NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

Wings & Things Guest Lecture Series

The Early Wild Weasel Days: The Air Force's First Anti-SAM Efforts

Former Wild Weasel Electronic Warfare Officer Col. (Ret.) Mike Gilroy discusses the challenges and opportunities facing Weasel and Strike crews at Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base in the mid-1960s.

Mike Gilroy: It's a pleasure to be here this evening. My wife, Patricia, and I drove up from San Antonio, Texas, where it was -- I think the day we left, the next day was 92 degrees. Bluebonnets are in blossom, you know, spring is gone, we're, you know, into the first days of summer.

I was really surprised coming up here. I really thought the price of gasoline would have gone up more than it did, but it was about $3.35 a gallon in San Antonio and it held pretty steady all the way up here. I have a good friend in San Antonio who is sort of a country philosopher, and he has theories about everything. And he told me the other day, he said, "I have a theory on why gasoline prices always rise and they never seem to go down again." And I got to hear with this guy because, you know, sometimes his theories are really pretty weird. And I said, "What's your theory?" And he said, "well, the theory is that we don't check our oil level often enough as a nation." And I said, you know, I said, "I don't understand anything about that at all." And he said, "Well, you know how you check your oil in your truck?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "When you go out and raise the hood, you pull the dip stick out, you wipe it off, you stick it back in the hole and you pull it out and check and see if you need to add oil or not." And then he said, "That's how you do it for your truck." And he said, "But we don't do that as a nation." And I said, "You know, I still don't understand a darn thing you're telling." And he said, "Well" -- he said, "Think about it now." He said, "All our oil is in Alaska" he said, "Gulf of Mexico" he said, "We have oil in Louisiana and Texas and Oklahoma." I said, "Yeah, I understand that." He said, "And all the dip sticks are in Washington D.C."

[Applause]

But I'm delighted to be here this evening. I thank all of you for putting on a little bit of snow this afternoon. I can't wait to get back to San Antonio and tell him about this huge snow storm we went through up in Dayton, Ohio.

I've narrowed down the topic, my talk tonight, a very specific period of time. And that's the Wild Weasel operations -- excuse me, I'm on the wrong button of course. That happened in Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base and during a specific period in time and those are the months that I was there, and that was from July of 1966 to May of 1967.

And we're going to talk about these guys right here. This is my Wild Weasel Class, it was class 3-2, three being 105's and two being 2nd class, and what happened to this group of people. And to a lesser extent, in war story, number two, we're going to talk about these guys. This is the 354 Attack Fighter Squadron. This was taken in about April of 1967. Some people there that -- that's me right -- wow. Fumble fingers here. That's me right there in the back. That's Merlyn Dethlefsen, Medal of Honor recipient, right there. Squadron commander Lieutenant Colonel Phil Gast, he retired as a three-star general. And let's see. Max Brestel, MiG Killer. We had bunch of people and we'll talk a little bit about them.

But for those of you who may not know what the Wild Weasel Program was, 24th of July 1965 was the first time a surface-to-air-missile was used in combat to shoot down an enemy airplane, and it shot down an Air Force F-4, damaged another pretty badly. It caused a lot of consternation. We had known that the missiles were being put into North Vietnam for months ahead of time. The chairman of the Central Intelligence Agency and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff all recommended to President Lyndon Johnson that the site should be destroyed before they became operational. And the President refused to do so.

McNamara, the Secretary of Defense, refused to take that recommendation to the President even. The State Department guy at the time, one guy was quoted as saying, "well, you don't think they're going to really use those missiles to shoot at you, do you?" And, you know, you sort of wished he had been there. A year later we could have send him up there and see what they have shot.

But there are a bunch of committees that were formed, one was the -- and the main one as far as I'm concerned, was a Dempster Committee run by a Brigadier General K.C. Dempster who was a World War II veteran, and who is running a research, one of the research and development division at the Pentagon. Joint Chiefs of Staff had their group, they called theirs Prong Tong, The Tactical Air Warfare Center at Eglin Air Force Base. They had a group of people together to try to figure out how to handle the missile problem. As did Pacific Air Force headquarters and a lot of the same people who are on all these committees and the -- some of the conclusions that they came up was that, "Well, we needed radar warning receivers in all our fighter aircraft. We need some jammers for them." And one thing which was interesting was that they needed timely processing of photographic intelligence.

It turned out that that -- this was well before Polaroid film, if you can remember -- so when an airplane flew over target and took a picture of something happening, you know, by the time they got back to its base and, you know, the staff sergeant went out and he undid the [Inaudible] fastener and took the camera out and fastened it and back up and took it into the photo shop to be developed, and by the time a person finally looked at the developed film and try to figure out what was on there -- flag something as being an important thing that, you know, someone needed to know about -- by the time copies of the film were made it was taken out and put on a T-39 aircraft and taken to the base that needed that intelligence information, it was not unusual for three days to have transpired.

The particular SAMs site, surface-to-air missile site that shot down the F-4 -- when it was shot down, no one knew that that missile site was there, when in fact it had been photographed two days before. This photograph hadn't been processed.

And they needed the SAM killer, the surface-to-air missile killer, and that's where the Wild Weasel came in to being -- the committee came up with some other really weird recommendations. They gave some briefings to the heads of General Electric and Westinghouse and, you know, all the big defense industries that got these heads together. And actually someone came up with a recommendation of taking surplus B-47's making, them into drones, loading them up with high explosives and going in there and crashing them into the SAM sites. That obviously wasn't chosen. But the SAM killer was the Wild Weasel Program, and initially was done with F-100 aircraft. I'm not going to talk about that, that's a wonderful story in itself. I'm going to talk about the F-105.

In about May of 1966, I had just completed a nine month TDY in the Island of Guam. And B-52 is flying archive missions in South Vietnam and managed to get into Wild Weasel Program. And there are some comparisons which I'll make a little bit later about how Strategic Air Command and B-52 crews were treated versus the circumstances that the 105 guys lived under. And there's a stark contrast. The training was short. We started out with ten days at Long Beach International Airport. We showed up there with eight pilots and eight Electronic Warfare Officers. I was an Electronic Warfare Officer in -- from the Strategic Air Command, as I said.

