BUZZ JOB

Let’s take a break… Just got a book from C.P. Weiland yesterday and read some comments about flathatting… which in my day we called buzz jobs. It is the bane of every squadron commander and the JO’s dream… what good is flying one of these marvels if you can’t share the experience with someone on the ground… Sorry C.P., but like any other junior birdman… I loved it!

My last tour in the Corps, I was flying the RF-4B Recon-Phantom. The mission and the plane were a flathatters’ dream. Ninety percent of our mission was single plane, solo sorties. And we made our living “down in the dirt”… We were about the only people left in the military; that did low level, VFR Operations on almost a daily basis.

A normal mission for us was to leave El Toro, fly the standard instrument departure (SID) … and upon crossing Saddle Back Mountain, heading for the Salton Sea… call LA Center, request descent to FL 180 and upon arrival cancel the instrument flight plan for the next 40 minutes and go VFR down into the desert. We’d usually fly pre-planned routes and take pictures of all kinds of targets. This was usually from no higher than five hundred feet and seldom at less than five hundred knots. You have no idea what real speed feels like… until you’ve been 1.1 Mach, at less than 100 feet! What a rush!

On occasion… targets of opportunity would pop up in the desert and the hunt was on… the only worry we usually had, was who was in the back seat… most guys in the squadron knew within a month who the players were… compared to the passengers… and if you had a good guy back there… You could have a lot of fun. Things were a little loose then, most of us had been to Vietnam and we were a pretty salty bunch. The kids flying in the military today couldn’t imagine the freedom we had… and the limits we could stretch it to.

My secondary MOS was as a Maintenance Officer… I was also a post maintenance check pilot and as such, used to fly most of my functional flight tests over the Salton Sea… I hated the idea that if I ever had to shuck the bird (ejecting)… of coming down in the cold waters in Warning Area. The desert; from the Salton Sea east to the Gila Bend Range and south to the Mexican border and north to Hoover Dam was our playground… Got to know to know the area like the back of my hand.

About a month before the fateful day… one of the twidgets from the electronics shop… came up to me and said, “Boss… the next time you’re out in the desert… have the backseater crank this frequency into the HF Radio… and see what happens”.

Now my family’s Coat of Arms… bears a Latin inscription that roughly translates… “Beware of those bearing gifts”. Heritage and experience made me alert… and suspicious

(This bunch had already gotten me once… when they submitted… and I approved… a requisition chit for fallopian tubes). I looked this young stud right in the eye and said, “What is it”?

He was coy and evasive at first… but finally said, “I don’t know if it’ll work in the airplane… but in the shop… with a dummy load on the antenna and on the lower sideband… we can talk to the truckers up and down the freeway out here”. He went on to say he thought it might be fun. I took the frequency, put it into my survival vest and promptly forgot about it.

About a month later, Denny Fitz and I and our two backseaters set out to make a parts run over to Hill AFB. Hill was the Air Force Supply Depot for F-4 parts… and I had made the acquaintance of an Air Force MSgt. there… who… with adequate priming, could produce any hard to get part… RFI… Regardless of the paper work! Since the Marine Corps was always sucking hind teat when it came to parts… this Air Force MSgt. became an irreplaceable cog in my maintenance management plan. In plain English… It was easier to steal the shit from the Air Force than to get it through our own supply system! The Sgt. was our inside man, who made all things possible.

We had the forward camera bay of Denny’s airplane loaded with two inop parts (CSD generators), which we would turn in for new ones… and two bottles of Jack Daniels (primer fluid). We had a 0600 brief and by 0700 were on our way out to the aircraft…

It was a beautiful day… the stars and moon were in all the right places… the air was crisp and I was about to leave the surly bonds of earth once again. I used to love these early morning takeoffs! The lights were still bright and the nine to fivers’… were just getting up. Looking down on them, you couldn’t help but feel superior… the drones were just getting up to service the queen bee and here I was… high above them, seeing what they could only dream about… and I was getting paid to do it! Life was good.

In the brief, I was to lead going over and Denny would lead coming back… At the end of the runway, we did our run-ups, nozzle checks, controls, gauges… and I looked over at Denny and he gave me a thumb’s up… “Show Time… Rock and Roll”!

