

The Son Tay Prisoner of War Search and Rescue Operation

*MIG CAP Mission Flown by Major Jimmy C. Pettyjohn, USAF.
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On 21 November 1970 while assigned to the 555th Tactical Fighter Squadron of the 432nd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing I participated in a very significant mission which was attempting to rescue American Prisoners of War which were being held in a North Vietnam prison camp in the city of Son Tay. The following narrative is a description of the details of my experience and participation in that rescue mission.

It must be noted that not only were the details of the mission highly classified and closely protected, but the fact of the mission was equally highly classified. There were only a very few people in the entire world who knew the purpose and details of the mission. Even many of us who participated in the mission knew nothing of its purpose until after the mission had been completed. (There are a number of books and articles which provide a detailed history of the entire mission, from inception to planning and to execution. They are worth reading.)

The day of the mission I had reported to my squadron operations building to prepare for a mission to which I had been assigned the previous day. My mission that day was to sit on a mission designated as a "Quick Reaction Force" (QRF). We were to preflight our aircraft and have everything prepared to launch on very short notice to wherever we might be needed. After I had finished the preflight and returned to the squadron operations I was approached by my Operations Officer and informed that I had been released from that mission and that I was to return to my quarters for "crew rest" and to return to the squadron later that night for a different mission. He said that he could provide me no details about the new mission but that I would be briefed that night.

I returned to my quarters and attempted to get some sleep but it was impossible as I was so curious and anxious about the new mission. I finally went to the officers club to have some late lunch and then returned to my quarters. I still could not sleep and although it seemed like forever the time finally came (1700 hours) to report back to the squadron. Upon returning to operations we still were not briefed on the mission at all but instructed to preflight our aircraft and then report back into operations.

Our squadron was equipped with F-4D Phantoms which could be configured with a number of different munitions loads and mixes of munitions. Upon arriving at my assigned aircraft it was immediately apparent that the mission was going to be something different or unusual. The aircraft was loaded with a large fuselage fuel tank as well as additional external wing fuel tanks with the only armament being the Aim-9 and Aim-7 missiles. We also were loaded with an electronic countermeasures pod.

When we had finished our preflight and returned to operations we were then given the mission briefing by the Wing Operations and Wing Intelligence staffs.. The briefing was very short but precise. We were only given a route profile to be flown, but the route was excitingly different than any other mission I had ever flown before. We were going up over Hanoi, North Vietnam to

fly a MIG CAP for some operation that we knew nothing about and were even then not told anything about who or what we were providing the CAP for. However, the key and exciting thing was that the rules of engagement, as the term “MIG CAP” implies we were going to be free to go into MIG territory and engage the MIGs if they became airborne for any reason.

The mission briefing did provide the following details. We were a force of 10 primary F-4s with two airborne spares. We were to fly in pairs of two so that we could establish two different orbits, one to the north of Hanoi and one just to the west of Hanoi. The concept was to establish a “race track” pattern in each orbit with one aircraft going north bound on one track with the other going south on his track. This was designed to allow each aircraft to protect the other aircrafts six o’clock position. We were also briefed on all of the normal mission details, i.e. headings, altitude, air speed, radio frequencies, rules of engagement etc. We were scheduled to get an airborne refueling on the way in, after proceeding from the tanker we were to arrive at a turn point south of Hanoi and by that time we had burned all of the fuel from the center line tank so we were to jettison it.

We were scheduled to depart Udorn at specified intervals in order to establish the continuous orbit coverage throughout the mission. When it came time for my departure we were informed that one of the primary aircraft had a ground abort and that we were to move up and fill in that position. We departed as directed and proceeded to the tanker orbit for our refueling. After coming off the tanker I proceeded toward the turn point, while doing so I selected the center line tank and when it was empty, I then jettisoned the tank and soon started to make the 45-degree left turn to proceed to the orbit track.

Almost immediately after making the left turn my RHAW gear begin to get indications that Early Warning Radar was tracking us. My radar scope indicated that it was at about the 2 o’clock position at about 30 to 35 miles. Soon afterwards my radar warning instruments indicated that the SAM radar (Fan Song) acquisition was tracking us. Very quickly the SAM “lock-on” light came on. The position from our aircraft was still at about our 3 o’clock. At that time I lit my afterburners and started picking up airspeed quickly (we were in a very clean configuration so the airplane responded well.) As I was doing this I got a SAM launch light and I heard radio calls calling out SAMs. I pushed the nose over and kept the afterburners lit and was picking up airspeed very quickly. At the same time all of this was happening I saw the plume of fire from the launched SAM. I am not sure what my airspeed was at this time because I had been watching the SAM. But being in a dive with the afterburners lit I know that I was over Mach 1. (Maybe 1.1 or 1.2) As the SAM appeared to turn toward us I started a very hard right climbing turn back in that direction. I am not sure how many Gs I was pulling because I was focused on the outside. (But when we landed back at Udorn after the mission I saw that the G meter was pegged at 8.5. Whether it reached that point in that turn or the next turn I don’t know.) I watched the SAM as it passed on by us but it was well outside our turn.

