**The Chu Lai Incident USAF**

15 mins read

[The Chu Lai Incident](https://captainbillywalker.com/war-stories/the-chu-lai-incident/)

**THE CHU LAI INCIDENT**

By Billy Walker and Arv Schultz

One fateful morning in February 1970, the usual radio chatter heard over the Gulf of Tonkin was interrupted by frantic Mayday calls from a crippled F-4 Phantom based out of Phu Cat, South Vietnam. Colonel Don Sorlie and his backseater, Capt. Ron Stein, were flying their second two-ship bombing mission over the Ho Chi Min Trail in Northern Laos (their wingman’s first).

After an uneventful first steep approach, Sorlie’s second run at his target resulted in all hell breaking loose. Seemingly from out of nowhere, a 23mm AAA shell ripped through the F-4’s left front quarter panel, blowing off the canopy and disabling Sorlie. While they were still in close proximity, the wingman advised Stein that he was dropping his ordnance and would catch up, but Stein never saw or heard from the wingman again.

As a result of the hit on his canopy, a piece of its frame had impacted Sorlie in his arm along with numerous shards of Plexiglas that were imbedded in his left eye, face, and upper extremities. To further exacerbate the problem, Sorlie’s oxygen mask was blown off, preventing any communications between him and the backseater. “I thought he was dead!” said Stein.

The F-4’s steep dive, which would have resulted in certain death for both men, ended when Stein, as if by instinct, grabbed the stick and initiated a pull up, climbing to approximately 15,000 feet. Although Stein was a pilot, he was not yet qualified in the F-4; above all, he was not qualified to fly it from the back seat. (In those days a pilot flew as a backseater before becoming an aircraft commander.)

Ground crews would later discover vegetation, including tree limbs, caught beneath the bombs. The 23mm shell that struck the canopy exploded aft of the cockpits causing additional damage. Another

Interesting fact was that both engine motor mounts were broken due to the high G’s pulled on the dive recovery. The engines, however, continued to function, although they were not quite aligned with their air intakes. To say the least it was a very close call!

As Stein leveled off he began to contemplate his options. Having just topped off with fuel and still carrying half of their bomb load, he calculated that they were extremely heavy, making a landing more difficult. The question was, what to do next?

Major Roger Parrish and his wingman had departed Cam Rahn Bay, South Vietnam, on a bombing mission to Laos at approximately the same time Sorlie left Phu Cat. After dropping his bombs and starting his return flight to Cam Rahn Bay, Parrish received a call on a guard frequency from GCI that an F-4 that had been hit and was in serious trouble. Parrish heard several ground stations respond to the stricken aircraft’s Mayday calls, but there was no reply from the F-4. Parrish opted to send his wingman back to Cam Rahn Bay and volunteered to divert to where the damaged F-4 had been last reported, to assist in its recovery. Radar was painting the F-4 and began vectoring Parrish to its location. At this time he was told that the Phantom had gone “feet wet.” This didn’t necessarily mean he was ditching – it just meant that he was over water not over land. “We owned the water and you never knew who owned the jungle,” said Parrish.

Stein had every reason to believe Sorlie had “bought it!” He was slumped over and motionless in his seat, his head was no longer visible. The tremendous blast of air from the fast moving jet (400kts.), minus the canopy, had forced Sorlie to scrunch down in his seat. Sorlie’s blood was splattering all over the face shield of Stein’s helmet, forcing him to continually wipe it off, while still attempting to fly the airplane. At this point Stein was convinced that his pilot was dead, but he continued to make distress calls while flying the aircraft that he thought was severely damaged. Knowing that his chance of surviving an ejection over water would be better than landing in the jungle, Stein pointed the aircraft east toward the Gulf of Tonkin, which was over 100 miles away.

From Stein’s radio transmissions, GCI figured that he definitely was going to jump out. They kept trying to talk to him, but he wasn’t ableto hear any of their transmissions. He kept yelling and saying he was going to jump out. “My front seater is dead. He does not talk to me.”

Parrish kept a vigil, continually scanning the sky in search of the stricken F-4. As he was being vectored toward the damaged aircraft, he finally caught sight of it, orbiting just above the cloud deck, off the shoreline. Knowing that the backseater was planning to eject, Parrish moved in close to the damaged aircraft’s right wing. When the F-4 pilot saw Parrish he was overjoyed, and even though he had an oxygen mask on, Parrish swears he saw him smiling.