The only thing that I remember about that training was that in the first day we got in there and the instructor asked for everyone to stand up and tell something about themselves, you know. Where were you born? Where are you from, you know? Are you married? How many kids do you have? How long have you been flying airplanes, you know? Where have you been stationed? And everybody, all 16 of us got up and said who we were and told a little bit something about us. And the guys said, "we're going to take a coffee break at the end when everybody has given their introduction. And at the end of the coffee break you come back in and you're going to pick up who you're going to fly with. And you're going to go through your whole training program with this guy, and so you better pick carefully. And you're going to fly your whole 100 missions with that person." So surprisingly, with this poor choice of -- this poor selection process, generally it worked out pretty well. I wound up -- teamed with a guy by the name Ed Larson, a long time F-105 guy. And we were both former enlisted guys so maybe that was the reason that we picked each other out. He had been security service as a Morse code operator. I had been a jet engine mechanic in B-36's and P-47's.

So we picked each other out. We decided, you know, we fly together. And it was sort of interesting. The flamboyant people sort of tended to go together, you know, and I guess there's sort of a chemical attraction there but the -- anyway, we all joined up and we had some more classes that day. And that night we all went to a -- they got a hospitality room for us at the motel we were staying at which was my first experience with the hospitality suite run by North American Aviation. So, there was, you know, some adult beverages there. And it was really pretty interesting. We had a few drinks and then we went out --

got in the car, went out to a restaurant to eat. And Ed was sitting across the table from me. And, you know, the -- we gave our orders and, you know, the soup course came and I looked over and there's this guy that I'm going to fly 100 missions sound asleep with his face about an inch from his bowl of soup. And I thought, “what in the hell I got myself into here?” But it turned out he was really an excellent pilot. He just had a tendency to fall asleep a lot. [laughter]

Anyway, we went from there to Nellis Air Force Base. And had a six course we were way at the end of the flight line. Those of you that were at Nellis years ago, the Thunderbird hangar used to be way at the end of the flight line there, and where the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds used to hang out when they weren’t flying out flying air shows. And they had an upper balcony there that was vacant, and that's where we had our classes.

The instructors that we had were the guys who were in the F-100 Wild Weasel Program. And most of them had been overseas, you know, and flown some missions. Some of them had killed SAM sites, a whole lot of them had not, but they were the best instructors available. I remember one class, they were talking -- someone was giving a lecture about surface-to-air-missiles, about the missile itself. And I remember him saying, “well” he said, “you know, if you're going to go in and try to find this missile site and shoot at it, chances are you're going to get shot at yourself” you know, the missile is going to shoot at you. And he said, “but don’t worry about that because, you know, you can dodge it with your airplane.” He said, “You can really dodge -- they're easy to dodge.” And, you know, it seemed like the guy was awfully cliff, you know, and almost to the point of being flippant. And somebody raised their hand, here’s what he said; well, you wait ‘till the missile gets really close and you pull up really hard and turn into it, and it’ll miss you.” And somebody raised their hand and said, “well, how close do you let it get before you do that?” And this guy got this real blank look on his face, and he was obviously -- he had never done this, you know, he had heard someone else say that you could do this. And he sat there and he thought a little bit and he said, “well, you’ll know.” And surprisingly, he was right, you know -- you know.

But we had some flights, as I say, that we had some shrike launches, we had a standoff missile, we'd call it, and that's -- put that in quotes standoff -- and the anti-radiation missile which we are to use to shoot against the radar sites. We didn’t have enough of them so the majors got to fire the shrike and we didn’t, you know. So the captains, we were captains, and, you know, there were a couple crews with captains on them, we didn’t get to fire one because, you know, there weren’t enough of them. So anyway, that part of the program really sucked.

We deployed to -- we left our training completed, to Takhli, Thailand in the 3rd of July, 1966, arrived in the 4th of July, 1966. Now, I thought when I was this putting presentation together, well, maybe somebody doesn’t know where Thailand is, you know. And so here it is on this map here. And here’s Japan, here’s China, Russia, India, and this is Thailand right here. And about under the T is there in Thailand, this about where Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base is. And the mission, we were going to fly, of course, were

here into the area of North Vietnam right here. So that's where it is. Now you all know where Thailand is when I talk about it.

We arrived there, as I said, the 4th of July, 1966. We had been flying, we ferried our aircraft over. We had six airplanes, eight crews, two crews went ahead, you know, by KC-135's to get everything set up for us. So we arrived there the 4th of July, 1966. We flew from Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas, Nevada, to Sacramento to where the materiel area was to get some modifications done to our airplanes and we headed out with tankers and flew to Hickam, Hawaii. We stopped; we got drunk in Hickam, Hawaii. We got up the next morning and we flew from Hickam to Andersen Air Force Base in Guam. And we sort of did the same thing there, you know, we were young guys, full of testosterone going to war, going to show our stuff, you know. So the second day we were at Anderson Air Force Base, Guam, the next leg of the journey was from there to Okinawa. And we stopped and we got drunk there, and then flew down, stopped at Saigon for a little bit, and then flew on into Thailand. So we weren't in very good shape when we got there.

One of our guys there in the -- the Wing Commander was there giving us welcome briefing. And one of the guys is in the front row and he was much the worse for wear after, you know, this four days of flying and inviting and fell asleep during the briefing. And the wing commander absolutely went ballistic. I mean he just really, you know, reacted inappropriately. And, you know, so we, you know, we almost were sent off the base right there.

But I want to talk to you about some of the challenges, you know. Every organization that ever went into war had their own challenges and unique challenges. And want to tell you about those that we faced here in Takhli, Thailand, and I'm going to talk about each one of these; restrictive rules of engagement, what the living conditions were like, the equipment that we had and the suitability for the task that we had, ammunition's short comings and shortages, because that was really important.

