

“MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY – Gunfighter 69 going down!”

Tactical Command & Control – Monkey Mountain

It was the TACC- North Sector “Swid Shift” which is the evening “swing” shift and the midnight to 0700 “mid” combined into one 14 hour overnighner. We were engaged in our missions and all was pretty routine. But that was about to change...

The Tactical Air Control Center typically has subordinate radar sites engaged in regional Control of fighters, and Reporting of air surveillance information. But the North Sector TACC atop Monkey Mountain 6nm northeast of DaNang, Republic of Viet Nam was uniquely different. It engaged not only the radar inputs of several networked radar sites but also incorporated digitized “special inputs” from the world of special intelligence which combined to present a composite battle management air picture which showed in minute detail the air activity of all of North Vietnam, the entire Peoples Republic of China border to a depth of about 50 miles from the South China Sea across to Burma including all of Laos.

The primary missions of TACC-NS, callsign “Motel”, included

- real time warnings to friendly aircraft when they came close to crossing borders into China, using a codeword announced on Guard Channel and the friendly’s callsign,
- issuing “Bandit calls” when hostile MiGs threatened friendly forces operating in ROLLING THUNDER (North Vietnam), BARREL ROLL (Laos) or STEEL TIGER (southern Laos), by transmitting “Bandits Bandits” Bulls-eye (Hanoi) and a location in miles from the bulls-eye like “west 40” followed by altitude and heading,
- Flight Following specific aircraft (photo recce for example),
- or large “Alpha Day Strikes” missions involving more than 100 F-105 fighter-bomber Strike aircraft and their escort fighters designed to suppress Flak or AAA and accompanied by F-4C for MiG CAP,
- supporting Special Operations (like U-2 and SR-71 flights),
- and supporting 37th ARRS Search & Rescue missions for downed aircrews.

Border Warnings were critical to the politics of the war in Indochina. In essence, we were being totally proactive in our attempt to warn American pilots of an imminent over-flight, but we were there to vector them away from “the line” and to document the event should that data be needed later by the Highest US Authority. In addition we were there to make sure our pilots obeyed the Rules of Engagement which prohibited flying into China except when our pilots were engaged with the North Vietnamese Air Force and the dog fight carried both combatants over the border during the fight: the “Hot Pursuit” policy.

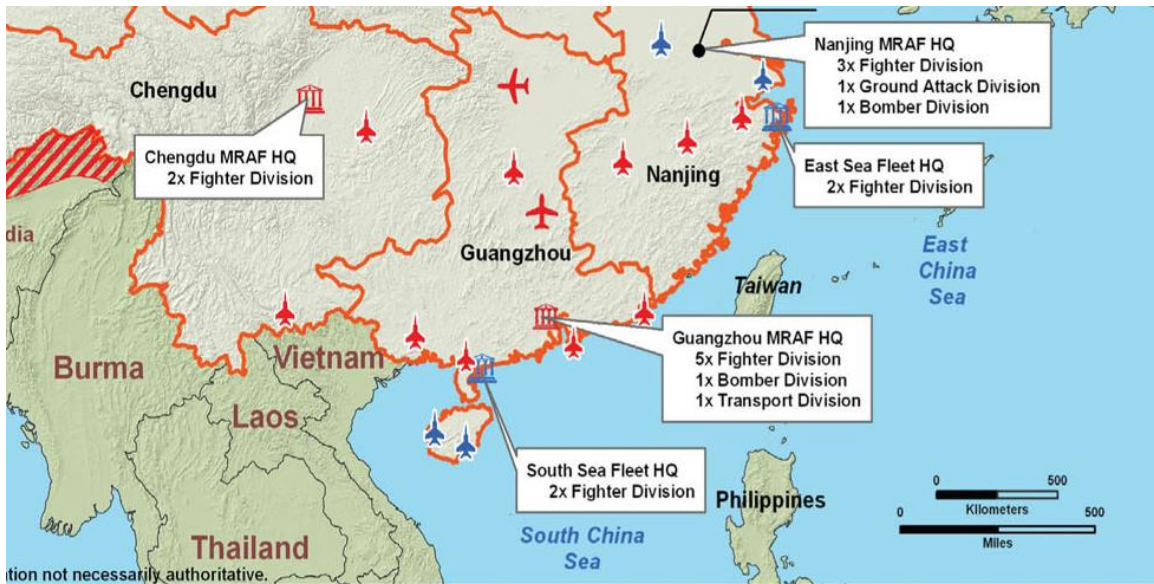


Monkey Mountain, RVN 620th Tac Control Squadron, USAF – “Motel” TACC-NS and “Panama” CRC

The TACC-NS managed the airspace with an eye toward mission accomplishment while we did all we could to prevent an international incident which could serve the political interests of the government of China or North Vietnam. We did not want to give them cause to claim a provocation which could somehow widen the war, or bring China into the war against the United States or take action in other areas like occupying Laos.