With hand signals and limited voice communication Parrish told Stein that he would fly around the aircraft to assess the damage. After a thorough inspection, the only damage visible to Parrish was where the 23mm shell had impacted the upper left windscreen blowing off the canopy; the rest of the aircraft appeared to be intact. The backseater, however, didn’t agree with this assessment, saying, “I don’t think so; it flies really badly.” What Stein had forgotten was that half of his ordnance was still attached to the aircraft, and a substantial amount of fuel remained as well, the combination of which made them very heavy, and no doubt contributed to the adverse performance of the aircraft.

By now Parrish and Stein were flying formation, and although he was close enough to communicate with Stein via the radio, the communication left a lot to be desired. Nevertheless, between hand signals and the limited communication, he hoped to help Stein build his confidence toward pursuing a landing instead of ejecting from the aircraft. Parrish worked feverishly to convince Stein that landing was his best option. Stein finally reluctantly agreed, and they began their descent, as a flight of two, to land at Chu Lai Marine base. Parrish picked this spot, not only because its location was near their current position, but more importantly knowing the Marine base was equipped with numerous arresting cables to stop the stricken aircraft once he landed.

As they began to penetrate the thick under cast, they encountered extremely heavy rain. Parrish pulled out all the stops to help guide Stein in for a safe landing, but there would be problems to overcome with landing the F-4 from the back seat.

The USAF bought the F-4, a Navy airplane, “off the shelf”; this included the tail-hook apparatus, which turned out to be a great addition in Sorlie and Stein’s case, as was the set of flight controls the Air Force added to the rear cockpit. This option was not present in the Navy version. The Air Force F-4 backseater had the ability to lower the gear with a lanyard, but because the tail hook handle was located in the front cockpit, with no way to get to it from the back seat, he would not be able to deploy the tail hook. Parrish felt that landing, even without the tail hook deployed, was still a better option than ejecting.

As they neared the GCA downwind position, Parrish told Stein to lower his gear. Stein complied, but asked, “How do I get the tail hook down?” Just then Parrish’s backseater could see some movement from Sorlie and shouted, “The pilot’s moving!” The rain beating down on Sorlie had apparently awakened him from unconsciousness. Parrish turned to look at Sorlie and although he was barely able to function, Parrish determined Sorlie was not dead after all. Sorlie tried to communicate by giving Parrish a wave using his right arm, due to having been wounded in his left shoulder and arm. Parrish signaled, if you read me, put down the hook now. At the same time he dropped his own tail hook. Sorlie nodded, and in spite of his wounds, reached over with his right hand to the left side to also put his hook down. Parrish said, “We got it made. You got gear and a hook. I’ll get you on the ground.”

With Parrish’s guidance they worked their way inbound on the Chu Lai GCA approach. Six 500-pound bombs were still attached and Stein lacked the capability to release them from his back seat position. In addition, the release mechanism apparently had been damaged by the 23mm shell, so Sorlie could not release them either. Stein would have to land with the bombs remaining under the wings of the aircraft.

Breaking out of the clouds around 800’, Parrish advised Stein to take the lead for the landing. The F-4 started passing Parrish on final, approaching at a higher than normal indicated speed, around 180+ knots. Stein and Sorlie touched down right on the approach end of the runway, tearing out the first barrier then the second, but about halfway down the runway, the third barrier brought them to a stop.

With his fellow airmen and the Phantom safely on the ground, Parrish requested landing clearance. He was informed that the runway was closed. At this point he was critically low on fuel and informed the controllers to clear the taxi-way for him. He then proceeded to land without incident. After securing his aircraft, Parrish climbed out to assist in extracting the severely wounded Sorlie, but he had already been taken to the base hospital for emergency surgery.

Both pilots of the stricken F-4 survived. Sorlie was later evacuated and eventually recovered from his near fatal experience to fly once again. Had Stein ejected, his aircraft commander would have had little to no chance of surviving. They also would learn later that the front ejection seat would likely not have deployed due to the 23mm shell strike.