The rules of engagement, you know, had been talked about, probably in every presentation that's ever been given about the Vietnam Air War so I won't go do that dwell I'm here. But just to say that, you know, some of them here that were prohibited, there is around Hanoi and Hai Phong, two major cities in North Vietnam that you couldn't even fly over them, you couldn't go -- you only can go into these areas. The harbors and the ships were off limits, you know. It was not a declared war. Some of the ships coming into the harbor were Dutch, were French, were British, all bringing supplies in there, they were off limits of course. And so -- I saw a picture in intelligence one day I went in there and there was a loading area off the harbor there in Hai Phong. And they're in canisters like an engine canister comes in, you know, there were probably 300 canisters with surface-to-air-missiles in them, and had been downloaded off the ships and were there ready for, you know, to be transshipped to a, you know, to a missile site somewhere. Excellent target. Well, wouldn't you love to go hit that? But it was on a restricted target list, so instead of taking out those 300 missiles when they were sitting

there in the canister, you know, you went and you flew in the airplane and you took them on one at a time, you know, which is a -- really, it's a shame.

The third bullet there is a statement attributed to Lyndon Johnson. I've never been able to track it down to see if he really said this or when he said it but it sure sounds like something that he said, you know. “And then boys, again, hit him out, I might say so.” And there were restrictions on airfields. We flew by, you know, the airfields on the way up going to a target. You fly by Kep, one of the other air fields. And you’d even see MiGs taxing out, ready to come up and take off and come after you. The rules of engagement were so restrictive that you couldn't attack those MiGs until they were off the ground and had the wheels in the well. Now, who the hell thought of that, you know? That's just terrible, but they're rules. We also had -- you couldn't attack another aircraft without visual identification first. And that again goes back to a lot of the aircraft going in there where the aircraft belonged to people that were allies of us, you know, in another conference or something, you know, and another treaty. And so, you know, our air-to-air fighters gave up their advantage of beyond visual range missiles by having to wait up, you know, close in on the guy, see that he was in fact a MiG-17 or MiG-19, back up again, you know, to get back and you know, get in range of the missiles. So a lot of the stuff there that was really, you know, poorly done.

I want to talk about our living conditions a little bit. Sleep and food; probably things that we all take for granted, right? You know we’re going to be some place and we’re going to have some living conditions that are really nice. I talked to you about being in Guam in 1965. Larry DeMuse is there in crowd here, and he was there with me at the same time. We were flying mission to the South Vietnam, and we had nice air conditioned quarters, we had plenty of food. We flew about one day out of three so the other two days the blue bus pulled up in front of the barracks at eight o’clock in the morning. We got our golf clubs and we got on the bus, and it took us across the islands of the Navy golf course, and we played 36 holes of golf and the bus came and picked us up at five o’clock and took us back and we would grab ahead, you know, and have few drinks and some food.

Now, contrast to this, a year later, now here we are in Takhli, Thailand in one of the premier fighter bases. This is it. Sort of nice, isn’t it? It's made out of tin, you know, so it's sort of high class. But this is the hooch that we lived in. These panels on the side here, you know, if it's raining really hard and the wind is blowing straight, you go out and you drop the panels down, you know, and it keeps the moisture out. But the rest of the time to get a little air flow, these panels that are along here and those along the side here, you raise them up, and see this board here and there's one here, you raise it up and you stick the board in the corner there to keep the panel up and allow a little air circulation to go through there. Inside this hooch, there are about ten bunks down each side there, and about four big ceiling fans hanging from the ceiling there. And that's it. Ten bunks have got racks on them and mosquito netting because there's a, you know, a lot of malaria over there, you know, so.

But anyway -- and you know what happens when you fly airplanes all day long? They have to be fixed at night. So at night, about a mile away is the, you know, the

maintenance area, and they run engines almost all night long. So part of the reason, and I'm going to show you some loss figures for the Weasels and for -- as well as for the Wing at that time -- part of the reason, I think, this is just my personal experience from being there, the loss rates were so high was actually air crew fatigue, you know, that -- you know, the only saving grace was that drinks at the bar were 15 cents so -- but, you know, you can only, you know, do that for only a short period of time, even, you know, young people like we were then. But no air conditioned quarters. There were few trailer, you know, that some of the field grade people had, the majors had but, you know, the rest of us guys were in these things and, you know, not a very conducive environment for, you know, being very rested.

We're also -- we're out of food for a good period at this time. I remember one morning after coming back from sortie I went to the – the Officers Club, it was air conditioned, and the waitresses are all young Thai girls, all very proper, you know, I don't think I ever saw any hanky panky going off between the Thai girls and the fighter pilots while I was there. I think they were all from fairly good families, who spoke broken English, had sense of humor. And I remember going in there for a lunch and I went in and I looked at the menu and then a girl came up and said, "what will you have?" And I said, "I'll have a cheeseburger." "No have cheeseburger." Okay. And I look down there, what else they had there and I said, "Okay. How about -- how about grilled cheese sandwich?" "No have grilled cheese sandwich." Okay. This was getting serious now, you know. And there was something else on the menu and I said, "Well, how about that?" And she said, "No have." And I said, "Not that." Well, this is nuts. So I'm not going to go through the whole menu this way, you know. And I said, "Well, what do you have?" She said, "We have eggs." I said, "That's it. You have eggs?" And she said, "Have eggs." I said, "Okay." I thought well, it's breakfast, you know, that'll be okay. So I said, "Okay. Give me three eggs, scrambled, and some toast." And she just got red in the face and she stomped her foot and she said, "No have toast. Have eggs."

And I mentioned in the other slide about ammunition shortages. And I remember reading the Stars and Stripes and I was over there, you know, it's about August or September of '66, and the headline was "The Secretary of the Air Force denies ammunition shortage." In going out to the airplane, and at that time our standard ordinance load on the Wild Weasel aircraft was two AGM-45's, the shrike missiles, and two pods of 2.75 rockets. So we had 38 rockets, two AGM-45's. The single-seat D's that flew with us normally had a center line with 6-500 pound bombs on there. And going out there and getting ready for a mission you'd have one shrike on the Weasel, nothing -- no rockets, not two shrikes, one shrike. And going over to our D model wing man and looking at him, instead of having 6-500 pound bombs on there, we he had two. And, you know, you talk about -- you know, you're the -- and it just broke their Crew Chief's hearts to give you the airplane like that. And to the Crew Chief I asked "Is this all you got? It's one shrike?" He said, "yes, sir. That's all they gave us." And so, you know, you were expected to go up and fly the sortie just as you would any other time but with not enough ammunitions on the airplane to do the job.