I absolutely loved the acceleration of the Phantom… it was awesome. After I rotated and got airborne, I came out of burner at 350 knots and let the good times roll… a few seconds later, Denny radios, “Two’s up” and I looked down on him as he joined up and slid into position.

The Phantom was an airplane that could look so different from various angles… from the side, it could look sleek and fast, especially the RF with its’ long slender nose… But if you looked down on top of the aircraft in flight… it looked fat and brutish… like a down lineman in football… ugly and not something you’d want to fuck with. From below, the way the wings melded with the fuselage… it once again looked rakish… The RF-4 looked like… and was the thoroughbred of the species. Like a young stallion… it just wanted to run… there was not a fighter on the west coast that could stay with us in basic engine or burner… We probably had the last true… Mach II birds left in the fleet… time and weight had slowed all the other F-4’s down. At the top end, only the Vigilante’s could give us a run for our money.

Note: Lost a race to a Vigi one day… passing 1.8 he just walked off and left me… I asked the guy in the wardroom later… “Just how fast is the son of a bitch”? With a twinkle in his eye he said, “Don’t know… never had enough gas to find out”.

Back to paradise; we’re climbing through about 23,000 feet… when my aircraft gave a noticeable thump, lurch and the “Master Caution” light came on… I looked down at the telelight panel and saw the right generator had dropped off line and the buss tie had stayed open… I already knew that from the planes actions and I’d started losing some of the associated equipment… I reset the generator and all seemed well for about two minutes when it failed again. Hmmm… Not looking good. I called Denny on the radio and explained what was going on.

Now flying on one generator was no big deal… but taking off with only one was forbidden. If I continued on to Hill and landed… I’d be stuck there until the thing was fixed. We talked it over and decided the best course of action was for Denny to go on and I’d RTB (return to base) to El Toro. I called LA Center on the radio and made arrangements to split the flight… with Denny proceeding as planned… and me returning to El Toro.

That settled, I kissed Denny off and turned back to the southwest. Hooters was my backseater that day (He was so named, because his wife had the biggest set of all the wives in the squadron). As soon as I set course, I tried to re-set the generator once again… voila… it worked. I looked down and we were approaching the town of Thermal, near the north end of the Salton Sea… and I still had almost a full bag of gas… 13,000 lbs internal… and still had some fuel in my drop tank. I decided it would be a shame to waste all that gas by dumping in order to land… So I called LA Center and asked for a descent to FL 180 and canceled my IFR flight plan and told them I would do a pickup in 45 minutes. Center approved and upon reaching 180… we canceled instruments.

Now Marines can get pretty creative, especially living on the edge as we were in those days… and we generally flew on hot mike… that way we didn’t have to key the mike in order to have a conversation. I asked Hooters if there was any place he wanted to see… “Naw, let’s just cruise around”. After circling the Salton Sea… we were bored. Then I remembered the note in my survival vest!

I then said, “Hey Hoots… Crank up the HF radio”. A little explanation here... The RF-4 was the only Phantom that had the HF installed… as far as I know. It was so we could communicate while over “Indian territory” (North Vietnam) and out of UHF range. The frequency control box for the radio was in the rear cockpit and only the backseater could set frequencies… The pilot could however… once the frequency was set… take control of the radio in the front cockpit by simply flipping a switch (a feature obviously designed by a pilot).

The radio itself was a boomer… 300 watts output and the whole tail of the aircraft was the antenna… and of course whatever altitude you were at (in this case about 17,000 feet) … that was the height of the antenna. Plainly put… we were a 300 watt, mobile radio transceiver… with a 17,000 foot antenna. We had a lot of range!

Hoots then asked me if I wanted to make a phone patch through NORAD? “Nope” I replied, “I got a new frequency for you to try”. Hoots plugged in the frequency and tried to load the antenna… which in Marine parlance… meant he blew and whistled into the radio mike… No go… The antenna was not responding (actually this was common procedure with HF radios, base or mobile). I then said, “Let me try”. I took control of the radio and I blew into the mike and almost instantly… we started hearing… “Breaker, breaker one nine” and all kinds of other gibberish…

Reading my mind (not hard in those days); Hoots says… “You’re Not”! I said… “Fuckin’ A… This is too good to pass up”! For the next minute or so, we carried on the last rational and sane conversation that would emanate from the cockpit for the next half hour… “Shadow… You know how many watts we put out”? “Yeah, 300… Now shut up and let me find one close”. “Do you know what the average CB radio puts out”? “No… listen”. “It’s about 6 watts max”. (Fuckin’ backseaters… they were always so anal retentive… and tech oriented) “So what”? “Well I was just thinkin’… If you do this, you may fry a few radios”. “Naw, ain’t gonna happen”.