Border violations occurred routinely with the over-flight of SR-71 missions but those were fair game – we expect the enemy to fire at will and fail. Border violations by USAF F-105 fighter-bombers loaded with lethal bombs are another matter, especially when the F-105 could be shot down and create a ton of evidence and some POWs on the ground.

If you look at the structure of the Chinese forces they are deployed to accomplish specific geographic missions. The nature of the threat varies significantly according to what years you are analyzing, but there are three major areas of concern at almost any time: the Sino-Soviet Border, the Taiwan issue, and the PRC-North Vietnam border. The location of bases, and the types of ground attack aircraft reflect the needs to deliver firepower on the enemy in each of those areas. The mechanics of aircraft range and payload determine what bases are used and what types of aircraft are made available.



Secondly, it is a truism of war that time relates to distance and that has a bearing on early warning and preparedness. The Chinese have a strategic defense concept similar to the NORAD DEW Line and it is called the “two island chain”. These are believed to be “trip wires” for their defenses. Notice that our WESTPAC US operations, including our strategic bases at Clark, and other places like Japan, Taiwan and Korea *lie inside their trip wire*.



It didn't occur to us that, from the Chinese perspective, two things were true: we were residing inside their perimeter, and they had us more or less surrounded.

366th Tactical Fighter Wing, Da Nang AB F-4C/E “Gunfighters”

“The 366th TFW moved to Da Nang AB and regained the 390th FIS in October 1966. While at Da Nang, pilots were frustrated that they were missing opportunities to shoot down enemy MiGs because the F-4C lacked a cannon and its missiles were ineffective at short ranges. So wing maintainers and aircrews modified the mounting of an external 20-millimeter Gatling gun pod on the F-4Cs used for ground attack for use in air-to-air combat, and in less than a month, starting on May 14, 1967, the wing’s pilots had scored four MiG kills. The gun pod innovation and the MiG kills that followed earned the wing the nickname it carries today, the “Gunfighters.” During this period, the wing earned a Presidential Unit Citation for shooting down 11 enemy aircraft in a six-week period and other combat actions.



It should be noted that not all the action was in the air. Starting with a Viet Cong rocket attack in February 1967 followed by similar attacks in July and September of that year and with increasing frequency thereafter, several ground personnel were killed and injured. The number of enemy attacks throughout the remainder of the conflict earned DaNang Air Base its well-deserved nickname: "Rocket City". The more extensive scheduled aircraft maintenance took place at Clark Air Base, PI.” [Source: *The 366 Wing History Office*]

64th Fighter Interceptor Squadron, Da Nang AB F-102 “Scorpions”

In early 1966 the 64th was selected to move to Clark AB, in the Philippines to boost the F-102 inventory in the Pacific region, in preparation for their move, F-102's from the 64th FIS would receive in-flight refueling capability and a Southeast Asia camouflage scheme. In June 1966 during a project code named "Hot Spice", F-102's from the 64th, would make the flight to Clark AB and officially becoming a part of the Pacific Air Force's F-102 force. The 64th FIS "Scorpions" discontinued their alert commitments in Southeast Asia and was inactivated on 15 November 1969.



Besides flying air defense sorties, F-102s of the 64th FIS at Da Nang accompanied SAC B-52s on combat air patrols over North Vietnam providing fighter cover against North Vietnamese MiGs. Although missions were flown over North Vietnam, the Southeast Asia-stationed F-102As are not thought to have actually engaged North Vietnamese Air Force fighters in air-to-air combat. In addition, F-102A actually did fly some close-support missions over the South, even though the aircraft was totally unsuited for this role. In these operations F-102s used their heat seeking Falcon missiles to lock onto heat sources over the Ho Chi Minh trail at night, often Viet Cong campfires. This was more of a harassment tactic than it was serious assault. They would even fire their radar-guided missiles if their radars managed to lock onto something. The pilots were never sure if they actually hit anything, but occasionally they would observe secondary explosions.



