

## **Phu Cat F-4 Crewman Saves Wounded Pilot**

18 February 1970 (Contributed by Norman Malayney)

Quick reaction and cool thinking under enemy fire by a crew member of the 37th Tactical Fighter Wing resulted in saving a multi-million dollar aircraft and the life of the aircraft commander (AC) who was wounded and incapacitated in the front seat of the stricken aircraft.

Capt. Ronald E. Stein, an F-4 Phantom crewman assigned to the 480<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron was flying in the rear pilot position of an F-4 aircraft on a combat mission when it was struck by enemy ground fire. A hit destroyed the aircraft's windscreen and front canopy, seriously wounding Col. Donald M. Sorlie, 37<sup>th</sup> TFW Deputy Commander for Operations, who was flying as the aircraft commander and flight leader of the mission.

**According to Capt Stein:** Our flight had been assigned to strike a confirmed enemy location. After reaching the target area, both our aircraft made one pass each, with neither of us receiving any ground fire. We had just rolled in to make our second pass when we took the hit.

The first thing I remember after the explosion was feeling a blast of air and bits of Plexiglas and the front rear-view mirror coming back on me from the front cockpit. I had my visor down so my sight was not hampered. As far as I could determine, I hadn't been wounded.

I could tell the plane was not controlled from the front seat by the way the control column was moving around loosely. I looked at the control panel and saw the eject light was on. At about this time, it dawned on me the AC might have been ejected. I grabbed the controls and started to bring the aircraft out of its dive and away from the area, so I could safely eject.

I remember leveling out at about 1,000 feet with a clear view of the trees below us. Looking more closely into the front of the aircraft, I could see some movement. It turned out to be Col. Sorlie's hand, which I think he raised to let me know he was still up front. I found out later our intercom had been taken out by the hit.

Not immediately knowing how bad the aircraft was hit, or how serious the colonel's condition was, and thinking we might still have to eject, I headed for the coast to get away from the target area and out over the water for a wet ejection.

I finally got the aircraft up to 15,000 feet and then had to cut back on power because both engines had started to fluctuate. We couldn't stay up there with the power cut back, so I started a slow descent and was about to hold at 10,000 feet. Since the aircraft was no longer pressurized, this was a better altitude to be at anyway, should either of us lose our oxygen masks.

After pulling out, I found out I did have radio contact with the number two aircraft in our flight, which was flown by Maj. Gary G. Fulghum Jr. and Capt. Richard R. Strunk. They told me they had seen us take the hit and they were going to get rid of their bombs and catch up with us to give a closer look and to escort us to the coast.

I had been squawking “Mayday” and giving position reports throughout so when I got to the coast, two F-4s from the 12<sup>th</sup> TFW at Cam Ranh Bay AB joined up with me and started to check us over. They told me we looked okay except for the windscreen and canopy being shot away.

They informed me they would try to get us to Chu Lai Air Field, which was the nearest air strip. They also informed me at this time that we still had ordnance hung on us. Evidently, the bomb release system had been damaged because we couldn't get rid of the bombs

We finally arrived over Chu Lai at 1500 feet. However, to further complicate matters, the weather was overcast with rain and three miles visibility. We started to fly a ground control approach (GCA) pattern at this time. I still couldn't talk to Col. Sorlie, but the crewmen in the other aircraft thought they could see him moving. They couldn't tell, though, if it was from the wind buffeting him.

We decided he might be conscious—which turned out to be the case-- and by somehow showing him we were going to attempt a landing, he should try to get the gear down, since this is normally done from the front seat. One of the other aircraft at this point flew and held a position directly in front and slightly above us while lowering his landing gear and tail hook.

We started to make our final approach and the GCA controller told us we were two miles out and high and on the glide path. However, I still couldn't see the runway. At a mile out, I finally picked out the strip and saw we were going in high. We were doing about 180 knots, when I finally touched down on the runway, hitting the first barrier arresting system and going through it. We engaged the second one and that brought us to a halt.

On stopping, the first thing I did was to open the canopy and get up front to check on the colonel and shut down the engine, since this also has to be done from the front seat.

By this time emergency personnel were all over the plane and medics were lifting the colonel, who was conscious, out through the hole in his canopy. They put him on a stretcher; cut his “G” suit and flying gear off, working on him as they took him away. I accompanied them to the hospital in the helicopter. I think the biggest thing for me at this point, was that I knew he was still alive.

I think our wing men and the crew in the other two aircraft did a great job of assisting us.