No sooner had I said that, then we hear… loud and clear… “Breaker, breaker one nine… any station… this is Georgia Boy… How do you hear me…over?”

The thought then occurred to me, that great moments in life… can be preceded, by the simplest of statements!

Before Hoots could throw water on this great opportunity… I keyed the mike and said, “Georgia Boy… This is Recon 05… I hear you loud and clear… How me, over”? Immediately he came back… “Ooweee man”! “What kind of radio is that…?” “You just about blew me outta my cab! Hell Bubba… I’m illegal… and you pegged my needles”… You a base station or something…?”

“Nope”, says me… “I’m mobile”.

“Mobile my ass… You must be on some mountaintop around here… You better shut that thing down Bubba… before the Feds are on you… like stink on poo”!

“Georgia Boy, I assure you I’m mobile”.

“Yeah, right”.

At this moment… I had a stroke of pure genius… if I do say so myself… I had turned back toward Thermal… I keyed the radio and said, “Georgia Boy… Where are you…? I’ll prove to you I’m mobile”.

“Where are you”? He replied.

“I’m near Thermal”, I said.

“Well Son… I’m east bound, down… and just passed Desert Center… I got my… peddle pegged to the metal… and I ain’t stopping until I gets to Phoenix…Arizona”!

“I’ll catch you before you get to Blythe… I’ll prove to you I’m mobile”…says I.

“Oowee… Shit man… you ain’t fooling me… You in Thermal… you got to be a base station on a mountain top”.

“I assure you… I’m mobile”!

He then said something that was too good to be true…

“Recon… Old Georgia Boy… is east bound and down… You ain’t catching me… ‘Lessen you in a Rocket ship”!

Hoots says, “Aww fuck… Why’d he have to go and say that”?

This was going to be one of those cherished little moments in life… By now, I knew he was on Interstate 10… between Desert Center and Blythe… We had to be just southwest of him about fifty miles away… Now if the genies of fate… didn’t urinate on the best of intentions of man… this was gonna be one for the ages!

I brought the power up…. and started downhill!

One of the marvels of the desert… is that on a clear day… from altitude… you could literally see forever…. for miles and miles and miles. My mind went tactical… I knew he still believed I was really stationary… but just in case… I figured he would be checking his rear view mirrors. My plan was to come from the southwest… the desert… He wouldn’t be expecting me to come from there. Hoots then chimes up… “You gonna boom ‘em”? You’re .98 and accelerating”. (Sometimes I think the only reason those guys were back there… was to bring an extra conscience along… in case your own went into… fail mode… which I was fast approaching)

“No… Don’t think I wanna do that”. (But my mind was saying… Great fucking idea though!) With both consciences in order; I backed off about 3%…

Going supersonic was now off the table… so I had to think of something else… In a nano-second it came to me… A few of us had discovered… that if you get fast enough… and low enough… out in the desert… You can leave a dust trail about a quarter of a mile behind you from your shock wave and wing vortices! (Before you say bullshit… I have plenty of others who can back me up on this… You also need to understand… Low and fast was where we had to live in order to survive our mission… Some of us just liked to go a little lower… and a little faster… than others.

Glenn Hyde saw it first-hand one day when he tried to follow me down in the weeds in a straight F-4 (he was supposed to be flying chase at 5,000 feet)… his backseater later accused both of us of trying to kill him. Glenn tried to follow me up the contour of a mountain and then through a saddle in a ridge line… where he hit my jet wake; which flipped him upside down at less than 100 feet AGL and at over 580 knots! Glenn had been a crop duster before joining the Marines… and kept his cool, pushed on the stick and climbed inverted until he had enough altitude to roll upright. His backseater was still shaking over an hour later, during the de-brief. By the way, Glenn’s call sign was “Crazy”… obviously a well-deserved tribute.