I looked up in the archives and found this quote here which I paraphrased. And it's really craftily worded isn't it? You know, I mean you're going up there with 70 bombs; you're going to go up there and drop 20 on the target. So the Secretary of the Air Force said, "you know, there's a shortage but it's not keeping our pilots from attacking their targets." Well, that's true, you know, as far as that goes that's something you'd say to Congress and Congress would think, "Oh, well everything is Hunky Dory" when in fact it isn't, you know. Sure, you can attack the target but you're not doing a whole lot of damage because you don't have a whole lot of munitions.

Ammunitions, they were short and -- but I want to talk to you for a second too about the equipment we were given to go find missile sites. You know, the United States Air Force would not send you out to do a job like this without giving you the very best equipment that's available. And I want to tell you how great the equipment was. It really was state of the art.

This is the radar warning receiver and these went into most of the attack fighter aircraft. And this, the airplane is right in the center there and this strobe going out behind here, something about it, you're seven o'clock position.

The surface-to-air-missile radar are these two strobes right here, one there and one there. It has two radar beams, well it has more than that, but for tracking purpose it has one that tracks elevation, and one that tracks your azimuth, and they're both displayed like that. As you could see they're about 15-20 degrees apart. So as you look at this, the surface-to-air-missile site is either right about here or it's right about here. And the accuracy of this equipment is plus or minus 17 degrees. So that surface-to-air-missile site now might be right here or it might be over here. So it was sort of an art to try to find the site. The backseat, the Electronic Warfare Officer, had some better equipment. It had this receiver here which is a little more accurate than the other. And this is an eye test for review for the old fighter pilots out there, "where's the SAM site?"

I have this slide in my box or slide for years and I couldn't figure out why the heck did I had it for. And I want you to imagine this problem. You're zipping along here at about 8,000 feet, you're going about 500 miles an hour and you're looking out the left window and then the right, and you're looking ahead and you're trying to find out where the missile site is. Well, there are some trained features you can see here, some cultivated fields here. It looks like maybe a river going up through here where the banks have collapsed where there's fresh earth there, maybe a village here, some more cultivated fields over here. But I made it easier for you because I have readjusted the slide and I put the missile site right in the middle. And there's the missile site right there. This one happens to be unoccupied but there's launcher position, there's one there, there are six of them all around the way. And there were [Inaudible] in the area, in the center here for the van, to the radar vans and things like that.

So the point is they're not easy to find, you know, and the equipment is the best we have at the time but it's not great either. Our standoff missile, I told you we -- our majors have fired these before, you know, when we're in training. This is the AGM-45 shrike. It was a

Navy missile when the war started. We did not have any standoff missiles in the Air Force, and we got some from the Navy on loan.

But just to give you an idea of what the geometry is of trying to attack a missile site, here's the -- let's say the missile site is right there and you're coming in from up here. Here is the outside range where the guy in the ground can hit you, can shoot at you. That's about 19 miles away from the site. And you had to be sort of creative as you're flying in this area here, until you get in here. Here's where you can shoot your missile at him, seven miles. And here's where your 2.75 rockets can hit him. So it's sort of a, you know -- as I say, you have to be a little creative in there about what you're doing.

I've got a few letters from home here that I wanted to share with you, and I wrote while I was over there. Like I say, we arrived there the 4th of July, this is on the 9th of July. And it was interesting, you know, we were losing people every day. I haven't flown yet. We're getting free mail there because we're not in the combat zone. So, you know, which I always thought was interesting. We're in the O' Club, it's hot outside, 11th of July, have been there seven days now, still hadn't flown. At that time the -- they didn't really know much -- how to use the Wild Weasels. And if the weather was bad in the primary target area, usually the Wild Weasels, they just cancel them out. We didn't go on any easy sorties at that time. And this is, you know, kind of typical letter home. "Sitting around, it's getting pretty old, the weather is still hot, the club is out of meat and a lot of other things and I'm not flying. Other than that everything is just great."

Finally flew. I got my first mission, only 99 more to go, but it was a dull mission, I went to a secondary target. 14th of July, I got myself a library card today. Our first loss of our eight crews happened on the 23rd of July. Jean Pamerton, Ben Musen got hit by surface-to-air-missile. Buddy Reinbold another of our Wild Weasel pilot was flying a D-model that day, got his hand shot up really bad and holes in his arms and had 87 holes in the airplane. 5th of August, '66 I finally saw some action. "Flew a good one today. I killed two SAM sites, is up flying north -- is up north flying is the greatest." I can't believe I said that, you know. I can't believe I said that. You talk about, you know, testosterone laid in young people, you know.

Anyway, I'm going to tell you a war story here. 7th of August, 1966 was a day where we lost a record number of aircraft over North Vietnam. And it was called Black Sunday, when you still read histories from that era. We took off here from Takhli Thailand, went out over Da Nang here, up the coast, refueling with KC-135 tankers in this area. And the targets were a series of targets in here, in an area called the Northeast Railway. Very heavy defended area that went from about Hanoi here up into China. A major transportation link were a whole lot of everything, all supplies came in there, many of them came in that way.

And I took off early in the morning, flew up here. We got about here, still on the tanker, and we heard emergency beepers going off, already two airplanes had been shot down. We headed in over the coast there, picked out a surface-to-air-missile site, we launched our shrike at, we launched the missile AGM-45 and the shrike, it went off in the air with

the appropriate amount time. The weather was terrible, towering cumulus clouds, tops about 40,000 feet, probably 5/10 coverage of the area and the haze below that. So, it was not really a good weather condition to be hunting missiles sites.

