. In an intense operation you might have several flights of fighters stacked up above you, and the high man would be feeding them in to the low man who would direct the strikes. As the fighters rejoined their formations and departed, the high man would usually provide a bomb damage assessment (BDA), which included exact coordinates of the target and our estimate of the effectiveness of their strike.

Our assignment on that day had been along the far reaches, up in the mountains in Harley's Valley and possibly at Ban Loboy,

Wingman, "High man" to us, up in cool air and cruising home at about 5000 feet over a valley in Laos.

which later became known as the most heavily bombed spot on Earth. We had been flying for about three hours when it came time to fly home, which could take as much as an hour if you were way out and the winds were not favorable. On this day, we had been very busy and attention to the fuel management and operation of the engine had necessarily been minimal.

Operation of the O-1 was very simple. After takeoff we leaned out the engine by pulling the mixture back until the engine ran rough, then pushed it forward one click. The two



The rock in Chokepoint Alpha—an inadvertent quarry. Photos by author.

wing tanks held a combined 41 gallons of fuel, and the O-470 Continental burned 10 gallons per hour when throttled back to cruise. The 23rd TASS was equipped with O-1F models, which had constant speed propellers (the "E" model had a fixed-pitch prop that necessarily compromised performance between takeoff, climb, and cruise). Most of us would throttle back to a "square" setting of 20 inches of mercury and 2000 rpm.

In each wing root, at the ceiling of the cockpit, was a fuel gauge that was actually mounted in its fuel tank, with its indicator attached to a cork float in the tank. So we watched the little fuel gauges in the wing roots to see when to switch tanks to keep the load fairly even. Typically, you took off on the left tank and you would switch to the right one when the left tank was half empty. Then you burned off the right tank until it was all the way down (but not until the engine quit), and at that

point you would be homeward bound when you flipped over to burn the last half tank of fuel on the left side. That was good for an hour and would get you home from nearly anywhere in the 23rd TASS area of operation, from Nape' Pass down to just North of Tchepone on Route 9. Watching the gauges for those changes was done with very little thought. You just glanced up there once in a while in your regular sweep of the windows and the gauges and your subconscious would alert you to action if a gauge was indicating that something needed to be done.

On this day I had been very busy supporting the airstrikes the low man had been directing. I realized later that every time I looked up at the right tank, it was still full, and that impossibility probably should have gotten my attention. Needless to say, it had not. I never noticed that I had been flying for three hours and yet my gauges claimed I had only burned 10 gallons of fuel—one fourth of the starting load.

When we finished up our work out on the New Road, lead probably said something like, "Let's go home." I would have called Cricket to report that this "Nail" flight, using lead's call sign, was RTB, and lead would have added power and commenced a climb. We conducted most of our Visual Reconnaissance (VR) and airstrike directing at about 1500 feet above the ground in 1966, which put us above the effective altitude for AK-47 ground fire. When we were cruising home, we tended to climb up to 5000 feet for both the relative safety and also the cooler air. I would sometimes lean back and steer that stable little plane with the rudder and take cat naps for a few seconds at a time as we flew into the setting sun, watching familiar karst shapes slide by and looking forward to seeing the thin shiny line of the Mekong on the horizon. We called that "The Fence."

So here we were, cruising at about 5000 feet and cooling off as we headed across the main trail between Chokepoint Alpha and the junction of Routes 911 and 912 (at that time). We had turned the war over to someone else and could look forward to a cool something on the porch of the FAC hooch down below Invert. No doubt a glance, without conscious thought, had confirmed that it was not yet time to switch back to the final half tank on the left.

Then suddenly my whole world changed from serenity to survival. It is really amazing how fast a single event can change your entire outlook and mode of thought in less than a second. The sound did not change much, if at all, perhaps because most of the noise is from the prop and the air rushing past the cockpit. But suddenly, not gradually, I was thrust forward against the shoulder harness and instantly knew that the engine, that single 470 cubic inch, six-cylinder, air-cooled, flat Continental engine, had stopped providing power to turn the prop. Of course the prop immediately went flat when the governor tried to keep the rpms up to my cruise setting, and

Low man about to cross The Fence. Thailand lies ahead, and Nakhon Phanom is only about ten miles beyond the wide Mekong River.

that kept the engine spinning but immensely added to the drag. The only way I was keeping flying speed was by going down.

