

X-RAY CHARLIE 799

For seventeen years there was on display at the USAF Academy an F-4C, tail

Number XC 799. This aircraft was, during the war, assigned to the 557th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Cam Ranh Bay. The aircraft was damaged beyond economical repair on 12 May 1968 when hit by ground fire while supporting the evacuation of the Special Forces camp at Kham Duc.

The aircraft was restored by the Utah Air Force Association and donated to the Cadet Wing in 1970 as a symbol of the mission of the U.S. Air Force. The old air-to-mud C-model remained in the quadrangle until early 1987, when she was replaced by a MiG-killer, the F-4D flown by Captain Steve Ritchie, an Academy graduate and the USAF's first air-to-air ace of the Vietnam War. XC 799 was towed to Peterson AFB in Colorado Springs, where she is now on display. 799, with her glorious combat record, her history of participation in, and contributions to, epic and historical actions, now sits incognito, repainted with a different tail number and paint scheme. This old tactical warrior now represents the stateside mission of the Air Defense Command. Sic transit gloria.

The following poem was written in 1972, following a visit to the academy and my first look at XC 799 in four years. It was inspired by a famous photograph of units of the Cadet Wing marching past her in her place of honor.

COLD WARRIOR

She sits alone, high in the crisp cold of the Rampart,
A shell of her former self, her head held high
And memories of past glories in her heart.

Half a world away are the jungles, mountains and green water
Where by all rights she should have died,
Where her sisters carried on the fight
Until the word came, "No more; well done; we tried."

What memories she must have!
The measured tread of the fledgling tigers marching past recalls
The desperate sound of more urgent footfalls.
The alert bell sounding, the scramble to the planes,
Her engines coming alive.
And life or death for soldiers miles away
Depending on how fast she could arrive.

What memories she must have!
That bleak November in the mountains at Dak To,
Those stygian nights on the roads in Tally Ho.
She was there!

A Chau, Bu Dop, Loc Ninh,
And Tet, when the whole world watched
As day and night she flew and flew again.
She was there!

Khe Sanh! Where for 76 days six thousand United States Marines,
Refusing to retreat,
Relied on air power and 192 years of pride and tradition
To hold back forty thousand North Vietnamese elite.
She was there!

She was overhead at Kham Duc
When Joe Jackson wrote his name on the roll in Valor's Hall,
For "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity"
Above and beyond the call.
She was there!

It was there she fought her last, in the Hell that was Kham Duc.
The wound was small, but mortal; it would prove to be enough.
She stayed together long enough to get her crew safely back to land,
And at the end, as her pilots walked away, she lay broken in the sand.
For her, the war was over.

And now she sits quietly as the young troops come and go.
To them, she is only an airplane,
Because as yet, they cannot know.

Know the feeling of seeing the ground rushing up to meet you,
Your heart stuck in your throat;
Know the nightmare of bright orange flashes
And dirty-gray puffs of smoke.
Know the unrestricted joy of soaring high
Above the clouds and wind and rain.
Know that to those who fly,
There is no such thing as "only an airplane."

Some of them will never know,
Content to join the crowd, to stay behind.
But when the call comes, the best of them will answer,
In aircraft far beyond the ken of old 799.

Until then, she sits and waits,
Her spirit still ten thousand miles away,
Watching over the building of the future force,
Her legacy beside her on the plaque
That tells the story of that final day.

“ On 12 May 1968, in support of the withdrawal of the Special Forces Camp at Kham

Duc, Republic of Vietnam, this aircraft sustained battle damage from ground fire and crashed upon landing. The crew received the Distinguished Flying Cross for their efforts on this mission. In this spirit, this aircraft is dedicated by the Air Force Cadet Wing to the members of the United States Air Force. It is a symbol of the versatile role of our Air Force in the world today and a reminder of our overall mission - to fly and fight."

She is there!

Only she isn't, not anymore.

They can take her out of the limelight in favor of her more glamorous sibling; they can make her up to match the wallpaper of her present home, but no one can ever take away what she once was and what she did in her seasons in the sun.

William F. "Toby" Hughes

557th TFS

August 1967 – August 1968