We turned to go after a second missile site, and just as we turned, the site launched at us. And I, you know, I called Ed in my calmest voice and said, “Launch!” And -- no, actually I said, “We had a launch at two o’clock.” And Ed pushes the airplane over, lights the burner and down we go. And the first missile comes by and Ed pulls up and turns into it and it goes underneath it, underneath it. Second comes by just a few seconds later, and Ed managed to dodge that also again. We’re running a little bit out of airspeed, we’re getting a little bit slow now. And the third missile coming at us right out of a cloud bank, and we’re about out of maneuverability, there was just no place to go, the missile was right there and exploded and did a real job on the airplane.

Okay. Now, I’m going to ask you to help me -- I’m going to ask you to help me with the rest -- this part of the story here. I’m going to -- when I count to three I want you all to take a real deep breath and hold it and don’t let it out and don’t breathe until I tell you you can breath, okay? Can you do that? Okay. And I’m going to be telling you some stories while you're holding your breath. Okay. One, two, three. Okay. All right. So here we are in the airplane and most of the brunt of the missile side hits the gun drum of the cannon. Over a thousand rounds of 20 millimeter ammunition blew up, took the nose of the airplane off. You can see nothing through the smoke except the fire warning light which says, “Your airplane is on fire.” And the master caution light which is on also, it says, “You got something wrong with some of your system in the airplane.” And I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t want to breathe this cordite because it probably is going to do some serious damage to you lungs forever.

Okay. So keep holding your breath. Don’t let it go yet. Back here in this back panel is the auxiliary canopy jettison handle. It’s a handle that I pushed many times, and it’s got a hinge pin in the middle, you push one end and the other end comes up, you grab it, you pull up on it, the canopy goes. And that’s a good thing at this point and time because that means fresh air is going to come in. Don’t -- keep your breath in yet. I can’t find it. I cannot find it. And I really, really, really want to take a breath but I don’t dare breathe this crappiness in the air. I couldn’t find it. It’s back here. I knew it’s here, that I used to put my hand on it all the time. I couldn’t find it. Okay. I really got to take a breath. Don’t you breathe yet.

And the other way to get rid of the canopy is by rotating the ejection seat handles. And I have every intention of leaving that airplane at that moment, I thought “The heck with this, you know, there’s no point sitting here, you know, dying of asphyxiation.” So I reached down and grab hold the ejection seat handles and rotated them up. You can breathe now. The canopy goes off the aircraft. When you rotate the handles in the F-105 it does -- it’s a two position thing, you rotate the handles, the seat bottoms out, the canopy goes and the seat is armed, ready to go. And then a trigger sort of flaps loose from the ejection seat, and you got to actually rotate the handles up and you open hands and grab the triggers, squeeze it. And I was half way through that process of grabbing those

triggers and squeezing it and somebody said, “Well, well, you better think about this for minute.”

And I looked around and, of course, the smoke had all gone out, the fire warning light had gone out. You can look out and, you know, you saw blue sky out there and a few white puffy clouds over here and, you know, everything really seemed pretty good there. So, anyway -- the first thing you want to do in that circumstances, I decided it was a mistake awhile longer, is in a two seat airplane, first thing you want to do is find out if you’re by yourself or not. So, I went to the call position on the intercom box and I said, “Ed, are you there?” And Ed said, “Yeah. Mike, are you there?” And which only goes to show you that there’s some proof to the theory that testosterone makes you stupid. Anyway, Ed said, “I’m going to try to get us out of here.” So there we are with an open cockpit airplane, doing about 340 knots. Ed headed out towards the coast and, you know, life is good.

So, I just stayed there. I looked out, there’s a huge hole in the leading edge of the left wing, top of the tail had been taken off, but at least the fire warning light was out. We head out towards the coast and we go across the place called Camp Pha. Camp Pha is on the coast, there’s iron mines there. There’s also an antiaircraft gunnery school there. So as we’re heading out towards or getting closer to coast and I said, “Ed, they’re shooting at us” and there was a big circle of Black 57 millimeter flak, probably a thousand yards back. And I said, “I got it.” And the second burst of 57 millimeter flak was probably about 500 yards back. Third burst went right off into aircraft and jolted the aircraft pretty hard.

At that time our wingman joined up. We had lost our wingman when we were dogging the first surface-to-air-missiles. It’s really hard to do formation in the same evasive maneuver, you know. Usually it’s sort of every man for himself and try to join up later. Well, Pete Pitman was our wingman at the time and he joined up -- he slid under us and probably had about 100 knot overtake, you know, so he slid under us and he slid way out here, and the flak started tracking him out. Well, you know, it was good for us because it would have hammered us there for sure. The controls went out about that time, we had just crossed over the coast, and the controls went slack. And Ed said, “Well, you know, we need to get out of here.” So I went ahead and bailed out and he bailed out about -- probably about three of four seconds later. Got under the canopy in the airplane, looked out and saw the airplane spiraling down and it was -- the airplane was down about 3,000 feet and it blew up. So the fire warning light had gone out but obviously there was a fire still burning in there, you know, so it blew up before it hit the ground. Good thing we got out of it when we did.

It was interesting. I was really pretty proud of the way I was handling everything. You have a survival kit attached to you, and I pulled the handle on the survival kit and the kit fell down. It’s got about one inch white nylon cord or tape that goes from you to the survival kit and then another extension that goes from the survival kit to your one-man raft. So you got everything you need in there. I pulled -- I release the survival kit and I looked at the handle and I thought, “You know, that will make a dandy souvenir, you

know." And I put it in my G-suit pocket and it's hanging on the wall back home. And all that's left of aircraft 358, by the way.

But anyway, I was pretty calm and cocky that I was remembering everything that I learned at survival school, you know. And I thought, "Okay" you know, and I took my radio out. I had a, you know, I had a couple -- we all had -- both carried, we all carried survival radios in our survival vest. So I pulled it out, was listening to the rescue going on, you know, enjoying my first parachute ride, and it was really cool. And I went over to my mind about all the stuff that we're supposed to do about landing in the water because you know it was going to be a water landing. And I remember that, okay, the raft hits the water first because it's the lowest thing. And then you pull on your risers to where your -- got your face into the wind and when you're feet hit the water you release your canopy so it blows off away from you and doesn't drown you. And I thought, "Gilroy, you're cooler than John Wayne. I mean, you know, you're really doing great here."

