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THE BEST OF FLIGHT JOURNAL

VIETNAM AIR WAR

Features

8 Armed with a Red Cross
Dust-Off Tactics in Vietnam
BY MAJ. GEN. PATRICK BRADY, U.S. ARMY (RET.)

22 SS *Mayaguez*
The Last Battle of Vietnam
BY RIC HUNTER

30 Down there Amongst Them
A Spad pilot's story
BY BYRON HUKEE

40 T-28 Sortie
A Raven's Tale
BY KARL POLIFKA

46 Man on the Run
Roger Locher's rescue from North Vietnam
BY JEFF ETHELL AND ALFRED PRICE

56 Cojones de Bronce
Flying on fumes over the Tonkin Gulf
BY REAR ADM. PAUL GILLCRIST, U.S. NAVY (RET.)

62 Treetop Warfare
A Bird Dog FAC in Raven Territory
BY KARL POLIFKA

70 Dragon Tales
A supersonic pilot takes on the Gooney Bird gunship
BY ED FREY, COL., USAF (RET.)

80 Vietnam Prison Raid
A gallant attempt to rescue American POWs
BY JOHN WARESH

Columns

4 Vietnam Air War Contributors

6 Editorial
BY BUDD DAVISSON

20 IN THE THEATER
Fighting Falcons F-4J
BY ROBERT S. DEGROAT

38 IN THE THEATER
A-7D SLUF
BY WARREN E. THOMPSON

90 Tailview
The stuff of legends
BY REAR ADM. PAUL T. GILLCRIST, U.S. NAVY (RET.)

On the cover: *a 435TFS F-4 Phantom heads to a target, May 1969 (photo by James Wood, courtesy of Warren Thompson).*

FROM THE PUBLISHERS OF
FLIGHT JOURNAL

Man on the

Roger Locher's rescue from

BY JEFF ETHELL AND ALFRED PRICE

"Oyster Two has contact!" "Oyster One has a contact zero-five-zero for fifteen!"

"Oyster Three is contact, Bob!"

"Right, we got 'em!"

"Oyster One on the nose, twelve miles, fifteen [degrees] *high, overtake nine hundred* [knots] *plus!"*

Anxious eyes scanned the skies south of Hanoi for visual contact. It was the morning of May 10, 1972 and the neighborhood was anything but friendly.

In Oyster 3, Phantom RIO Chuck DeBellevue picked up MiG transmissions on his Combat Tree equipment and informed his pilot that he had a positive hostile identification on the planes in front: "He's squawking MiG! He's squawking MiG! Stand by to shoot!"

F-4Ds of the 390th TFS inbound to target area with a full load of ordnance—North Vietnam, February 1970. (Photo by Ken Smith courtesy Warren Thompson.)

Run! North Vietnam

Maj. Bob Lodge, pilot, and Capt. Roger Locher, RIO, prepare for another mission over North Vietnam in their F-4 Phantom.

There were similar clipped instructions in 555th Tactical Fighter Squadron F-4 Phantoms Oyster 1 and 2 as the back-seaters locked on their radars and made the final switching for a head-on attack with Sparrow missiles. With the nearest MiG almost in missile range, Oyster 1's pilot, Maj. Bob Lodge, eased his Phantom into a shallow climb. The Phantoms on either side followed. Meanwhile, Tommy Feezel in Oyster 4, still some distance behind, was catching up fast.

With his radar locked on the target eight miles in front, beyond visual range, Lodge squeezed the trigger and a Sparrow surged out trailing smoke. The missile, 12 feet long and weighing about 450 pounds, accelerated from its launch speed of 600 knots to 1,800 knots in 2.3 seconds. Then, the motor exhausted its fuel and cut out. The missile should have coasted the rest of the way to the target, but it was a dud and, for some reason, it exploded when the motor cut. Lodge squeezed his trigger again and a second Sparrow roared toward the same target.

Lt. John Markle in Oyster 2, slightly behind Lodge and 600 yards to his right, also fired a pair of Sparrows and had one fail: "Our first missile apparently did not get rocket motor ignition. The second missile came off the aircraft and turned slightly right as it climbed. We continued to maintain position on Oyster One in an easy right turn, slightly nose up. As I checked the missile's progress, the trail showed a slight left turn toward the radar target."