F-102 Delta Daggers On Alert at Da Nang

The small number of aircraft committed to SEA air defense before 1965 tripled by the end of 1966. At that time 12 F-102s stood alert in South Vietnam (6 at Bien Hoa and 6 at Da Nang) and another 10 in Thailand (6 at Udorn and 4 at Don Muang). Little change occurred in 1967 and 1968, the Air Force keeping a minimum of 14 F-102s on 5 minute alert with the remainder of the force on 1 hour call. [Unit history; Mc Chord Air Museum]



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SSgt, USAF 1st Mob Comm Gp.
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64th FIS Delta Daggers at Da Nang Air Base 1967 - 68

26 June 1967 ... Like I said, we were engaged in our missions and all was pretty routine. But that was about to change. Real time intelligence of a grave nature started to flow in and it was obvious that our full attention would be required not in ROLLING THUNDER but over the South China Sea.

The intell reported:

- The Chicom airbase at Ling Sui on Hainan's south coast launched MiG-17s
- Hostile intent - orders to shoot down the intruder "violating their airspace"
- They had identified the target at 135km southeast ...the American Phantom

We verified the only possible American target which was Gunfighter 69, an unarmed F-4C from the 390th TFS of the 366th Tac Fighter Wing, DaNang returning to base from scheduled maintenance at Clark AB in the Philippines. Later we would find out it was Maj J. C. Blandford and 1Lt J. M. Jarvis ferrying aircraft F-4C 63-7577 from Clark AFB in the Philippines when they were intercepted by Chinese Air Force Shenyang J-5s (MiG-17) about 25 miles off the southern tip of Hainan island. It became our belief from the evidence that they were meaconed off their route between Da Nang and Clark beginning about 85nm out from the Hainan coast causing them to fly almost to the Chinese beach violating PRC airspace. So this *appeared to be an attack on Hainan and the Chinese were causing it!*



We assessed the situation: an unarmed USAF Phantom over the South China Sea in International Airspace was about to be destroyed without warning. There was no positive control yet and it might be another 5 minutes or more until Gunfighter 69 was in radio range and able to establish contact. The men next door at "Panama" CRC had no radio contact, nor did they have radar contact. The fact that the PRC had demonstrated "hostile intent" was vested in their launch of two MiG-17's with orders to attack the Phantom.

The Battle for Gunfighter 69

Gunfighter 69 was not yet on *Panama* GCI surveillance radar nor was it under positive control at this point. The mission of *Motel*, the TACC, was to manage the battle. The mission of *Panama*, the CRC, was to provide radar and voice control for fighters. Events began to develop very rapidly. *Motel* was now following *Gunfighter 69* trying to warn the crew while watching the MiG-17s and more PRC fighters using TACC-NS Special Sources.



The Chinese described it: “June 26, 1967, in Wenchang County, Hainan Island, 135 km south-east over the international airspace found an American F-4C fighter, 8500 meters high, 850 km per hour. [This is the correct location, altitude and speed for Gunfighter 69. I believe at this point the meaconing was initiated which drew the aircrew off course and toward Hainan from the southeast.]

“Hainan Island Naval Aviation Division, 6th Battalion commander was responsible for the air defense to determine if U.S. aircraft, along international air routes to the south in order to have an international cover for the aircraft for eastern invasion of Hainan Island from the angle to the south. along the Lingshui activities.”

“To buy time, the commander immediately ordered 16 Chief Deputy Wang Shu-Shi and Lu and pilots to face enemy. Two-plane after take-off, rushed to the theater (in pairs with maximum power).”

