

Updated Information on 12th TFW Deaths

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The author flew as aircraft commander, instructor pilot, maintenance test pilot and flight leader from March 29, 1966 until departure from SEA on January 7, 1967. The below mentioned crashes occurred in Florida, Okinawa and @ Cam Ranh Bay, Republic of Vietnam. His comments are on fatal crashes where he has corrections or additions to the information supplied in the 12th TFW listing. His thanks go to those who created the listing and to those who have added to it over the years.

4 June, 1963: Richard Gibson @ MacDill AFB, Tampa, Florida

The above listing of the death of Richard Gibson was prior to my arrival to MacDill, so I am unaware of its veracity. However, there is no mention of another Gibson who was killed in January, 1964. I think his name was Bob Gibson, but I can't be sure of his first name. Gibson was flying an F-84 for the 559th TFS out of MacDill.

I was driving down the Florida Peninsula enroute to report to MacDill to fly the F-4C out of pilot training. I believe it was January 9, 1964, but am only sure that it was in early January. I was driving through Ocala, Florida when they broke into a news report on the car radio to say that a plane out of MacDill had crashed just to the east of Ocala. He went down in a severe thunderstorm.

When I reported to MacDill, I was assigned to the 559th. A month after I arrived, the squadron had a ceremony for Elsie Gibson, his widow. The circumstances of his death were hidden from Elsie. He survived the ejection but seriously injured his leg. He pulled himself up to a tree, in the rain, and sat against it, awaiting rescue. Javalinas found him, alerted to the scent of his bloody leg. They killed him and partially devoured him.

On May 5th of 1965, I ejected from an F-4 in almost the same spot, just to the east of Ocala.

24 May, 1965: Larry Morrow and Quint Lusby @ Naha Air Base, Okinawa (558th)

Quint was one of five of us assigned to the F-4H, later re-designated the F-4C, out of pilot training at Laredo AB. He was with the 558th that proceeded the 559th to Naha. The following was provided by Chuck "Jag" Jaglinski who was with the 558th in Okinawa: in his words "as I remember it, it was at night and they had just completed a GCA (approach) cancelled IFR, and went around VFR and were lost on downwind. Cause was vertigo. That was a long time ago, but since Quint was the first close friend I lost, it has stuck with me". My information was that they hit about 9 miles from the end of the runway.

25 October, 1965: Del Dyer and Bob Harlan @ Naha AB, Okinawa (559th)

That night, six planes from the 559th were assigned to fly night training missions. Four of us, including myself, flew night in-flight refueling missions, while two planes were assigned night, low-level intercept training. It was a terrible night to fly with rough weather. Capt. Gary Smith, our briefing officer, warned of the dangerous weather.

Intercept control was from the Navy blockhouse on Okinawa. They lost contact with Del while the two aircraft were flying at 3,000 feet. It is suspected that they just did not pay attention to the radar altimeter. No evidence of the crash was ever found.

26 May, 1966: Terry Griffey and Gary Glandon @ Cam Ranh Bay (391st)

Terry and I were close friends, having been the only backseaters who had been upgraded to Aircraft Commander who were then-flying at Cam Ranh. He and I were classmates from the Air Academy, where Terry had been starting guard on our undefeated 1958 football team.

It was suspected that they had premature ignition of the Snake Eyes they were carrying, but it was later discovered that Capt. Solis, flying as lead, had picked up three holes in his aircraft from 50-caliber ground fire. None ejected and thus no MIA death.

The 12th Wing lost four aircraft and eight pilots on two separate Sky Spot missions. Just after the drop command was given by the Sky Spot controllers, the two flights of two disappeared from their radar screens. It was surmised that both had premature ignition on their Snake Eyes.

3 September, 1966: Cliff Heathcote and Bill Simmons @ Cam Ranh Bay (557th)

Doc Simmons was our much beloved 12th TFW Flight Surgeon. He loved his chances to get in the back seat and fly in the Phantom. He had treated me for an injury received after being shot down in Laos on April 21st, 1966

Cliff was also a friend. I had worked with his wife Pam on a welcome back celebration for the 557th when they returned from Okinawa to MacDill.

It was surmised that they got caught in a severe downdraft in a thunderstorm and it blew them into the ground.

17 September, 1966: Surwald, Rocky, McCann and Browning @ Cam Ranh Bay (558th)

This particular crash is permanently etched into my memory. I was down at Squadron Ops for the 559th and it was 2100. The building severely shook, along with a very loud “boom”, and I rushed outside to witness two Phantoms silently and slowly circling in flames as they sank into the Bay. There was no sound from the impact.

I rushed over to the hospital and talked with Don Browning, the only survivor from the 558th two-ship that was returning from a refueling stop at Danang and Don reported that the back seater was flying in the wing ship when they hit Don’s lead plane on a turn. The impact was just to the east of the runway. Don does not remember our conversation.

11 November, 1966: Dick Butt @ Cam Ranh Bay (559th)

On this date, Ken Cordier was leading a 559th flight of three F-4Cs against a target in the Finger Lakes Region of Route Pack 1. It was not a Wild Weasel flight. In fact, Cam Ranh never flew any Wild Weasels during 1965 or 1966.

Within a period of 30 seconds, ground fire shot down numbers 2 and 3. No chutes were seen by Ken as stated when I interviewed him after the shootdown. I acted as Summary Court for all 8 pilots we lost during that 3-week period for the 559th. I interviewed all the surviving pilots so that I could write accurate letters to their wives.

All four pilots survived the crashes and ended up in Hanoi, with Dick dying in captivity.

Ken Cordier was shot down NW of Hanoi 2 December, 1966. He was on a 559th mission and was downed by a SAM 2 fired by Russian crews. He and his backseater, Mike Lane, were also guests of Hanoi.

Ken ended up being head guy for the River Rats on return as well as head guy for the POW Wing. He and I were roommates at Cam Ranh.

6 December, 1966: Lee Greco and John Troyer @ Cam Ranh Bay (559th)

This crash is particularly troublesome to me as I think I was partially responsible for it happening. The aircraft hit a mountain, but it was not during a CAS strike as stated in the listing.

Two days prior to the crash, I led a flight of two off the alert pad against a VC training facility on the north side of the Michelin Rubber Plantations located north of Saigon. The next day, I also led a flight of two off the pad against Michelin.

On return from the second strike, there was a severe thunderstorm sitting over all of Cam Ranh and the surrounding area. It was monsoon season and it was a deep black.

Approach was in a very dark thunderstorm and Approach Control had me drop to an altitude of 3,000-feet and then gave me a heading which was directly aimed at a hill that I knew to be 3012 feet high. Instead of screaming at the controllers for their possibly fatal error, I broke off the approach and, instead, flew a radar approach up the entry to the bay and on into landing, using the onboard mapping radar.

John Troyer was an “old head” backseater who had been in the 559th for many months. Lee Greco, on the other hand, had been with us just 4 days, having been assigned from the states. He did not have time to learn the topography of the area around Cam Ranh. The day after my near fatal approach, Approach Control was guiding his approach and gave him the same heading at the same place in the sky. He and John plowed into the mountain at 3,000 feet and both perished.

An additional duty for me was to run the 12th TFW Command Post at night. A week after Lee and John went in, the controllers who had caused the crash visited the Command Post. They had no idea that I was a pilot who flew the fighter missions. They actually joked about the incident. It was all I could do to contain myself. Part of my restraint was based on my knowledge that I might have saved the aircraft and crew if I had only done what I should have done, and created an “issue” with Cam Ranh Approach Control.