

10May72 Oyster excerpted from Hobson book p. 224

F -4D 65-0784 555 TFS, 432 TRW, USAF, Udom
Maj Robert Alfred Lodge (KIA)
Capt Roger C Locher (survived)

On the first day of the Linebacker offensive the loss of a Phantom over North Vietnam triggered one of the most remarkable stories of escape and evasion to come from the wars in Southeast Asia. A strike force of 32 Phantoms was launched on the first raid of the offensive against the vital Paul Doumer Bridge and the Yen Vien railway marshalling yard near Hanoi. This was the first raid on the Doumer Bridge since February 1968 and was followed up by another raid on the 11th that effectively put the bridge out of action for the rest of the war. Major Lodge and Captain Locher, using the call sign Oyster 01, were leading the MiGCAP flight for the strike and were flying an aircraft fitted with the Combat Tree IFF detection system. Lodge and Locher were regarded as one of the USAF's best fighter teams and Bob Lodge was a driving force behind the success of the 432nd TRW's success in MiG-hunting.

As they were orbiting at 18,000 feet about 25 miles west of Thai Nguyen they were engaged head-on by a flight of four MiG-21s. The two formations passed each other and the Phantoms turned quickly to get behind the MiGs. Three of the MiG-21s were shot down, one by Lt John Markle and his WSO Capt Steve Eaves, one by Capt Steve Ritchie and his WSO Capt Chuck DeBellevue and one by Maj Lodge and Capt Locher.

Moments later a flight of four MiG-19s zoomed up and closed on Maj Lodge's aircraft. Lt Markle warned Bob Lodge that there were MiGs on his tail but Lodge was chasing another MiG-21 and made no attempt to maneuver. Moments later, just as he fired another Sparrow missile, Lodge's Phantom was hit in the tail by cannon fire from one of the MiG-19s. The hydraulic system failed and Lodge ordered Locher to eject as the aircraft was on fire and in a flat spin but it appears unlikely that Maj Lodge himself managed to eject before the aircraft crashed. None of the other Phantom crews reported seeing any parachutes from the burning Phantom as it spun into the ground. The Wing at Udorn presumed that both the crew had died in the incident until on 1 June, three weeks later, a Phantom crew reported that they had heard a beeper and had made voice contact with Capt Locher who had been in hiding for three weeks.

A SAR task force was quickly diverted to the area but the Sandys and the helicopters received intense anti-aircraft fire and, as the helicopters were attempting to pinpoint Locher's precise position, a MiG-21 made two high speed passes. As the helicopters were also running short of fuel, it was decided to abandon the attempt for the day. Gen John Vogt, Commander of the Seventh Air Force, cancelled all planned missions over North Vietnam for the next day and directed that all forces be diverted to the rescue of Capt Locher. The rescue attempt on the 2nd began with a diversionary attack on nearby Yen Bat airfield and attacks on known AAA positions in the area. The rescue force consisted of a total of 119 aircraft including SAR helicopters, A-1 Sandys, F-4s, F-105G Wild Weasels, EB-66 jammers and KC-135 tankers.

Heavy ground fire met the Sandys and the helicopters as they swept in at low level and more Phantoms were called in to attack the guns. Every gun in every village seemed to open up on the helicopters as they came in literally at tree top height. The brand new electronic location finders carried by the HH-53s were instrumental in finding Locher's position precisely.

As the lead helicopter (69-5786 flown by Capt Dale E Stovall of the 40th ARRS) approached the survivor the crew lowered a jungle penetrator and Roger Locher jumped on and was hauled aboard under a hail of bullets and shrapnel. The rescue force had, right up to the last moment, half expected a trap set by the North Vietnamese as they could not believe that a downed airman could survive for so long in enemy territory.

Roger Locher had landed safely on a steep, heavily wooded hillside, not far from the burning wreck of his aircraft and within sight of the MiG base at Yen Bai. He had walked about 12 miles from where he had been shot down and had stayed alive by eating wild fruit, nuts, berries and the shoots of weeds. He was lucky in that he could obtain food from various plants and fresh water from the many streams that flow through that part of Vietnam.

Having been on the ground for 23 days, Roger Locher holds the unenviable record for the longest duration between shoot down and rescue and also for the deepest penetration rescue of the war. Locher was flying his 407th combat mission when he was shot down and had been credited with three MiG kills along with Maj Lodge on 21 February and 8 and 10 May flying 65-0784 on each occasion.

Roger Locher later retrained as a pilot and in 1985-87 commanded the 4453rd Test and Evaluation Squadron, which was responsible for testing the F-117A stealth fighter. At first it was hoped that Locher's pilot, Major Lodge, had also managed to escape. However, this was not to be and Lodge's remains were returned to the USA on 30 September 1977. Bob Lodge had shot down three MiGs and was regarded as an outstanding pilot and combat leader. He was the 432nd TFW's weapons officer and knew more about the APX- 80 Combat Tree system than any other pilot in Southeast Asia.

Lodge and Locker's Phantom was the first American loss to the VPAF's MiG-19s. Fifty-four Shenyang J-6s, the Chinese-built version of the MiG-19, had been delivered to Yen Bai where the 925th Fighter Regiment was formed in February 1969. During the bombing halt the new unit had little opportunity for action until the start of Linebacker I but it had used the time well in training and building up to full strength. The MiG-19 that shot down Lodge and Locker was thought to have been flown by either Lt Pham Hung Son or Lt Le Thanh Dan and two of the eight aircraft that took off from Yen Hai on this day were lost.