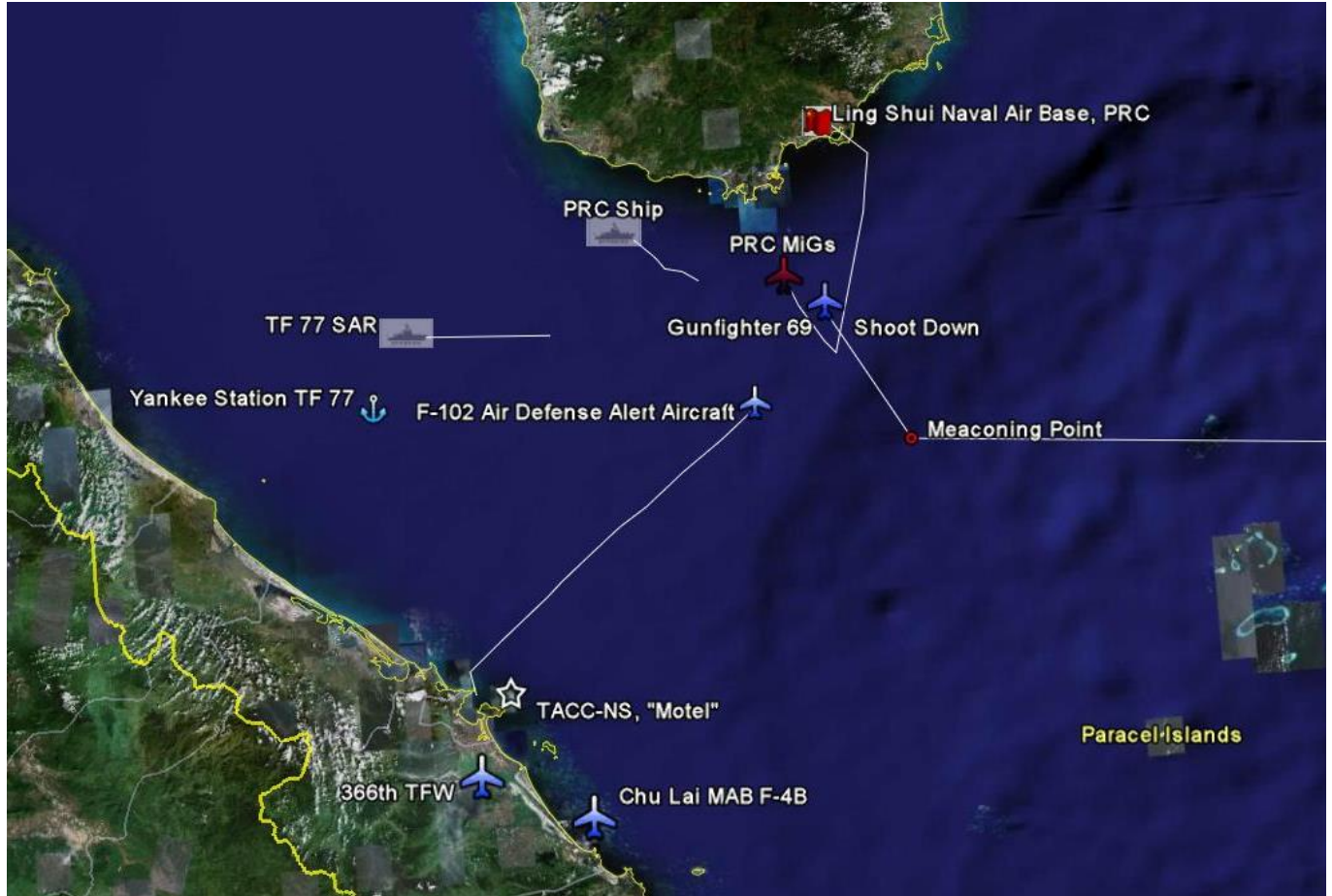
“ Complex weather conditions seriously affected the fighting started. 9000 meters over a large area of dense clouds and cumulonimbus, the 600 meters at low altitude while a thunderstorm. Wang Shu-flying climb to 10,000 meters, is preparing to turn left to the enemy attack, the U.S. plane suddenly dropped a high turn left, slipped out of China's territorial sea line. A few minutes later, the U.S. plane entered again into Chinese airspace to the east. Wang Shu-chu, another preparation, but once again the U.S. plane suddenly fly out of the island's territorial waters.”

“I played "hide and seek" game with U.S. plane - with the plane in the air (heavy cloud formations). Navigator of inaction , according to the intention of the commander, decided to adopt the "enemy outside, I inside, the enemy turned around, I pulled out" as a (tactic) means to guide and Lu Shu-chu, and Wang Jiliang are patrolling the coastline on standby.”

“ When the U.S. planes in the Lingshui 55 kilometers turn right onto 3rd invasion of the airspace of China [27nm southeast of the Hainan coast], Wang Shu-Turn hard left at once, rapidly approaching at a distance of 250 meters when the gun salvo has hit 204 meters away from the enemy, the U.S. plane knock down. Lu and Jiliang also hold several meeting and flew on. The U.S. plane crashed immediately with explosion.” [source Chinese language official press and translation services]

Badly damaged by cannon fire from the MiGs, the crew ejected at an altitude of about 25,000 feet. At this point we got momentary radio contact with Gunfighter 69 and confirmed by intell: “MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY – Gunfighter 69 going down!”