After landing and getting Sorlie out and off to the hospital, Stein caught a ride to the hospital with a Marine flight surgeon. They collected all of Sorlie’s stuff and then went back to the doctor’s office. He checked Stein out but found no problems. Stein remembers the doc pulling out a bottle of Johnny Walker Black from his lower desk drawer and they toasted each other several times. After several telephone calls the doctor told Stein that he should probably get out to the end of the runway as a C-7A Caribou had been ordered to wait there to take him back to Phu Cat. They stopped for one last look at the aircraft and then the doctor was off to the EOR.

**Roger Parrish inspecting the damage to Sorlie’s F-4**

Note the canopy damage

As Stein walked up to the aft ramp of the Caribou, which was holding number one for takeoff, he unloaded Sorlie’s stuff and saw the puzzled looks cast his way questioning, Just who was this hotshot captain they had been holding for takeoff for over 45 minutes?

Back at Phu Cat, there was a party and the retelling of this amazing story numerous times continued to the wee hours. Stein was free from duty the next day, but back in the air the day after that.

Phu Cat’s Wing call sign for out-of-country missions was “Cobra”. Ever since that day Stein adopted its use in his flying career. Forever, he will be Ron “Cobra” Stein.

Lt. Col. (then Captain) Ron Stein was awarded the Silver Star for his heroic efforts. Col. Sorlie was awarded the Purple Heart for the wounds he received, but Col. (then Major) Parrish never received recognition for his heroism during that event.  An oversight due to Parrish’s commanders changing command at the time.   Parrish’s recognition fell thru the cracks.   Parrish himself never pursued any recognition.

Parrish’s meritorious pursuit to answer the distress call of his fellow airmen, evaluating the seriousness of the damage to their aircraft once he visually inspected it, building their confidence by providing encouragement and convincing them to land instead of ejecting, and finally leading them to a safe landing, the outcome of which today, almost a half century later, finds them all alive and well, should not go un-noticed or un-rewarded. Col. Roger Parish should receive the recognition he rightfully deserves for the heroic, unselfish rescue mission he performed in helping save the lives of his fellow airmen, not to mention the F-4 Phantom.

During his career as a fighter pilot Parrish reflected that, “I killed a lot of the enemy over there, but one thing I am really proud of was having helped save the lives of the two F-4 pilots.”

Over the years the memory of the names of the two F-4 crewmen had faded, but Parrish recently spent a great deal of time attempting to discover the whereabouts of the two men whose lives he had saved on that fateful day. He related the story of the Chu Lai incident to his friend and fellow formation pilot, Billy Walker, expressing the desire to locate the pilot as well as his backseater. After hearing this, Billy decided that he had to try to find someone who might help with this long overdue recognition. “I contacted several veterans’ groups through [www.military.com](http://www.military.com/). Over time, I heard from a number of individuals who remembered the incident, albeit none had details. It appeared to be a dead end,” said Billy.

A couple of years ago Billy had the pleasure of meeting Col. Don Sorlie through a mutual friend. “We had a delightful lunch at Anzio Landing at Falcon Field, Mesa, Arizona,” Billy recalls, “However, nothing enlightening came out of this meeting other than the satisfaction of being with aviators who had obviously been tested.

“Recently, retired Col. Sorlie and I were kibitzing some, which led him to tell me of the time he had been flying a mission over the Ho Chi Min Trail in Laos. As he led me into his story of being hit by a 23mm shell and having his backseater land the airplane at the Chu Lai Marine Base, he could readily detect the amazed expression on my face. I knew this story!

“Relating the same story to Col. Sorlie, from the perspective of the pilot of the F-4 out of Cam Rahn Bay who had saved his life, I told him of the effort Col. Parrish had made trying to locate Sorlie’s whereabouts and of my efforts in this regard. Now, serendipitously, here he was at the same dinner table! Amazing!

“I suggested we attempt to surreptitiously organize a surprise meeting between Sorlie and Parrish. Since Parrish and I were scheduled for an early morning breakfast with a local aviation group it was decided that I would pick up Sorlie, then Parrish along with another friend, and head for the Quilted Bear for our breakfast gathering. Sorlie was to avoid any mention of his Vietnam experience and I would only introduce the two by their first names. It worked! Parrish had no clue as to who our extra companion was.

“The purpose of the February 14th breakfast was to honor the late General Jimmy Doolittle. Due to traffic, we arrived a few minutes late and missed the general introductions. When it came time for me to speak, I mentioned the fact that I had already told the group of the two times I had the great fortune to meet Jimmy Doolittle, but that today I had a special guest to introduce.

