

Robert LaPointe

From: JetVet2@cs.com
Sent: Wednesday, July 24, 2002 7:33 AM
To: rlapointe@gci.net
Subject: Ruby 2/ Shot down 4 Jan 73

Bob,
Saw your article on the ARA web page.
We were the last Buff to go down in Nam. You guys picked us up off Danang.
Below is our story written by our AC, Gerry Wickline.
Hope to see you at a River Rat reunion (touch base with John Flournoy).
Cheers,
Bill Milcarek
River Rat/ NJ CINC

The below aircraft and flight crews were downed before or after the 11-Day War period of LB II and therefore were not counted in statistics of LB II.

3 January 1973 - (1) Lost, (0) Damaged. This is loss number 17

Ruby 02 B-52D 55-0056 Truck Park 15 miles NW of Vinh, NVN Lost. Hit in PTT. U-T sortie.

Lt Col Gerald F. Wickline AC Dyess E-23

Captain William F. Milcarek CP

Major Roger A. Klingbeil RN

*Captain Myles J. Mc Ternan N

Captain William E. Fergason EWO

TSgt Carlos S. (Chuck) Killgore G

Flight crew went feet wet and bailed out in the Gulf of Tonkin. All six recovered safe.

*For Myles J. Mc Ternan's story, see web site:

<http://www.afa.org/magazine/valor/0698valor>

Craig, the following is a copy of a letter I sent to a friend describing my two missions during Linebacker II, AKA the Eleven Day War, and of our final mission over Vinh on January 3, 1973. Our plane was the last B-52 to be shot down in the Vietnamese War. Gerald F. Wickline, Lt Col USAF, Ret.

Dear George,

I guess you would be interested in my WAR STORY, so here goes. I deployed to Guam on 9 Feb 1972 and was back home for a 26 day break in July 1972, then back over for five more months. Then another 28 day break at the end of November 1972.

In April 1972, we flew five missions in the DMZ area and southern NRVN where SAM's were fired at us with none coming very close. The rest of missions were flown in South Vietnam, where we were relatively safe. I deployed back over to Guam on 24 Dec 1972, crossing the International Date Line on Christmas Day (I almost missed Christmas completely), and flew our first mission over Hanoi on the 27th. Believe me George, you can't believe how bad it was. Our target was a railroad yard on the north side of Hanoi. We came in from over the water just north of Haiphong, and we no more than coasted in over land when the first missiles were fired and they continued in barrages for the next 23 minutes until we exited the SAM rings near the Laos border. We saw well over 100 SAM's fired and more than 30 of them came within one mile of our airplane, with at least half of those missing us by less than 200 feet. My mouth was so full of cotton I could barely talk, and the whole time, I thought I would be dead the next second. There was no way to outmaneuver them, and several times I was blinded by a near missile detonation or from the brilliant glare of their rocket trail as they went past me. The B-52 right behind me was shot down, with no survivors listed as of this time. The

total time of the mission was 16 _ hours with one pre-strike and one post-strike refueling.

We had 16 hours on the ground and flew our second mission on December 29th. This time we were hitting Phuc Yen airfield (NW of Hanoi) and flew practically the same route. This mission was a milk run compared to the one before. Only about 40 missiles were fired and only about eight came within one mile of us and none very close. We did have a MIG close to within 3 miles at our 12 o'clock, but he never locked on or fired any missiles. We thought he had the first plane in our cell, because he was only about a mile from him when he broke off the attack. On this raid, we had three waves of B-52's striking the same target, from three different axis- SIMULTANEOUSLY. We were more afraid of another B-52 dropping bombs on us than we were of SAM's and MIG's because we were at 31,000 feet and the lowest altitude of the three waves. Anyhow, no one was shot down or even hit that night, and that was the last raid over Hanoi. This mission was only 14 hours long and as soon as we landed, we were shoved on a KC-135 to go to Utapao-so Christmas in Guam and New Years in Thailand.