Motel exercised overall control to defend *Gunfighter 69* by expediting the launch of two F-102 air defense birds at DaNang to intercept the MiG's. As the Delta Dagger F-102's departed Da Nang eastbound, climbing out over the South China Sea, more intell came in. Other MiGs were launching from another Chinese airfield on Hainan Island. We were outgunned again, so we looked for support from both the 366th TFW F-4s, *Gunfighter 69's* own Wing, and the Marine F-4's at Chu Lai under agreement we had with HQ III MAF, but it would be some time before they could launch and be in position to help. Clearly, the Chinese had picked the time and place to bushwhack *Gunfighter 69* putting all the American forces seriously behind the power curve and playing catch-up.



The TACC was linked to *Red Crown* Yankee Station and TF 77 naval forces were now responding with SAR resources enroute to pick up the *Gunfighter 69* aircrew. The US Navy was in a race and behind the curve as the Chinese vessel had a head start, and was rapidly closing on the aircrew afloat, alone and in the blackness of night. *Motel* shared our combat information and updated *Red Crown*. The original MiG-17s had completed their mission and now, with two USAF F-102's closing on them, the MiG's returned to base at Ling Shui on the south coast of Hainan Island. No other MiGs had yet gone feet wet, they maintained an orbit over the PRC island. The Delta Daggers were coming in fast but they had no MiG targets. The immediate problem was providing protection for our aircrew until the US Navy ship and SAR helicopter could arrive and effect a rescue.

A few minutes later the Chinese MiGs had cleared the area so I re-directed the F-102's to the area where the Chinese ship was supposed to be. After a few minutes the "Deuces" called a visual Ident on the Chinese ship. Lead asked permission to fire and I authorized it: "Permission granted, sink the \$@#&&^%!" The Deuces rolled in on the ship and then launched 24 2.75" Folding Fin Aerial Rockets each. After 48 rockets detonated the F-102 pilot reported "Splash One" which confirms a kill. Presumably 48 rockets pierced the ship in a mini-holocaust which ended the combat then and there.



Chinese Gun Camera Film of Gunfighter 69 Shoot Down (Provided to author by the pilot)

The U.S. Navy picked up the *Gunfighter 69* aircrew, and all other fighters returned to base. The orbiting MiG's stayed over Hainan Island electing to protect the homeland from a safe location. The F-102's recovered at Da Nang. I was briefly chewed out by the Blue Chip Duty Officer, a Brigadier, who asked what my authority was. As a 1/LT Ops Crew Senior Director I answered: "As ranking duty officer I had the obligation to defend our forces and I did, sir." I sweated that for the next two days.

The New York Times covered the story in their 26 June 1967 edition stating that bad weather and faulty American communications caused our jet "to stray over Hainan". It was "war provocation" said the NYT quoting the Chinese Communist press agency Hsinhua. The Times went on to talk about other shoot downs with the United States steadily escalating the war effort. There was no mention by either the communists or the New York Times of Chinese meaconing an unarmed plane or our destruction of the ship.

This incident should have had some severe repercussions but it didn't. Presumably we killed about 30 Chinese sailors and sunk a ship. It's ironic that we focused so much time, effort and treasure along the PRC borders north of Vietnam and Laos while somewhat neglecting the southern airspace. We defended against attacks that came to us, and at least

one time that did happen. But we had a gap in the area south of Hainan and the Chinese exploited it.

But then on April 1, 2001 there was a collision between a Chinese F-3 fighter and the United States Navy IT-3E 'Aries' surveillance plane resulting in a U.S. emergency landing on Hainan Island. McGill Law School studied that incident in depth: "... it represented a very public clashing of the world's two great super powers as they strove to define their positions in the world order and postured to save face, in their oriental and occidental ways. Above all, the incident raised five distinct questions for the future of world peace."

Interesting. I haven't heard a word about the 26 June 1967 incident in 40 years, an event which was caused by the Chinese, and which resulted in a heroic save by American forces and death to the Chinese combatants. And now I am going to paint a red ship on my Jeep Liberty!

William R. Peterson TLCB #1095
Thailand-Laos-Cambodia Brotherhood

William R. Peterson was the Combat Crew Senior Director at the TACC – North Sector at the time of this incident. He had subsequent service as a squadron operations officer and commander, followed by assignments in the Pentagon, NSA and CIA.