“I asked Col. Sorlie to stand with me while I cited some of his accomplishments. I was careful to delay mentioning his SEA experience until last.

“Then, I said, ‘…and Roger Parrish has met retired Col. Sorlie before!’  Parrish’s look was one of puzzlement. Continuing, I mentioned the incident. Parrish’s look was that of sudden realization and astonishment that here was the very person he had been searching for over the past many years. They had not seen each other for some 36 years. Sorlie was a presumed corpse at their first meeting over the Gulf of Tonkin.”

At the time of the aforementioned incident, Parrish’s rank was major. His career has included many experiences including winning the “Top Gun” award. He flew 133 combat missions in Southeast Asia, dropping a mix of napalm, MK 117 (750 lb.) and MK 82 (500 lb.) bombs, rockets, in both day and night bombing. Roger lost a wingman on a bombing mission in Laos, but he was never hit himself.

Parrish was later selected as USAF Thunderbird Leader in both the F-4 and the T-38. During his stellar Air Force career, Parrish flew the T-28, T-37, T-33, T-38, F-100, F-105, F-4, F-15, and F-16. He flew 133 missions in the F-4 in SE Asia. His good friend Billy Walker is of the opinion that the fateful flight into Chu Lai, when he assisted the stricken airmen, should have qualified Parrish to receive the DFC or, perhaps, the Silver Star.

Following his military career Parrish went on to become a test pilot and demonstration pilot with Learjet before joining America West Airlines as a pilot. At America West, Parrish flew the Boeing 737 and Airbus A-320. He rose to become assistant vice president of flight operations, director of training, and finished his career at AWA as a simulator instructor in the Airbus program.

Parrish currently lives in Mesa, Arizona, with Bette, his wife of 54 years. They have four children and nine grandchildren. As a member of the Lafayette Escadrille d’Arizona, he flew a WWI Nieuport 17 replica fighter. He now flies a WWII Stearman primary trainer and participates in missing man formation performances for Veterans Day as well as for other events to honor the fallen heroes of wars past.  Parrish also flies a 7-AC Aeronca “Champ.”

As a combat veteran Sorlie flew 50 (F-86) mission’s in Korean, and 143 (F-4) missions in Vietnam. He was the Director of Operations at Phu Cat at the time when his near shoot-down incident and subsequent landing at Chu Lai occurred. Sorlie was also a test pilot at Edwards AFB between 1955 and 1967 and was involved with testing all the “century” series fighters. Sorlie was the sixth man to pilot the M2-F1 lifting body and made his first of five flights on May 27, 1965. He went on to make three flights in the M2-F2, and performed 33 ground tows as well.

Sorlie was chief of the fighter test operations branch at the Air Force Flight Test Center and was the official “boss” of the lifting body and X-15 Air Force test pilots. Don Sorlie was honored by the Flight Test Historical Foundation in 2005 for his work in testing Lockheed’s U-2.

Currently residing in Klamath Falls, Oregon, Stein is a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel who served in the military for 26 years. During his flying career he amassed over 3800 hours (328 combat), and 217 combat missions in the F-4 Phantom and 1600 hours in the F-16 Falcon.

He and his wife, Sharon, have two daughters and five grandchildren. When they moved to Klamath Falls in 1983, he retired from the Air Force and joined the Air National Guard. In 1992, he retired from the Air National Guard and transitioned to training F-15 pilots in the simulator as a civilian contract instructor at Kingsley Field.

Stein is proud to be called a veteran and he is always there to do something to serve other veterans and their families. He enjoys woodworking and has decided to put his talents to use in the hope that the items he makes will help in some way to further honor the lives of veterans who served our great country. He is now retired but volunteers much of his extra time to numerous veteran related organizations.

Lifting Body Program Test Pilots: Don Sorlie, Bill Dana, Bruce Peterson, and John Manke. These devices were the predecessors of the Space Shuttle. Don Sorlie in an **M2-F1 being towed by a C-47**. This device was made out of plywood!

Sorlie’s view of this famous flight of the XB-70, just before the tragic accident destroying the “Valkyrie” and the F-104 Joe Walker was flying. Sorlie was flying a photo F-104D. The photographer ran out of film on a separate mission. So they left and did not witness the actual mid-air occurring shortly afterward. That photo was likely taken by Clay Lacy from his photo Lear 23.