

F-4J 155800 VF-96, USN, USS *Constellation*
Lt Randy H Cunningham (survived)
Lt(jg) Willie P Driscoll (survived)

Seconds after Cdr Blackburn's aircraft was shot down another of the *Constellation's* Phantoms ran into trouble. Lt Cunningham and Lt Driscoll were in the flak suppression flight on the Hai Duong raid and had just released their cluster bombs when they were attacked by two MiG-17s. The MiGs overshot and Lt Cunningham fired a Sidewinder that destroyed one of the enemy aircraft. By this time there were several groups of MiG-17s, MiG-19s and MiG-21s in the air near Haiphong and it was obvious that the VPAF had launched an all-out effort against the raid. Lt Cunningham and his wingman dived into a group of eight MiGs that were attacking three other Phantoms of VF-96. With his second Sidewinder Cunningham shot down another MiG-17 that was on the tail of Cdr Dwight Timm's Phantom. As four MiG-21s dived on Cunningham he evaded and headed for the coast. On the way out he spotted another MiG-17 and decided to attack it. What followed was one of the most famous dogfights of the entire war with the aircraft and crews equally matched in performance and skill. After a series of vertical rolling scissors manoeuvres Cunningham fired a Sidewinder that hit the MiG which then dived into the

ground. This third kill of the mission made Randy Cunningham and Willie Driscoll the first 'aces' of the Vietnam War as they had previously shot down two MiGs on 19 January and 8 May. What is more the fifth MiG was thought to have been flown by a pilot known to the Americans as 'Colonel Tomb' who had built up an enviable reputation in the skies over North Vietnam.

Cunningham and Driscoll had little time to celebrate their new 'ace' status. They headed out towards the coast passing several more MiGs but as they approached Nam Dinh climbing through 16,000 feet their aircraft was damaged by an explosion from an SA-2 missile. Shrapnel peppered the rear underside of the fuselage and the starboard wing tip was blown off. At first the aircraft appeared to be flying normally but soon afterwards the hydraulics started to fail. The aircraft pitched nose up and Cunningham flew along for several minutes causing the aircraft to alternately climb and dive as he rolled it using rudder and throttle. In this manner they reached the coast but the aircraft was on fire and started to spin. Unable to pull out of the spin Cunningham and Driscoll ejected about five miles out to sea. The pair were soon rescued by SH-3 Sea King helicopters from HC-7 and were taken to the USS *Okinawa*. The incident is described in detail in Cunningham's book *Fox Two*.