This was where my Hurlburt FAC training paid off immensely. That course was a little loose, but they did drill in some fundamentals, and I took my first actions without really thinking. In fact, I was already looking around to see where I was and where I should fly toward in the moments that I took action. The first thing I did, without looking up, was to flip the tank selector to the other tank. It did not matter which tank, just to whatever tank it was not on when the engine quit. Then I shoved the mixture lever and throttle full forward, and third, I flipped up the toggle switch marked "Boost Pump." If the engine-driven fuel pump had failed, this pump might be enough to restart the engine.

That was all I could do inside the cockpit, so I next punched the transmit button on the throttle and told lead, about a mile ahead of me, that my engine had quit. I immediately saw him roll into a turn to come back toward me. Soon he would be busy suggesting directions to the safest areas and calling for rescue, then keeping track of where I crash landed so that I could get picked up.

Looking down, the options were grim and few. We knew the entire area around Alpha and Bravo was often full of hostile forces. Some had encountered big guns in that area too, and only luck would carry you to a place where they were not.

Before I could form a plan and before lead even got off a transmitted response, a most wonderful sensation shoved me hard back into the seat as that lovely O (for opposed) -470 engine came up to full power. Calmly, I called lead and informed him that my engine was suddenly back to normal. He rolled back to our westerly course again and probably asked me what had happened.

What had happened was clear to me as soon as I checked the two fuel gauges. The right one was still indicating full! Immediately, it was apparent to me that the right float had stuck and the tank had actually run completely dry. When we landed, I noted the problem in the maintenance forms and went off to the Tactical Units Operations Center (TUOC) to debrief and head for a cool one on the porch. It was the end of another day on the Trail.

Please Let Us Know

If you change address or email address, we need to know about it. Please send an email to Membership chairman Mike Vale, at Mevale762@gmail.com, or a card or letter to TLCB, PO Box 343, Locust Grove GA 30248.

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Gunfighter, continued from page 6.

In the photo above we see the blogger looking over Mr. Wang's shoulder with an expression of curiosity. Mr Wang finds Hainan Island, 100 miles diameter, located in the South China Sea. He is explaining that the characters depict the Order of Battle for the various deployed forces. Because this area of China is a very large island, the majority of forces are a part of the Chinese Navy. In fact, Wang's jet fighter was assigned to a naval unit. Wang is pointing at the Ling Sui base which has control of significant forces. Just below Wang's finger is the area where Gunfighter 69 was shot down. I think the Wang told the blogger the whole story in great detail but I doubt that anyone in China is ever going to admit to the practice of meaconing. The whole "U.S. aggression" story was a lie; meaconing proves it.

This is where we at Motel, Panama and my F-102s and the Navy heard Jim transmit on Guard channel, "MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY Gunfighter 69 going down." Continuing Major Blandford's recollections, his brother Joe said:

> Both of them ejected and landed in the South China Sea. Jim said that for some reason, during his descent, a sharp piece of metal, possibly from the explosion, kept puncturing his life boat. He said that probably the most dangerous part of the episode to him was getting untangled from the parachute lines once he hit the water. Jim was a very good swimmer and these comments were very significant. Both Jim and his rear-seater, Lt Jarvis, were in the water. They saw the Chinese boat coming toward them, and, at the same time, the U.S. Navy helicopter, that we believe came from the Aircraft Carrier Hornet, coming to pick them up. Jim praised the Navy highly.

It was my intent to catch the MiGs and destroy them before they reached the safety of Hainan. The MiGs would have none of it. They were probably aware of the capabilities of the F-102 or the F-4C in a fair fight. Wang's MiGs had too much of a head start, so there was no chance to get them now and no other MiG pilots wanted to play.