So down we go when the raft hits the water, my feet hit the water, I released the canopy. Now I'm going to count to three again and I want you to hold you breathe again. Are you ready? One, two, three. Okay, hold your breath. Don't breathe now. And I'm sinking like a rock. For the second time today I'm going to ran out of air. I'm sinking like a rock, you know, I've got boots on, I've got G-suit, you know, which has got flares, I've got a big buck general hunting knife, I got my pistol, I've got flares, I've got baby water bottles and I've got survival radios, and I'm really, really, really heavy and I am sinking like a stone. I have forgotten to inflate my life preserver, My May West, you know. Okay. Well, it ought to be an easy problem to fix. Don't breathe yet. And because there are two plastic tabs, one here and one on this side and you want them, if you can just find one and pull it. One is the CO2 cartridge and one side is enough to inflate the whole thing. I couldn't find it, could not find it. And I'm still going down and I'm probably 30 feet underwater this time. And I really, really, really want to take a breath. And, you know, that -- and I just know that if I do I'm dead, I'm going to drown right there. And I can't find the thing, you know, they had shifted somehow during the bail out or something. I could not find them.

I was just about ready to take the biggest breath of salt water in my life when the one inch nylon cord just shows right up in front of my face. I grabbed that thing and I pulled myself up and I jump in the raft. You can breathe now. Jumped in the life raft and had about 30 seconds of self criticism that maybe I wasn't as cool as John Wayne after all. And anyway, I was in there in raft and it was safe. I pulled up the survival kit to see what was in there. There's supposed to be a lot of things in the survival kit. You're supposed to have a 22 Hornet Rifle, you know, in pieces, you know, the stock that you can put together, you know, that go, you know, hunt antelope or deer or something like that. You're supposed to have food, you know, pemmican and all sorts of good things to eat. You're supposed to have a can of water, a couple of extra radio was supposed to be in there, survival manual that you can read, you know, what to do when sharks are coming after you. You're supposed to have shark repellant in there and sea dye marker and all sorts of good things. I pulled up my survival kit, I opened the lid and there are two pair of black wool socks in there, that's it. I said, "Everything else had been stolen out of the

survival kit. Two pair of black old socks, I guess whoever stole the stuff didn't know what to do with black old socks when it's 95 degrees out and the humidity is 95."

So anyway, I threw that back over the side. We all carry plastic baby bottles with water in, you know, as our own personal waters, you know. So I took one of those out and drank it and got the radio out and was listening to what was going, and things were looking up again. About three or four foot swells in the water, I couldn't see my pilot, he was probably a hundred yards away or less but I couldn't see him because of the swells. And we're in the water for about an hour and a half, and here comes an HU-16 out of Da Nang. Now, I didn't know it was an HU-16 out of Da Nang. I knew it was an HU-16 and this is -- this is deceptive here because this one that says United States Air Force on the side.

So anyway this HU-16 comes in and I can hear them on the radio, picking Ed up and I don't -- I haven't set off my flare yet to let them know where I was. As soon as they picked him up I'll light my flare. And they said, "Okay, I see you. We see the other guy. We see the other pilot." I did not take exception to the fact that they were calling me a pilot. I thought to myself, "It'd be nice to be rescued anyway." Now, here comes the HU-16 over and it's camouflaged, and all our planes are camouflaged over there but they still had a star in there and they still said U.S. Air Force. This was camouflaged but it didn't have any of this U.S. Air Force stuff on there. And I was saying to myself, "You know, this is probably some commie trick of some sort." But what had happened I found out later was that the -- it was a new arrival airplane, it had gone into the paint shop, you know, to get its, you know, the Southeast Asia paint job on it. And they had to put it on the schedule because they needed an airplane, so they pulled it out before they finished the paint job.

So here comes this HU-16 taxing up with no markings, and I thought, "I don't know who's -- what country does this airplane belongs to." And in the door is an oriental in a wet suit. And I reached for my pistol and this little kid shouts, "Don't shoot! I'm Hawaiian!" So anyway, we get in the airplane, this is Ed in the raft, this was taken out of the pilot's window of him there. He swears that's me and I swear I'm bright enough not to have my hands on the water in the South China Sea that has a highest density of poisonous sea snakes of any place in the world. But that was Ed, and that picture made the front page of the New York Times, I believe.

Ed is badly damaged when he got in the airplane. He had back trouble before but the seat of the -- the ejection seat of the 105 hits you with 18 instantaneous G's. So, if you're a 200 pound person you've got 3,600 pound weight on your -- immediately on your spine. And hardly anybody does that without getting a compression fracture of some kind. And I got a compression fracture too, T-13, I think, or T-14. But at that time I weighed about 170 pounds so, you know, it was a minor damage compared to Ed's. Ed never got to fly ejection seat aircraft again. He went -- flew C-47's after that.

But we got rescued and went back to Da Nang. The rest of the day wasn't good. The two that got shot down before is John Wendell and Will Gideons were Prisoners of War. Ed

and I were the only rescued. About 15 minutes past us Bob Sandvick, Tom Pyle, another Weasel crew went down just on the outskirts of Kep Airfield. Charlie Fryer and Dick Moran were Navy pilots who were shot down that day. And Mike Brazel from the 354 was shut down shortly after us. Excuse me. Pardon me.

An interesting day -- it was a record for the most losses, you know, for quite a while. The next day was just as bad. The next day we lost our operations officer in the 354 Attack Fighter Squadron. And some of you may know him, Jim Kessler. Jim Kessler was our -- was a major. He's the only the guy, I think, that received three awards at the Air Force Cross. Jim was a very aggressive guy. He was a B-17 or a B-29 gunner in World War II, was a Korean War ace and, I like I said, was our operations officer. We lost another Wild Weasel aircraft in the 12th August, Davis and Metcalf they both got out okay but the airplane was definitely damaged. Joe Brown and Don Singer were shot down during road wrecking, another Weasel crew on the 17th. And after 45 days of being there, over 16 people four were dead, three were wounded, and two were prisoners of war. Not a very auspicious start but the problem of losses are just as high in the squadron. This is the 354 Attack Fighter Squadron. One of the three squadrons at Takhli at this time, it was also the 333rd and 357th.

