

2Jan71 RF-4 SAR Laos

Chris Hobson, Vietnam Air Losses – United States Air Force Navy and Marine Corps Fixed-Wing Aircraft Losses in Southeast Asia 1961-1973, (Hinkley: Midland Publishing, 2001) p. 211

F-4E 67-0359 469th TFW, USAF, Korat
Capt H D Wier (survived)
1Lt R K Brown (survived)

The first aircraft lost in the New Year was a Tiger FAC Phantom that was shot down while controlling a strike on the northern edge of the Plain of Jars. The aircraft was damaged by AAA as it dived on a group of trucks. Capt Wier headed southeast but he and his navigator had to eject just west of the Ban Ban Valley and was rescued by a USAF helicopter.

Christopher Robbins, The Ravens – Pilots of the Secret War in Laos, (Bangkok: Asia Books, 2000), p.299-301

On the second day of the new year, 1971, Chuck Engle was flying over the Plain of Jars when he heard over the radio that a Fast FAC in a Phantom, call sign Tiger, had been shot down just east of the 7/71 Split, the spot where the main route coming onto the Plain of Jars from the east split in two. It was an area which could no longer be worked by Ravens in light aircraft because of the quantity of heavy anti-aircraft guns that the enemy had moved into it. Guns powerful enough to bring down a high-flying F4. But Engle immediately headed toward the location of the downed aircraft, dropping below the thousand-foot overcast in order to conduct a methodical search for the missing crewmen.

After several sweeps over the road junction he saw the burning fighter below him. "Give me Voice or give me Beeper," he radioed, the standard call to a downed pilot. Within minutes he had made radio contact with two survivors, who told him that enemy patrols had already moved in toward them.

The first fighters on station were the Skyraiders, and although Engle brought them down below the overcast they were forced by the low ceiling to jettison their bombs along the road, but returned to strafe the area surrounding the survivors. Both Tigers reported that all three aircraft were taking heavy ground fire on each pass, but Engle continued to direct the fighters onto the smoke of his marking rockets to buy time while a search-and-rescue could be assembled.

More A-1s arrived, carrying CBU and strafe, and relieved their colleagues until one of the planes took a hit in the engine and was forced to break off and head for home. Two Phantoms, carrying "snakes and nape," high drag bombs and napalm, arrived next. They dropped their bombs on the road, unable to use them because of the proximity of enemy patrols to the survivors, and returned to use their napalm in close support. As they prepared to make their second pass the Tigers reported an enemy patrol moving directly toward them.

The problem of how to drop the napalm without hitting the Tigers was compounded by the steep hills rising on three sides of the survivors. The only possible route for attack was to fly directly over the Tigers, a course which demanded precision marking by the Raven and split-second timing for the drop by the fighters.

Engle took the O-1 down low and flew over the heads of the Tigers to fire a marking rocket at the foot of the hill in the direction from which the enemy were approaching. The Skyraiders followed on his tail, dropping their napalm to splash uphill until the end of the flame hit the smoke. It wiped out the enemy patrol and hit so close to the Tigers that a gob of burning nape splashed onto one's boots.

Engle continued to direct the fighters around the survivors, ringing them with burning napalm as a wall of protective fire. Only when he had fired all of his rockets and was low on fuel did he return to base. That night he heard that it had grown dark before the Tigers could be picked up.

In the Raven hootch the general opinion was that the Tigers were SOL—shit out of luck. Engle's courage and accurate marking had bought them time, but the enemy would move in even more anti-aircraft guns overnight and surround the area. Anyone returning the following morning was going to be eaten alive by flak.

In case the men were forced to spend another day and night on the ground, two "survival" kits were prepared. Each one contained an M-16, bandoliers and clips of ammunition, hand grenades, a lined field jacket, gloves, a radio, batteries, food, and water. They were wrapped in a blanket and held together by nylon fiber packing tape. The plan was for a CIA Pilatus Porter to pre-position itself at Lima 35, and if anti-aircraft fire thwarted a successful SAR, the plane would make a high-speed, low altitude pass over the survivors at dusk the following day and kick out the bundles.

But Engle was in his O-1 at 4:30 A.M. to fly onto the plain. The same cloud deck as the previous day covered the area around the 7/71 Split, and he dived beneath the overcast to make contact with the survivors. They had suffered badly from exposure during the night, and reported that the enemy were all around them and closing in.

Two Phantoms, loaded with napalm and CBU-24, checked in at first light. Engle brought them down beneath the clouds, where they would be forced to operate in an extremely cramped arena. He told them to run parallel to the road, three hundred meters apart, and to drop their ordnance the moment he fired his smoke rocket. Their explosives fell within feet of the survivors.

Despite a barrage of anti-aircraft fire from the guns, which had been moved in overnight as predicted, Engle brought another set of Phantoms down through the clouds and continued to lay an ever-widening circle of ordnance around the survivors, forcing the enemy back. When the Jolly Green went in to make the pickup it looked as if the Tigers were on a barren island surrounded by a black sea of scorched ground. Both men were snatched from the ground alive.

Chuck Engle became the toast of fighter squadrons throughout Thailand, and his reputation reached its zenith. There was no question about Engle's courage, the Ravens agreed, but there were limits. The guy was crazy, people muttered, and there was more talk about his subconscious death wish. But Engle shrugged it all off, and swung the chain around his neck holding the bullet. It was simple—the enemy had taken their best shot and missed.

Note: Chuck Engle awarded the Silver Star for this mission