Capt. Steve Ritchie in Oyster 3, 3,000 yards to the left of Lodge, also launched a Sparrow, but its motor failed to ignite. Tommy Feezel, coming up from behind, saw the missile fall away from the Phantom "like a bomb."

Of the five Sparrows launched, only two functioned as advertised. But when everything worked, the missile's 66-pound warhead was devastating. The recorder in Markle's plane captured his reaction as he saw his second missile strike home: "Oh, right! Now! Good! Woooohooo!"

Then, on the radio: "Oyster Two's a hit!"

Lodge replied, "I got one!"

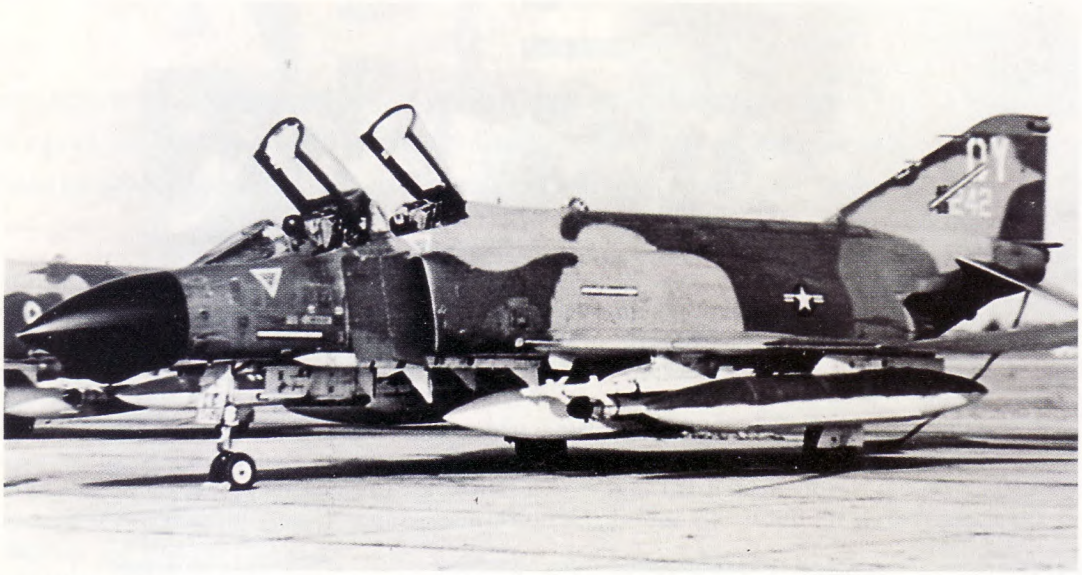
Steve Eaves, Markle's back-seater, confirmed the leader's kill. "Roger, he's burning and he's going down one o'clock!"

Capt. Roger Locher, Lodge's back-seater, saw two explosions a long way in front, and as he got closer, he caught sight of two North Vietnamese fighters tumbling from the sky. "The MiG-21 Markle shot down was the closer. It did a cartwheel and went underneath

"One or two seconds later, wham! We were hit. I looked up and saw the MiG [the MiG-21 in front] separating away. I thought we had midaired because that was exactly my interpretation of how a collision would feel. We both said 'Oh sh*t!' but my 'Oh sh*t!' was because the guy in front was getting away from us."

F-4s parked in revetments at Udorn Air Base, Thailand. (Photo by Ken Hackman.)

us about half a mile in front, in a ten-degree dive. A few seconds later, I saw the one we hit going down in a sixty- or seventy-degree dive. Its left wing was shot off; it was in a pretty fast roll to the left, on fire and trailing smoke. The guy had already ejected."



A 555th Tactical Fighter Squadron F-4D Phantom II.

The two surviving MiGs continued their headlong charge and flashed close over the Phantoms as the latter swung right to get on their opponents' tails. One MiG pilot misjudged the rate of closure on Lodge's turn and narrowly missed colliding with Oyster Leader. When Lodge rolled out of the turn, he was only 200 feet behind the MiG, and from the rear seat, Locher had a close-up view. "We were in his jet wash. There he was, burner plume sticking out; the shiniest airplane you've ever seen. He was going up in a chandelle to the right; we were right behind him."