Back to Georgia Boy...after less than five minutes… I was now down to about a thousand feet, holding .98 Mach and could see the back of a white truck about 10 miles just northeast of me… I keyed the radio and asked… “Georgia Boy… What color is the back of your truck”?

“It’s white… like my Georgia Cracker ass”!

As he answered, I saw the truck ahead do a little wiggle in the road… He was obviously clearing his six!

I saw no other traffic on the road in either direction for over ten miles (even the car Gods were co-operating). I told Hoots over the ICS… “Man, we’re getting’ down in the dirt… it’s Show Time!

I dropped down as low as I dared… and timed the merge for me to be in the center divider (it is very wide in that part of the desert)… just as we would pass abeam Georgia Boy… About a half mile in trail… Hoots confirmed a dust trail behind us as I moved into the center divider, keyed the radio and said…

“GEORGIA BOY… LOOK OUT YOUR LEFT WINDOW”!!!

At this point… and at those speeds and low altitude, everything is usually a blur in your peripheral vision if you’re not looking sideways; all I remember seeing was the two biggest white eyes I ever saw… Looked like goose eggs! I didn’t see much else… ‘cause I was soo low and soo fast…

As the cab passed my peripheral vision… I stroked both engines into afterburner… and pulled up at about 5 G’s… When the nose reached 60 degrees… I unloaded and did two full deflection rolls…

Simultaneous with this I hear two voices… “Holy… Sweet Peter… Mother… Joseph and Jesus… he swapped lanes!” Hoots exclaimed.

“Oh my Gawd… You were in a fucking Rocket Ship”!!! Yelled out Georgia Boy.

That my friends… as they say in the commercial… was priceless… and worth what ever price there was to pay, short of losing ones’ wings.

Then Hoots says… “Holy Shit… You almost blew him off the road… Man, he swapped lanes two times”!

I continued out ahead for about 2 or 3 miles and pulled up through the vertical… over the top… and started downhill for another merge… this time head on… As I rolled upright;. Georgia Boy could see me… and he read my mind…

“Oh God No… Don’t do that!” “Puleease… Don’t do that”! Passing through about 5,000 feet… I regained my senses and I leveled off and made a wide sweeping turn around the truck.

Now relieved of another attack… Georgia Boy gets diarrhea of the mouth…. “Hot damn… Nobody’s gonna believe this! Nobody will believe I got run off the road by a Rocket Ship…! Recon… Give me your phone number… I’m gonna win some money at the bar tonight… Shit… Fire… this is unbelievable!” Even Hoots was laughing now… I happened to look up into the side mirror and noticed the crows feet around my eyes that the oxygen mask caused from my smiling… this was a wonderful moment… one you’ll never forget.

I finally came back to reality and saw I was below 7,500 lbs. of fuel… I called him on the radio and said… “Georgia Boy… We’d love to stay around a play… But I’m running out of gas… We’re gonna have to break it off and head back to base”. If I’d had one ounce of gray matter still working… instead of operating on pure adrenaline… I wouldn’t have said another word… But whoever said Marines were smart?

Now I didn’t want some Redneck calling my house in the middle of the night… drunk and trying to settle a bar bet… I wasn’t about to give him my home phone number. But my mouth engaged before my brain reacted… and I said, “Hey, here’s the Ready Room phone number… call me there and I’ll back you up”.

What a stupid son of a bitch I was!

The rest of the flight was uneventful… The generator stayed on line, I picked up my clearance, flew back to El Toro, landed and as I signed the Maintenance forms… Phil Seward… my Maintenance Chief… said “Boss… Don’t know what you did… But the CO, XO and OPS-O… are waiting for you in the Ready Room”!

Euphoria was about to turn into HACQ (House Arrest, Confined to Quarters)… I’ll spare you the details… I got a butt chewing and thought I was toast… until the XO smiled when he said I had to answer all these damn phones calls from all over the West Coast (Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, Arizona and California)… 300 watts does indeed… go a long way… One poor old lady who heard my next to last radio transmission and was sure I was running out of gas out in the desert, said someone needs to go… “Help that Boy”. He then said, “What freq were you using”? I handed him the note from the twidget… and he smiled and tore it up.

When word got around the squadron… I enjoyed new status with the troops… But I had to “check six” for a long time… especially around the Heavies… But you want to know the truth…

I ENJOYED EVERY FREAKIN’ SECOND OF IT!