We got our training at Utapao and flew our first flight on the night of 3 Jan 1973. Our target was a truck park 15 miles NW of Vinh, which is just below the 20th parallel. We were the next to last airplane in a nine plane wave. Our call sign was Ruby 2. At about the IP we picked up some SAM signals and started our SAM maneuvers. We saw lots of AAA fire over Vinh, more that I have ever seen before, including the two missions over Hanoi. Several missiles were fired at planes ahead of us, and at the other two waves of B-52's which were hitting targets West and SW of Vinh. At about 40 seconds TTG, four missiles were fired at us, off our left wing. SAM's #1 and #2 were fired first followed a few seconds later by #3 and #4. I maneuvered to avoid #1 and #2 with #1 going past our nose (real close) and detonating just above us (going up). #2 SAM missed our tail by an estimated 50 feet and also detonated just above us. I had lost sight of #3 and #4, and we were close to TTG zero so I rolled level with the PDI centered and simultaneously with bombs away, there was a tremendous explosion directly below our nose. Three windows on my side of the airplane shattered and showered us with broken bits of glass. The #1 engine fire light came on and a blazing fire was burning in the #1 pod. We shut #1 down. All of my flight instruments, including airspeed and attitude were inoperative. Most of the engine instruments on both sides of the cockpit were inoperative, in fact the glass was shattered in most of them. All hydraulic power to the left wing was out and all fuel gauges on the left wing were either spinning or stuck. I polled the crew and everyone answered but the tail gunner. No one was hurt at this time. A couple of minutes later, the Radar Navigator called in a fuel leak that had just developed above his head, and fuel was pouring in, right on top of him, and shortly he started screaming from the pain of the fuel burning him (chemical burns).

We stayed in cell with the other two airplanes and three more SAM's passed across our nose and exploded just above us. We got out over the water and turned south and by this time the RN was screaming from the pain of the JP-4 burns, and the lower deck was literally floating in JP-4. The escape hatches were nearly brim full of fuel.

We tried continuously to contact the gunner, but to no avail. We started a descent with the other two airplanes staying with us, and leveled off at 12,000 feet about 90 miles north of DaNang. Soon after level off, we felt a thump and heard a parachute beeper go off. Our gunner had bailed out all on his own, as flames from a fire in the belly began licking around his turret. That was one of the smartest things the gunner ever did, as had I not heard from him I may have tried to land the airplane and would surely have killed us all. Once I was sure the rescue forces were in contact with the gunner, we started setting up for the bailout.

The airplane was barely controllable. Every time we would attempt to slow down, the airplane would start a roll to the right and we could only straighten it out by gaining airspeed. The fire in the #1 pod kept burning intermittently. The #8 throttle had no control over the engine and I think it

was running at idle. As near as I could tell, the other six engines were still running, but I was not sure because I had very few reliable engine instruments.

By this time we were abeam DaNang, so I turned eastbound (away from land) and ordered bailout. We were almost sure that when the first ejection seat fired we would become a fireball, but thank God that didn't happen. I heard two thumps which I assumed was the Navigator and RN ejection seats firing, followed a few seconds later by a third, which was the EW. I told the co-pilot to go and he squeezed the trigger. I was temporarily blinded by flying debris. After I got my eyes cleared and looked, he was gone. I made a call on interphone to see if anyone was still on board - waited a few seconds - pulled the throttles to idle - assumed the position, and squeezed the trigger. I felt a tremendous kick in the seat of my pants, a great blast of cold air, severe tumbling, an extremely sharp jolt tearing the ejection seat from my hands, and a loud pop followed by the most intense silence I have ever heard. This all happened in seconds as my parachute zero delay lanyard was hooked. I could hardly believe my good fortune when I looked up and saw that beautiful big orange and white canopy of the parachute above my head. I said out loud to myself, "Wickline you lucky son of a gun, you've got it made now." About that time I felt extremely nauseous, so I pulled my oxygen mask from my face and barfed into to the Gulf of Tonkin. I think it came from the relief of the last 30 minutes, and that I was away from that airplane, which was a fireball waiting to happen.