The MiG in front of Lodge was too close for a missile attack and his Phantom didn't have guns, but Lodge eased off his turn and the enemy-fighter's range was opening. Soon, it would be in position for a missile shot.

The combat was going well for Oyster Flight when, suddenly, the tables were turned. Zooming up from below to gatecrash the fight came a pair of MiG-19s—probably flown by Lts. Le Thanh Dao and Vu Van Hop of the 3rd Company. They curved after Lodge's F-4 as Markle, to Lodge's left and in no position to engage them, shouted a warning. "OK! There's a bandit; you got a bandit in your ten o'clock, Bob, level!"

In a sweeping left turn, the MiG-19s passed behind Oyster Leader, then began closing in from his right.

"Bob, reverse right, reverse right, Bob. Reverse right!"

"The bandit's behind you ..." [the rest blotted out].

Lodge thought the MiG-21 in front had opened the range sufficiently for a close-in shot. Locher remembered: "We were ready to blow this guy away when I heard John telling us to reverse right. Then I saw another MiG-21 overshoot to the left, about one thousand feet away.

"Oyster One padlocked!"

"Padlocked" meant Lodge was concentrating on the MiG in front, and immediately afterward he launched a Sparrow.

From the leading MiG-19, a string of fiery grapefruits bridged the gap between it and Lodge's Phantom. Again Markle's voice came over the radio: "He's firing; he's firing at you!"

Locher describes what happened next: "One or two seconds later, wham! We were hit. I looked up and saw the MiG [the MiG-21 in front] separating away. I thought we had midaired because that was exactly my interpretation of how a collision would feel. We both said 'Oh sh*t!' but my 'Oh sh*t!' was because the guy in front was getting away from us.

"The next thing I knew, we were decelerating; I think the right engine had exploded. We ended up doing some really hard yaws to the right." From that moment, the Phantom was doomed.

Locher remembers, "Bob said, 'We don't have any hydraulics.' "

The pilot's measured words brought home the harsh reality of their situation; the fighter was not going to get them home.

The back-seater was still pondering the implications of what he had heard when a yet more immediate danger manifested itself: the blaze in the rear fuselage had begun to eat its way forward and, roasted by the heat, the transparent plastic of the canopy over Locher's head was slowly turning an opaque orange. Smoke started to seep into the cockpit.

Seconds later, the Phantom was upside-down and falling fast. "We were under negative G at the time. My ass was off the seat; I was pinned against the top of the canopy."

Locher grabbed the handle between his legs with both hands and pulled hard. "I saw the canopy go, then I went out under negative G. There was a lot of wind blast; I started to see again. Then thwack! The parachute opened. And zoom! Past me went two MiG-19s."

The other members of Oyster Flight watched in dread fascination as Lodge's plane went down, but no

"I had to decide whether we should risk the loss of maybe half a dozen airplanes and crews just to get one man out. Finally, I said to myself, 'Goddamn it, the one thing that keeps our boys motivated is the certain belief that if they go down, we will do absolutely everything we can to get them out.'"

one saw Locher eject or his parachute open. The backseater was fired downward, and smoke from the burning aircraft screened him. It appears the pilot, Bob Lodge, was still in his cockpit when the Phantom dived into the ground.

Locher was dangling from his parachute for only seconds before being thrashed by the branches of 40-foot trees as he fell through them. Once on the ground, he frantically undid the quick-release and scrambled out of his harness. Then he tried to pull the rest of the parachute down from the trees. The canopy was draped over several branches, however, and resisted all attempts to jerk it clear. He then tried to disconnect the survival pack from the parachute harness. But his fingers didn't want to work. They simply refused to obey his brain's commands (he thought his spine had been injured, but it was, in fact, a symptom of shock following ejection and would soon wear off). There was no alternative; the parachute and the precious pack had to be left behind to betray his point of arrival.

Two young girls are the observers in this Hanoi antiaircraft battery.