And that is when the Deuce pilot saw the Chinese ship. I gave the Deuces on-scene legal authority to kill the threat to our friendly forces. Their successful attack was the only way we could buy time for Navy SAR to reach the Gunfighter 69 aircrew in time. There were many options open to the Chinese, but they opted to call it a day. They got what they wanted – enough half truths to create a propaganda attack against the United States during the Glassboro Conference.

Bear in mind that I do not believe that pilot Wang played any role in the ambushing of an unarmed plane whose pilot believed he was flying an international flight route over open ocean. Wang was flying a well-rehearsed profile for an air-to-air attack. The Chinese command and control officers, who guided Wang and the other fighter pilots that day, as well as the air surveillance crews, were all very much aware that they were creating an ambush whose purpose it was to lure the American off course along a specific route that had the appearance of an air raid on Chinese territory.

At this point, I knew Navy SAR had our guys taken care of, the CHICOM ship paid the price, and our Deuces were in the pattern at Da Nang. We returned to our primary mission – the air war in Rolling Thunder, Barrel Roll, and Steel Tiger.

I am happy things turned out the way they did. I never lost a wink of sleep over the decision I made – it was an act of war, and it was legal. I wish I had met Jim Blandford when he came here to Kent Island in 1997 for a nephew's wedding. He was minutes from my house and we had so much to share. I will confide that my motivation here is tied directly to the plight of POW/MIA families. If I could prevent a POW situation I would, as I did on 26 June 1967. What I hear from the families, many times over, is their lament as to how many years of goodness they have lost; and it is true.

With that thought in mind, I would like to close with the words of Lt Col Jim Blandford's daughter, Elaine Corder, as she describes how it feels to have experienced those 32 years after the shoot-down: "Know always that your actions made a big difference in many lives. Jim Blandford touched countless hearts in his lifetime, and he was especially beloved by the children and young people lucky enough to know him. He was cherished by his family."

So I enjoy the words of those Blandfords who recently found me, content to know we all did well on that day over the South China Sea. Air Force pilots have their MiG kills painted as stars on their jets. On the rear hatch of my "inferno red" Jeep Liberty, there is a painted, black silhouette of a Chinese warship. The words ring true today: "Splash one!"

Reunion, continued from page 11.

The Saturday night banquet was amazing. While we were waiting to go into dinner, Ed Stein walked up and slipped something into my jacket pocket and said, "don't even look." So naturally I did. He had given me the Ubon patch that we were both bidding on the night before at the auction. I will admit that when Leighann Pruiksma sang the National Anthem, it brought tears to my eyes. That continued with the USAF Color Guard's Missing Man presentation, very impressive. I could go on and on because the entire weekend was a high.

Brothers on my mind, you bet. Thank you to Bill & Thelma, Bob & Phyllis, David & Virginia, Jim & Paula, Mike, Tommy, and of course John Sweet. Thank you for a wonderful reunion experience. Thank you for bringing me back home to the Brothers on my Mind.

Above, Val Archer joined Tuskeegee Airman at 15. When the war ended he experienced almost no change. Below, Dutch Van Kirk, Enola Gay navigator and now sole survivor from crew. Urge on mission was to detonate the bomb on Hiroshima and get the plane back in one piece. Both happened.

Right, Helen Denton typed 500-page war order for D-Day and kept her secret for 50 years.
Below, Mac Thompson summarized 38 years of work and Assistance in peace and war in Thailand and Laos.

Below, MIA/POW table ceremony by USAF honor guard from Dobbins AFB. Below right, Rosie Wheatley's quilt, and winner John Lorenzen at banquet.

Above, outgoing President Loftus receives RC-121 model from the TLCB board, shown with M/C John Sweet. Below, Nipa Hut in action. Gurleys kept plenty of delicious home-cooked food coming. It got pretty cozy at times. Below, right, Nipa Hut under construction, prefabbed by David Gurley.

Left, Madelline Santo smiles bravely after Delta tour mishap. Guide Wayne Kitchens responded swiftly. Nancy and John Sweet pose with some of the new flags. TLCB also had its own flag made.