As I reached the top of the climbing turn and saw the SAM pass by I pulled the throttles out of afterburner and rolled the aircraft inverted so I could look outside toward the ground and have a clear view of the surrounding area. (I have to admit to committing what could have been a fatal error because as I reached the top of my hard climbing turn I noticed that I had let my airspeed drop to about 290 – 300 knots. This is a real “no – no” when you’re in a high SAM threat area.) As I did this I saw the second SAM launch so I rolled back over, lit the afterburners again and started down. We went through essentially the same maneuver again—lots of airspeed, turning hard and climbing back in the direction of the SAM. The results were about the same. The SAM cleared us by quite a bit. This time as I reached the peak of my climb and leveled off I saw a salvo of three SAMs being fired. I started to push over again but I saw that the SAMs were just going straight up, they didn’t look like they were being guided, they were just going ballistic-- straight up. I watched them some and then my eyes caught the flash of three more SAMs being launched. I doubt that they were all from the same SAM site but that was of little concern. The radio waves were full of lots of aircraft transmissions calling out SAM launch warnings. (It is my belief that as the SAM sites started firing the F-105s started putting weapons on the SAM sites and it caused the SAM crews to panic and just salvo off their missiles with no ability to guide them so they were just going ballistic.)

After I saw the last three SAMs that I was watching going straight up another flash of fire caught my eye. This was an airborne flash not a ground based SAM launch flame. I heard radio calls about a SAM hit and I was sure that what I had just seen was in fact the hit. But because of all the radio chatter at the time I couldn’t really be sure what was happening and where. But what I did know was that I had to head back to base in a hurry because I had used my afterburners so much that I was “bingo” fuel minus some 400-500 pounds. (Which meant I could not get back to Udorn without hitting a tanker.)

I thought I heard a call from Firebird 3 (one of the F-105s) saying that he had just taken a SAM hit. A few minutes later I learned that it was actually Firebird 5 which had gotten hit. He said that the aircraft was still flyable and that he was headed back into Laos. I told him that I would try to close on him and look him over and escort him out. He said that he didn’t seem to have taken a direct hit but rather the proximity fuse of the missile must have detonated the missile and shrapnel got him. I guess that it ruptured a fuel tank because he said he was losing fuel fast. At that time I had a radar lock on him and told him I was closing a little but I had to conserve as much fuel as I could because I was running very low myself.

In the meantime as all of this was being reported to command elements they made the decision to bring the KC-135 Tanker off his orbit and head him toward us and hope for a hookup before we ran out of fuel. A few minutes afterwards Firebird 5 said that he didn’t think they could make it to the tanker. GCI was keeping us advised of our relative positions—i.e., “Tanker is 12 o’clock at 80 miles, -- Tanker is 12’o clock at 60 miles, etc. Sometime during all of this exchange Firebird 5 said that if they flamed out, and he was sure they were going to, that they would ride it down to 18-20,000 feet and bail out. Shortly thereafter they did flame out and he called again

saying they had flamed out but that they would ride it on down to what I believe he said was 15,000 feet. (It was garbled somewhat, and I am not quite sure of my understanding of that transmission; however, I am sure of the next two transmissions. One, was he said, "Tell the guys back home that it was a SAM that got us." I said to him, "Roger that, I think I saw it when it hit you or immediately afterwards." His last transmission was "Well we're ready to go—Bravo is gone, Alfa is going."

At this time GCI advised me that the tanker was 12 o'clock at 20 miles and had started a 180 degree turn in front of us. I was cleared to tanker frequency and as I contacted them they were rolling out in front of us. A great sight!!!! We were running on fumes. We hooked up and got refueled and after we dropped off the tanker I switched to SAR radio frequency and found out that both pilots from Firebird 5 were on the ground in good shape and in radio contact with the SAR commander. (I later learned that the decision was made to wait for first light to go in and pick them up, which they did, and they picked them up and took them to Udorn.) I offered to stay on site for cover but was advised that other Falcon F-4s were already in position and that I was cleared to return to base. As I started back toward Udorn I had switched back to GCI frequency and shortly thereafter I was advised by GCI that they had a bogey coming from the north and they turned us around and gave us a heading for an intercept. I turned back north and armed my air-to-air missiles and we tried to get a radar lock on to any possible targets. Soon afterwards GCI advised that the incoming target was actually one of our F-4s, so I was turned back around and was cleared to return to base.

While returning to base I heard a radio transmission which said, "We got them all out". By this time I had begun to get some idea of what we were doing and what was going on. When I heard that call I got a real excited feeling that we had in fact done some sort of rescue. But I was mistaken because the call was referring to the fact that they had been successful in getting all the special forces guys out who had been inserted for the rescue.

After landing we went to Wing intelligence to debrief the mission and after the debriefing I was walking down a small corridor which was rather dimly lit and I came face to face with an Army Colonel who was dressed in full combat battle dress and he looked at me (I still had all my flight gear on) and said, "Did you just land major?", and I said, " yes sir I did". He then asked "Were you up north?" I again said "Yes sir I was." Just at that moment another officer walked up and said something I did not hear, to the Colonel who had been talking to me, and the Colonel said to him, "Someone stood up in front of me, so I just shot the son of a bitch." I later learned that the Colonel that had been talking to me was the Ground Commander of the Son Tay Raiders---Colonel Bull Simons"