Locher took out a beeper radio. "This is Oyster Zero One Bravo. I'm on the ground. I'm OK." Then, fearful the transmissions might betray his position to the enemy, he switched off and set out at a brisk trot to distance himself from the parachute. He had covered about half a mile when he heard a babble of voices coming from the direction in which his plane had crashed. It was the posse sent to bring him in. Dead or alive.

Lodge quickly dropped into a small depression and covered himself with leaves, brush and rotting vegetable matter. "They had a good search party of adult men; starting at about noon they searched fairly thoroughly. People yelled and screamed to get me to move, and once every fifteen minutes, somebody fired three rounds from an automatic rifle into the ground."

Locher thought it would be only a matter of time before he was found, but until somebody stood over him with a gun, he resolved to remain still. "If they wanted me, they would have to stand on me. I grew up in Kansas and spent a lot of time hunting pheasants. A lot got killed because they got nervous. They would sit among cover on the ground, and you could walk past without seeing them. But if you stopped for a cigarette, one might flush out from just behind you, three feet away, and you would get it. Had it sat tightly, it would have lived." Roger Locher had no intention of imitating the birds' error.

At dusk, the searchers assembled noisily and went home. Stepping quietly in case someone had stayed behind, the fugitive moved a few hundred yards before dark. Then he picked out a relatively soft piece of ground, stretched out and began his first fitful night's sleep in North Vietnam.

After first light on the second day, the airman had barely covered a few hundred yards when the searchers returned and again he burrowed into a patch of rotting foliage. "They had the whole village out to look for me—even women and kids. Fortunately, they didn't bring dogs or they probably would have found me. Some little kids came within thirty feet of me, but they were there to get away from the adults and take it easy. After about an hour, they went back to join the search party."

Capt. Patty Schneider, one of the intelligence officers at Udorn, was distraught when she heard that Roger Locher had been shot down. They had never dated, but now she realized she had fallen in love with him. "We always seemed to end up together at parties and he

would usually walk me to my barracks. When I had good or bad news from home, he was the first one I told. I decided that when he came back he wasn't going to get away from me again!"

Framed by the U.S. and Thailand flagpoles, the "Jolly Green Giant" helicopter carrying Locher prepares to land at Udorn.

Yen Bai. Roger Locher was alive, but famished. "My stomach was growling; I was always thinking about eating. I found a few dariens—small pods about the size of an apricot that contained edible kernels. Another fruit looked like a pithy cherry; it, too, had an edible inside. And there were weed shoots. They had no taste; they were just bland—blah. And that was it," the airman recalled.

Day followed day in a regular pattern: get up at first light and walk a mile or so away from the rising sun and then hide; at dusk, walk a few hundred yards toward the setting sun and bed down for the night.

On the 13th day, Roger Locher's desire to make progress overcame some of his initial caution and nearly cost him his freedom. That morning, he was trudging west, buried in his thoughts, when he suddenly realized he had blundered into a village. There were people all over the place, and if he went out the way he had come in, he thought he was sure to be seen. The airman crawled into a patch of foliage, covered himself with brushwood and leaves and resolved to stay put until dark. Everything went well until late in the afternoon.

"The kids were bringing in the cattle, and this water buffalo must have smelled me. He stopped, standing on one of the saplings covering me, and refused to go on. The kids shouted and hit him, but he wouldn't budge. Then one of the kids went running off to the village. I thought they'd seen me and were going to get dad with his gun. A little while later, the kid came back with his bigger brother who hit the animal hard enough to make it go. As they went off, I looked up, and there was the butt of the water buffalo, the first kid, a second kid and a little kid who ran after them, tripped and fell down, got up and ran on. The animal had knocked the camouflage off my right leg; if they had been looking for me, they would certainly have found me. It's a good thing water buffaloes can't speak!"

The airman replaced the camouflage, waited until dark, then crept quietly away from the village.

During the morning of June 1, a thunderous "whooosh" rent the air: the SAM battery near Yen Bai had launched a missile. The significance of the reverberations did not escape Locher: "If they were firing, there had to be American aircraft nearby. I monitored Guard frequency on my radio but heard nothing. So I waited about five minutes, then I came up: 'Any U.S. aircraft, if you read Oyster One Bravo, come up on Guard.' "

To the south of Yen Bai, Phantoms of the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing were on the way home after bombing a target near Hanoi. One of the flights was using the call sign Oyster on that day and by a remarkable coincidence, it was Oyster 2 that picked up Locher's transmission.