It says 21 aircraft lost. Does anybody know how many airplanes a fighter squadron usually has? Twenty-four, twenty-four. Twenty-four aircrafts, so okay, here, you know, July to December we've lost 21, okay? Seven pilots or electronic warfare officers were killed, nine were prisoners of war, eight were rescued, we've lost two squadron commanders and an ops officer during that time. And these figures are slightly misleading because as I said, of the ones that are rescued not all of them are fit for duty, you know, some of them, you know, can't fly jets anymore because of the ejection sequence.

The wing was a little -- not quite as bad, and as I said, there were three squadrons, you know, the wing lost 40 aircraft during this time, 13 pilots or EWOs were killed, 16 guys were POW's and 14 rescued. Now, that was pretty bad, but I'll tell you, the reason -- I think the reason that the losses were so high at that time crew fatigue, I think, really played a major part on that, you know, that -- you know, you went up and you know you had these high-stress situations that you went through, high doses of adrenaline, came back. Blew off some steam at the bar with a few drinks, went back, you know, got an hour or two of sleep, you know, with engines running which is not very rational. And I think eventually that accumulates and, you know, you're just a little bit slower in your reflex or your decision making process isn't quite as sharp as it should be.

But anyway, I want to fast forward now a few months to another mission on 10th of March, 1967. And this time we have a lot of better leadership. I've known the 354 Squadron. We had good guys leading us before but a guy by name of Phil Gast came in there and -- or before we'd fly the morning sortie we go to the bar and we drink all day. Phil said, "No, we're going to do a lot of stateside piloting stuff." So, you know, we're going to have -- my extra -- you know, everybody got extra duties. I was a maintenance liaison officer, I was a public affairs officer, and probably couple of other jobs in there.

And so I had a job to do when I got back from flying, you know, I had to go do this job and we all gripped about it because, you know, what the heck kind of a deal is this, you know, but it kept us out of the bars and it got us a lot sharper.

We had new quarters, a place called -- the guys called La Ponderosa down by the main gate were built, nice brick quarters, air-conditioned, way far away from the flight line, the hooches were all closed in on the sides and air-conditioned so, you know, it was -- you know, you can go in there at ten o'clock in the morning and it was dark and it was cool, and they were silent proof so you can, you know, you can go in and sleep. The food and the weapon shortages are solved and we -- and I guess one of the important things too is we had enough experience crews at that time that we could train the new guys coming in, you know. We didn't have to send them to Hanoi the first day by themselves, we can take them as a, you know, to group package one or we can put them on our wing and, you know, let them get a little experience that way.

But this is a group I'm going to talk about here, on the 10th of March '67, it's 354 Attack Fighter Squadron. The target on this particular day was the Thai Nguyen Steel Mill, and it's right about there where my shaking hand is pointing, right about north of Hanoi. There's north eastern railway but I said -- told you, you know, went up northeast towards China, there was a northern railway that went directly north and that's were the Thai Wind Steel Mill. General Momyer VII, the four-star generals in charge of seventh air force, in his memoirs wrote about the defenses in North Vietnam and singled out some that were worst than others. The Hanoi Rail Yard, the VF3, Thai Wind Steel Mill were three of the ones that he mentioned very, very, very heavily defended area.

The 354th Attack Fighter Squadron commander, Phil Gast, was leading the mission that day, as well as leading the flight to east, the flaks suppression flights. The Weasel flight was made up of Dave Everson and Joe Lunam as lead, Bill Heft as the wingman number two, Bill Heft was a KC-135 co-pilot who had been put into a fighter which is a pretty common thing at that time. Merlyn Dethlefsen and I, Merl is my third pilot at that time as number three. And Ken Bell as number four. Ken Bell was on the wing staff, we're all captains and he was a major. He was going to give us a Stand Eval while we are on this mission. Good luck with that, huh?

So, we take off and we head on up. From Takhli, we refuel over Laos, go up over here and turn about here, turn on head south, heading towards the steel mill. We just head south and we're about 8,000 feet and we're descending for some reason. And we're down 6,000 feet and I called Merl, I said, "We're getting way too low." And we're down to 5,000, 4,000 feet. And I said, "Merl, we've got to pull up, we're too low." Merl is a, you know, a indoctrinated wingman, you know, he believes in following his leader, you know, if the leader goes in the mountain, you know, the rest of the flight goes in the mountain. I didn't go to pilot school, I went to Electronic Warfare Officer school, and they didn't teach us that. So, anyway -- and then we heard two beepers and that was our -- Dave Everson and Joe Lunam had been hit and bail out almost immediately. They have been hit actually a little back further but we didn't know. When we started the decent they have been hit at that time.

So anyway, they bail out. We got two beepers, the strike force is probably 15 minutes to the target still. Bill Heft calls, “I’m hit really bad. I’ve got to, you know, get out of here.” Merl and I take over and Merl tells Bill Heft to join up -- somebody coming off the target and go home with them. And we head on in trying to attack the missile site which is guarding the area, which is just south of the steel mill. I line Merl left on the radar and we fire a GM-45 at it, and it doesn’t do anything, it doesn’t hit anything. I’ve taken him over the target, over the SAM site and he said, “I can’t see it, I can’t see it.” So, I said, “Give me another run in.” He turns around, goes back to the right, comes back in. The second run was way too short, you know, I need more time. The equipment that you have lines you up an azimuth so it doesn’t give you -- the ranges are very iffy thing, you know. On the receiver you have in the back seat, when you go over the site, those, you know, you can -- two strobe lights. They’ll drop maybe an 1/8 or 1/4 of an inch and then pop back up. And if you’re not really, really looking at it, you’ll never see us. So, you know, finding exactly -- go over the site is pretty hard to do.