It took about 15 minutes or so to come down from 12,000 feet in the parachute and it was so quiet that it almost made your ears hurt. I saw a fireball on the horizon. Our B-52 had hit the water and exploded. I started to oscillate in the parachute, swinging from side to side, so I reached up to grab the risers to stop the oscillations and could barely get my right arm above my head, and when I did, it hurt like hell. I had to do this three or four times during the descent, and each time my right shoulder hurt worse and by the time I hit the water, my right arm was useless and very painful. I started hearing the sound of waves, and as I had already deployed my survival kit, I uncovered my parachute quick disconnect covers and got ready to hit the water. As my feet hit the water, I released my parachute and barely bobbed below the surface. I rested a few minutes in my life vest and then tried to get into my life raft, which was a major accomplishment because the waves were 10' to 15' high and white capping, and about every third wave would wash completely over me. My right arm was hurting real bad by this time and it was practically useless, so it took me about 15 minutes to get into the raft. When I did get into the raft, I found that I had planted my rear end in the small end of the raft, instead of the large end, which made the raft very unstable. I was not about to get out and get back in the raft the right way, so I just hung on. I tried four or five times to get out of my parachute harness, but couldn't, so I just sat back, got my survival radio out, turned it on and waited. I heard nothing for a while, then I heard my co-pilot talking to an OV-10 pilot so I knew they were looking for us. About this time the sun came up, and with it the wind, which made the waves higher and chilled me to the bone. There was a low overcast and lots of haze, with very poor visibility. The co-pilot continued to talk to the OV-10, giving him short counts for ADF and soon after, I heard an engine, and looked up to see an OV-10 approaching. He passed over me first, so I gave him a call and he set up an orbit directly over me, and started to direct the helicopter, which was already airborne, to the area. About an hour after I hit the water, I saw the helicopter, and watched while he picked up the co-pilot who was only about 200 yards from me. Then he came over and picked me up. Even though my arm hurt like hell, I attached myself to the rescue devise with a deathlike grip and was hoisted into the helicopter. We were flown directly to the DaNang hospital.

My co-pilot was in good shape except for a sore back and a cut under his chin. The gunner had been picked up by a helicopter from the USS Saratoga and was OK except for a cut under his chin. As a matter of fact, all six of us had a " " to a 1" cut under our chins. The RN was next to be picked up and was blistered badly about his waist, wrists and ankles. (Anyplace his clothes fit tightly). The EW was next, with a sore back and a piece of helmet visor,

which shattered during the ejection, in his right eye. There was no permanent damage.

We had a lapse of a couple of hours with no word from the navigator. Then we got the word he had been picked up in real bad shape, with a large cut on his right cheek, a fractured cheekbone, and a distended stomach from swallowing so much seawater. His ejection seat had failed to fire and he made a manual bailout, and probably hit the bottom of the airplane on the way out. He is near full recovery now and should be back to flying soon.

They took x-rays of my shoulder at Da Nang and found a displaced fracture of the large bone in my upper arm. A piece of bone, at the joint, about the size of a half dollar and about 1/2" thick had broken loose and was pulled in behind my right shoulder. There was no immediate need to have surgery, so I was transferred to Guam where General Johnson awarded me the Distinguished Flying Cross and a Purple Heart and was then air evacuated back to Dyess AFB. The next day I was sent over to Carswell AFB. The following day they made a 5" incision in my right shoulder, replaced the large piece of bone that had broken loose, and secured it in place with a 1" screw, which will stay there forever unless it gives me problems. I have gone through three months of therapy and still can't get my right arm above my head. It looks like that is all I'm going to get. It still causes me some pain, especially with a lot use or heavy activity that causes me to move my arm to limits.

Well George, that is the story. I am thankful to be alive. The mission over Hanoi on December 27, 1972 was a nightmare I will not soon forget. I found out on that mission that I was not a coward. I begged for an excuse to turn that airplane around and not fly through those missiles, but I was more afraid of being branded a coward, than of dying.

Your friend,
Jerry

The above was written by:
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