Lt. Jim Dunn (who flew an F-4 chaff bomber during the May 10 mission) heard Locher's voice come through weakly. The survivor's use of the same Oyster call sign struck Dunn as "kinda spooky." He informed his flight leader, but by then, Oyster Flight was beyond range of Locher's transmitter. So another flight was asked to reply to the call.

At this stage, the downed airman's aim was simple: he merely wanted to say he was still alive. Fletch Flight (an F-4 unit on this occasion) made contact, and Locher repeated the earlier call and gave more detail. "About five minutes later, Fletch Leader came back and said, 'We passed the word, and the Jollys and Sandys are on their way.' That put a big weight on my shoulders. I thought there was no way a rescue force would come in so far for me, but I didn't tell them not to come!"

Udorn, Thailand. The news of Locher's radio call left Patty Schneider euphoric. "My knees went shaky; I couldn't concentrate on my other work anymore." Tapes of conversations between the F-4 crews and Locher were brought into the Intelligence Center, and she was one of several present when they were played and replayed. "We listened to see if it was his voice and if he was under duress. We were all of the opinion that it was his natural voice and he did not seem to be under duress," she recalled.

Roger Locher in the helicopter cabin only minutes after he had been picked up after 23 days in hiding in North Vietnam.

Saigon. It was one thing for a bunch of relatively junior intelligence officers at Udorn to establish the identity of an airman down in North Vietnam and conclude that he was not speaking under duress. It was quite a different matter to secure authority to mount what would now have to be a major operation to get him out, involving risk to a large number of planes and crews. That particular buck stopped on the desk of Gen. Vogt, the Seventh Air Force Commander.

"I had to decide whether we should risk the loss of maybe half a dozen airplanes and crews just to get one man out. Finally, I said to myself, 'Goddamn it, the one thing that keeps our boys motivated is the certain belief that if they go down, we will do absolutely everything we can to get them out.' If that was ever in doubt, morale would tumble. That was my major consideration. So I took that on myself. I didn't ask anybody for permission, I just said, 'Go do it!' "

Like many a senior commander before him, John Vogt had made a brave decision and now had to live with it. If losses were incurred during the operation, there would be no shortage of Monday-morning quarterbacks to tell him how he should have handled the problem differently.

Thailand. While the downed airman pondered his chances of rescue, he had no idea of the size of the effort sparked by his radio call. Gen. Vogt had willed the end; he also willed the means. That day, all Air Force operations scheduled against North Vietnam were postponed, and the forces released were made available to support the rescue.

Soon after dawn, two helicopters and four A-1s took off from Nakhon Phanom for the three-and-a-half-hour flight to Yen Bai, accompanied to northern Laos by the HC-130. Then the huge supporting operation began to take shape around the rescue force. Sixteen Phantoms were to attack Yen Bai airfield, crater the runway and prevent MiGs based there from interfering with the rescue. Another 16 Phantoms were to hit antiaircraft gun positions in the area. The rescue force and the bombers, plus their attendant F-4 escorts, radar-jamming EB-66s, F-105 Wild Weasels and KC-135 refuelers, totaled 119 aircraft. About as many planes would take part in the rescue of Locher as had been involved in the original May 10 attack on Hanoi!

As on the previous day, when a much smaller rescue force had been beaten back, Capt. Ron Smith was in tactical command of the four A-1s and two helicopters heading in to collect Locher. The helicopters and a pair of A-1s lay back, while the two leading A-1s, piloted by Smith and his wingman, continued to the rescue area.

Locher had correctly answered his authenticating question the day before, giving his mother's maiden name, but there still remained an outside possibility that the helicopters were heading for a trap; the airman might have been answering with a gun pointed at his head. So Smith had a new question, devised by an officer who had attended the same college as Locher.