Second run was too short. I said, “Merl I need a longer run.” So we went out to the south of the target, turn back in and we start heading back in. We’re out of the flak area, the flak is ahead us. A flight of four, MiG-17’s comes in on us. And as we enter the flak, they’re not having any part of that, they pull off and we go into the flak. And that about -- that is the worst flak I think I’ve ever seen. And a lot of the guys who flew in World War II, you know, said that’s the worst flight they’ve ever seen. For those of you that have never, you know, been in that situation, if you’ve been in a real big hailstorm, you know, when the hail is hitting the roof or maybe -- or even under a corrugated steel roof where the hail is hitting, that’s what it sounds like. I mean the stuff was just, you know, rattling off the aircraft, you know, and some was not rattling off the aircraft, some was making holes in the aircraft, and really heavy stuff.

Anyway, we went through and we made our second homing run. The MiGs broke off. The flaks suppression flight with Phil Gast and his crew were just coming off the target, and Max Brestel was his wingman, they – the flight of four MiG-17’s is there and they’re coming off and they’re, you know, the MiG-17’s are turning there. And Max arms up the gun and shoots down one and, you know, he’s on the radio. Max is a very excitable guy, he swore this not true story, but I know this is a true story. He’s on the radio and he said, “I got a MiG, I got a MiG!” And Phil Gast was not the -- the mission commander was not one for, you know, loose talk in the radio, and he said, “Shut up and get another one” and he did, you know, he did. The only dual MiG kill from an F-105 with a gun in the war, you know, really well done. So, Gast got a MiG too.

Anyway, we couldn’t find those SAM site that time. I said, “Let’s try another run in, Merl.” And we went back and there was a function on the equipment that you call -- I know it was called manual gate that you could go to and you can lock your receiver in the back seat up on one signal, and one signal only. And it was made for making training runs at Hawthorn, Nevada or something like that. So anyway, for the fourth run I locked the receiver into that and sat there and we drove in until we’re back into the flak again, MiGs jumped us again and went off. And we finally went it and on the fourth run found

the missile site, bombed it. And in the meantime we did not know but Ken Bell, our number four who is our wingman, had taken a hit and later on was hanging down, and so can make left turns and not right turns, but he hung in there and didn't say anything.

We got off target and went back and recovered at [Inaudible] . And this is the picture of the airplane at that time. This picture was taken by a good friend of mine, Joe Klein, an aviation artist. And I said, "Joe, we need more flak" you know, but he was pretty proud of the airplane that he painted so he didn't want to put in more flak on there. The steel mill was a good mission. Most of you have heard Pardo's Push, you know, Bob Pardo when he -- his airplane was shot up and his wingman too. And he had his wingman drop his tailhook and pushed them out. That happened on this mission. That happened about half an hour after we left.

Merl Dethlefsen received the Medal of Honor, Max Brestel got two MiG kills, Phil Gast, got one, so it was a pretty good mission. Driving me home, you know, we got home, we landed and debriefed at one of the F-4 bases, and then we're cleared for one-time flight to get our airplane home to Takhli. That was about last of my exciting missions in April. This tall good looking guy here is me. That's landing after my 100 missions. Bob Scott, our wing commander, Phil Gast there with my 100 mission flight suit, Merl Dethlefsen. I'm the happiest guy there because I don't have to fly anymore. And -- but they all -- and my nice flying boots there, you know, elephant height flying boots.

I had the Wild Weasel stencil on my shorts, you know, you changed put on your flight suit. And that's the end of my war stories but I had some observations to make. And I know a lot of you guys are former military guys or former Air Force. These are some of observations that came to me after this whole thing was over, you know. That's your -- pursue it there. The first one there is that, you know, you always have leadership in an organization but it always comes from the top, you know, the guy with eagles, you know, who has a wing commander position or the DO position or whatever, even some squadron commanders, you know, aren't always the real great combat leaders. We had first lieutenants not too long out of the Air Force Academy who are probably better mission leads than some of the more senior people. And we always had people that stood up and do a good job but it isn't always the leaders. It isn't always the guys that have a title of leaders.

And the bravest people don't always come out of the war with the most medals, you know. We have guys -- I've read some write ups on some guys that would come down and after every mission they write themselves up for a Distinguished Flying Cross, you know, or if they got shot at they write themselves up for a Silver Star. But most guys wouldn't do that, you know, they would not -- they didn't give a damn about that, you know, you'd like to have maybe one for your Mess Dress you know. But beyond -- but like I say, there are a whole lot of people that come out of there, you know, and you read their resume and, boy, they all sound like they're just really some hot stuff -- not so.

The best combat leaders don't always wind up as generals. We had, in the Wild Weasel Program, we're pretty lucky, you know, with the generals. We had Chuck Horner made

four stars. Joe Rolston, Vice Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, made four stars. Dick Myers made Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, all Wild Weasel experience guys. But, you know, a lot of the mission leaders, Billy Sparks, you know, we're talking about Billy the other night, you know, if you really wanted a combat leader who could inspire people to go do great things and then take you up there and do that, you know, the kind of guy who would charge hell with a bucket of ice water, you know, these weren't the guys that the Air Force really appreciated, you know, they weren't shiny enough or they weren't polite enough or, you know, they stood around and scratch themselves or something and all that, you can't have that. So, you know, the right guys don't always get the top. You don't always your combat leader, you know, you get something -- in a lot of cases, that's a combination of business manager and a little bit of leader and something like that thrown in. A lot of that is self -- [Inaudible] don't always have the reason to do so.

And I'm a little embarrassed about putting this in at the end about fighter pilots but I have been -- yeah, I am right. I had -- when I first was associated with fighter pilots, and I spent most of my time after Takhli in fighters, the, you know, these people were arrogant, you know, they were cocky, self righteous, know-it-all's, they always wanted the prettiest girl when we went to the bar, you know, there was little redeeming social value, you know. But they turned out to be just splendid people, you know, people who were, you know, proud to be associated with in times, like I said, you know, about Billy Sparks charging hell with a bucket of ice water, these guys, true man, would do that. So anyway, those are my observations, I mean, you know, I'll take credit for them, you know, you don't actually have to agree with them.

So that's it. That's the end of my story.