

HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE SHOT DOWN?

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be a pilot in Vietnam and have your plane shot down over enemy territory?

Printed below are excerpts from letters written by Air Force Capt. Fred Howard Porter III, a 1960 graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy and husband of a former Denver girl, whose F4C Phantom fighter-bomber was hit by Viet Cong anti-aircraft fire on take-off from an air base in South Vietnam.

Da Nang
9 Dec., Friday

"My Dearest Family:

"Well the last 17 hours have been rather exciting, to say the least. I got off on my mission all right early this morning, but we never got to North Vietnam.

"We took off at 0120 (1:20 a.m.) and were turning out of traffic, climbing in a left turn at about 400 feet. I was adjusting our radar to look for other traffic. We were in clouds.

"As Maj. John Young (the aircraft commander) pulled the throttles out of after-burner, the left engine exploded with two loud bangs, closely together.

"Fire shot out of the left engine about 20 feet in front of the plane's nose and the entire left side of the airplane was engulfed in flames.

Power Went Off

"All my electrical power went off. I had no instrument lights and I had lost all interphone contact with Major Young. The fire provided plenty of illumination, however. Major Young shut down the left engine and I waited to see if the fire was going to go out.

"There still was no voice contact so I watched for the 'Eject' light to come on (This is an alternate means to tell the rear-seat pilot to eject if the interphone is out. The rear-seater must eject first.)

"Then came two more explosions. I thought about all those bombs and magnesium flares hung under the wings and the auxiliary fuel tank hung externally on the aircraft's centerline.

"I could see fire trailing a great distance behind us. Then the aircraft controls went out. The bird rolled violently to the right, then rolled left and inverted with the nose down about 20 degrees.

"That was all I needed. There was no possibility of landing by then. I knew I had to go first and there wasn't much altitude left. I thought 'all right you lousy V.C., here's your chance. You better make it good.'



Capt. Fred Porter

"I sat erect and as the aircraft rolled inverted, reached for the 'D' (detonation) ring between my legs and pulled. We were going 350 knots (403 land miles) per hour.

'What a Blast'

"What a blast! I was whipped around, thrashed and tumbled as fire, flames and blackness whirled relentlessly by. My arms and legs flailed. I thought I was being torn apart, then whump and sweet, quiet bliss!

"I looked up and there was that beautiful white canopy! I was glad, however, it was night. It would have made a nice target in daylight.

"In the distance I could see old 544 rolling and spiraling down, in and out of clouds, intermittently exploding and trailing about 100 yards of flame.

"I took stock of myself and found I had a shroud line tangled around my gear and face and my oxygen mask had been torn loose. My helmet stayed on, even with the visor open. My parachute started oscillating but by pulling on the risers I could control it.

"I could hear another plane circling around. I extended the antenna on my little guard radio and could hear them talking about us. Thank God. I didn't have time to talk to them as I could see I'd hit the ground soon."

Capt. Porter then described how he deployed his seatpack survival kit. In being strapped into the Phantom, one of the straps that connect the survival kit with the parachute harness could not be engaged.

He wrote that he told his crew

chief "this probably will be my night to eject. He's probably still wondering about that."

Reach the Kit

Capt. Porter, however, was able to reach the survival kit in time to deploy it.

"I looked down again and wondered what kind of reception committee was waiting for me. The ground appeared to be moving upward very rapidly.

"Wham! Did I hit hard! I grabbed frantically for the parachute release and unsnapped it before the chute could drag me across the ground.

"I was about 10 feet from a ditch where some bushes were on the bank. I hauled up my chute, took off my helmet and stuffed them under the bushes. I followed.

"Flares were going off and I could see our aircraft burning about a mile away. The bombs and flares were exploding intermittently.

"I could not hear anything moving near me. I checked for my .38 revolver — it was there. I took out the radio again. The No. 2 man in our flight was circling overhead. I called him and told him I was directly under him.

"He answered that he read me loud and clear. He said he had radio contact also with Major Young and a rescue helicopter was on the way.

Hit 'Hot' Area

"I knew we had gone down in a relatively 'hot' area where there was quite a concentration of V.C. So, I remained hidden for what seemed like hours.

"It really was only 25 minutes when the chopper appeared. I signaled him and he got a visual sighting on my signal immediately. He landed about 20 yards away. I ran up when the chopper stopped moving. They pulled me in and we headed back to the base.

"They already had picked up Maj. Young and it surely was good to see him.

"How was that for an action-packed 30 minutes?"

"They have me in the hospital for about 30 hours for observation. I got a lot of bruises, but I'm in very good shape overall. I ache all over from strained muscles. I didn't know I had so many muscles — and every one hurts."

Capt. Porter reported to his wife by telephone later that a ground party of Marines went into the crash site after daylight. They drew fire from the Viet Cong and one Marine was killed when he stepped on a claymore mine.

The ground party was able to determine Capt. Porter's plane had taken a direct hit by an anti-aircraft shell in the left jet engine.

A Lucky Hit

"It was a lucky hit, because of the chance of it occurring at that altitude was very slim — about like hitting a sparrow with a rifle a mile and a half away."

Capt. Porter was scheduled to go to Bangkok, Thailand, for "R & R" (rest and relaxation) upon his release from the hospital in Da Nang, but he cancelled and returned to duty within a few days.

He has been in Da Nang as an operations officer for a little more than six months. His assignment does not call for combat flying, but he has flown several dozen missions voluntarily.

After he was graduated from the Air Force Academy, he trained in Georgia, Arizona and Texas, before being assigned to Moody Air Force Base at Valdosta, Ga.

He was an instructor pilot first and for the last two years was a T38 test pilot.

Mrs. Porter and their two-year-old daughter have moved to Colorado to await his return from Vietnam. Mrs. Porter is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Warren Lowe, Denver. Lowe is financial columnist for The Rocky Mountain News.

His parents now live near Raleigh, N.C. His brother, also an Air Force officer, was graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1963.



Successful rescue at night of Maj. John Young and Capt. Fred H. Porter III southeast of Da Nang by HH crews from Det. 7, 38th ARRS (MAC), Da Nang AB, RVN.

Primary aircraft.

RCC 1st Lt Fred Gregory
CP 1st Lt Al Jacox
HM A2C Paul Vann
RS A2C J. W. Duffy

Secondary aircraft.

RCC 1st Lt Dave Stevenson
CP Capt Pepper Marcum
HM SSGT Hubert Marsh
RS A1C Russell Bote
RS A1C Wayne Price

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