Locher described what happened after he made radio contact with the rescuers. "Ron Smith said, 'Hey, Oyster, I got a question for you and you'd better answer it right.' I'd been studying my other three questions all night, I knew the answers to those. But this wasn't one of them. He said 'What's Kite's?' Kite's? Everybody at Kansas State University knew the drinking haunt frequented by students. I said, 'It's a place to drink beer.' He said 'Drink what?' 'Beer!' He said, 'You sound like the one I want.' I said, 'You're damn right I'm the one you want!' " Locher's snap reply and indignant quip established beyond doubt that there was nobody telling him what to say.

Shortly after his rescue, a clean-shaven Locher poses with Steve Ritchie (left), Patty Schneider and Chuck DeBellevue (right).

Sitting on the hillside, the downed airman heard the whistle of distant jets, then the wail of sirens at Yen Bai. Four F-4s rolled in and attacked the south end of the airfield; another four went for the north end. Simultaneously, more F-4s dive-bombed antiaircraft batteries in the area, causing secondary explosions that sent columns of smoke high into the sky.

Ron Smith also saw the attack: "Everything was going like clockwork. As I crossed the last hill before the Red River, with my wingman, the bombs went off at Yen Bai."

A few minutes later, Locher heard an A-1 roar past. By the time the second A-1 came in, he had his signal mirror pointing at the approaching aircraft. The A-1 pilot saw the bright flash of the sun off the mirror, called "Tallyho!" on the radio and began to circle the survivor.

The pick-up went exactly according to the book but, as "Jolly" pilot Capt. Dale Stovall explained, the same could not be said for the first part of the egress back toward base: "It took less than two minutes to get Roger on board the helicopter, and then we were all on our way over the ridge line. Jerry [Capt. Jerry Shipman, pilot of the backup helicopter] was waiting for us, and we started back in formation. Every village had been alerted, and we started taking small-arms fire on the way back.

Locher immediately after his rescue. On the left is Gen. John Vogt.

"As we came over a ridge line before we dropped into the Red River [Valley], we had the surprise of our lives. A train coming down that railroad from China had seen

the smoke at Yen Bai and had stopped exactly at our crossing point. We came over the ridge line in formation, and sitting in front of us was a fourteen-car train. Two cars had sandbagged gun positions, similar to what you see in the WW II movies. Their gunners were looking down the Red River Valley. They tried to get their guns cranked around to fire at us.

"The rescue helicopter swept in behind the A-1s as the gunners were trying to get a shot at them. Meanwhile, I was trying to jink and the Sandies were all hollering and yelling as they strafed the train. It was like a kids' parade. We went right over them and pressed on at low level across the valley."

Locher sat in the fuselage of the helicopter, completely ignoring the war raging around him. Someone had passed him a box of C rations, and like an orphan who had found the key to the treats cupboard, he gobbled cookies as fast as he could.

When he could get no more into his mouth, he stuffed them into his pockets. "I still didn't think I was getting out of North Vietnam, and I'd be damned if I was going to go down a second time without eating!" he explained. He worked his way through a can of apricots and everything else within reach before his stomach, unaccustomed to such largess, issued a stab of protest.

A large crowd was waiting at the airfield to greet him, and the reception committee included Gen. Vogt, who had flown in from Saigon especially for the occasion.

When Locher stepped from the helicopter, loud cheers rose from the several hundred service people standing on the ramp. Patty Schneider watched excitedly as the gaunt, unshaven, filthy, ecstatic man she loved shook hands with the general and his friends.

Weak from lack of food, Locher walked like an old man; he had left the base weighing 180 pounds, now he was down to 150 pounds. Willing hands helped him into the waiting ambulance. It was the moment Patty had prayed for, yet now she was at a loss as to what to do.

"All the other guys knew how I felt, but Roger really didn't. When he got in the ambulance, I didn't want to get in. I felt I had no right to be in there; we had not dated or anything. But the other guys pushed me toward the ambulance and said, 'Get in there!' So I did. That was how Roger found out he was special to me."

Patty Schneider and Roger Locher were married about a year later.

Roger Locher's feat as an aircrew survivor who remained unassisted and at liberty for 23 days in enemy territory and initiated a successful rescue established a record for the Vietnam War. It ranks among the most successful combat evasion episodes in history. +

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