

## **Sequel to “MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY Gunfighter 69 going down!”**

**By William R. Peterson (aka “Willi Pete”)**

**On 26 June 1967 a pair of MiG-17's circled the skies over southern Hainan Island waiting for the order to attack. Their prey was an unarmed F-4C returning from Clark airbase in the Philippines to the 366<sup>th</sup> Tac Fighter Wing, callsign Gunfighter, at Da Nang, RVN. The Chinese had successfully “meaconed” Gunfighter 69 off course to create the appearance of an attack by U.S. Forces against China.**

**Major Jim Blandford, pilot, and Weapons Systems Officer Jeremy M. Jarvis, had mechanical problems with their navigation gear which delayed take off. Now Major Blandford thought his gear was acting up again, but this time it was the meaconing . Suddenly the clouds parted and Jim saw the terrain below and knew it wasn't what it should be. And in that instant, without warning the MiG attack was on. Gunfighter 69 got off a MAYDAY as they prepared to eject, and another call “MAYDAY MADAY MAYDAY Gunfighter 69 going down!” and then they were gone from the plane and swaying in their chutes as they fell 5 miles to the South China Sea below.**

**Unknown to the aircrew I had launched a pair if F-102 “Deuces” to provide MiGCAP, combat air patrol, to ensure their safety against any CHICOM attempts to capture them or strafe them in the water. The Chinese had shot down a USAF F-104 a few years before, using the same ambush techniques, and the pilot was still a POW. Now there was a Chinese ship enroute to the scene and much closer than our own Navy SAR forces.**

**At about 13 minutes out of Da Nang the lead Deuce pilot called in to Motel and I told him there were no MiGs in the area. The ambushers were on their way home while other MiGs maintained a patrol over central Hainan Island. To prevent capture or worse to our Gunfighter 69 aircrew I directed the Deuces to get a visual identification of the Chinese ship. Another minute passed, then he called “TALLY HO!”. I asked them to absolutely confirm their “Tally Ho” and they did. At that point lead Deuce asked permission to Go In Hot. I asked for a “Weapons Check” and he confirmed each Deuce had 24 rockets - 2.75FFAR. I didn't know what the Chinese vessel had but it didn't matter. The decision was made in that instant.**

**“Lead, this is Motel- you are cleared in weapons hot. Sink the %#6\*&@ Chinese boat.”**

**“Roger Motel – going in hot!”**

**A minute later Lead called back: “Motel Motel Splash one!”**

**“Roger that!”**

**The Navy rescue helicopter picked up the aircrew and flew them to U.S.S. Hornet for a medical check and then they were flown over to Da Nang. There being no further threat I released the F-102 fighters to return to base, and reduced the alert to our normal wartime status.**

Flash forward to July 2010.

I'm not a "joiner". I have a healthy social life but I just don't have a need to join organizations – until I found TLCB. I couldn't believe the warm welcome home – even after 39 years it felt good. And there was so much to learn, especially when I thought I knew so much already! In return for all the great posting on the TLCB Mission Board, the MEM, and the website, I thought the least I could do is contribute some articles. Immerse yourself in TLCB and you will find yourself in a hugely rewarding maturing process. What you get out of a thing is proportional to the amount you put into that thing. My piece on the ambush of an unarmed American F-4C by the Communist Chinese was of special interest to me because I was personally involved in saving the aircrew and killing an unknown number of Chinese aboard a PRC vessel attempting to take them as POWs.

For instance, I didn't know my work one afternoon in Vietnam was the subject of a New York Times article. They didn't mention me by name but it was a one of a kind deal – hard to miss – the loss of a Phantom jet shot down by the Chinese in self-defense over Hainan Island. Self defense my ass! They electronically lured the Phantom off course by means of a technique called "meaconing" into a place where two MiG-17s were waiting to implement a shoot down technique they had practiced especially for this occasion. The NYT didn't print that, nor did they disclose that the Chinese lost a ship in the process.

This was clearly a cover-up involving the Chinese Communist naval and air forces of Hainan Island and the Central Government in Peking, the NYT, and the US Forces in the chain-of-command. I'm not saying they were in collusion, working together for a common goal. It's simply like the event never happened. The Glassboro Conference in New Jersey was underway, with world leaders converging to find peace for the common man. The second in command of the Moscow régime was visiting Castro in Havana. The Johnson Administration had been doing all it could to prevent a confrontation with China that might bring China into the Vietnam War. The NYT boasted "Special to the NYT" with their byline; special indeed – it was virtually the Peking talking points. AP picked it up once, with no follow-ups. The fact that I saved two American fliers while killing an unknown number of Chinese in the process never saw the light of day after September 27<sup>th</sup>.

But then I wrote my article for the Mekong Express Mail, hardcopy journal published in the December 2008 MEM, which led to the online reprint of the article on the TLCB website. Now, after widespread MEM distribution and worldwide access via the internet, I discovered that people were interested in the events of Gunfighter 69. Then on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010 I received an email: "Dear Bill: This is hoping that you will receive this email. It was returned as undeliverable from the first email that I tried sending. It is self explanatory. I'd love to make contact with you, *as the pilot of Gunfighter 69 was my older brother, Jim Blandford, and I had heard the story from him. If you receive this, we would love to hear from you.* Thanks and best regards, Joe Blandford".

I never knew the Gunfighter 69 aircrew names until I got involved with the MEM article, and here after 42 years was the brother of the Phantom pilot locating me and asking if we could get together. Well yeah! – but it's a big world, where was he? And that thought of de-briefing

the mission with the family – caused me to think about the fate of the aircrew. First things first, I had to locate Joe. If people tell you it's a small world believe them. I found Joe living and working on Kent Island, MD – my home for ten years, and now Joe was only about 40 minutes from my current home. Joe made my research easy by introducing me as 'the man who saved my brother's life in Vietnam'.

Joe, his wife Marilyn, and two sons Charles and Robert met my wife Jean and I at their family business on the island three days later. We talked for three hours about every detail we could think of and some incredible results came from that meeting. Our debriefing and discussions were resumed two weeks later when Joe's third son, Joe III, flew in from California for some family business and brought some items of keen interest with him. Joe told many stories, and the sons chimed in with their own recollections, painting a picture of an Air Force fighter pilot all of us can be proud of. In essence Jim Blandford rotated to the States and continued his career with a promotion to Lt. Col. serving until his retirement at Mac Dill AFB, Tampa, FL. A large number of nieces and nephews, other pilots and friends gave testimonial to Lt. Col. Jim Blandford. Jim retired in 1977 and died of cancer in 1999.



Christina Olds provided Joe III (aka Lightmann) with a scan of an original photo she made of her Dad and some friends, including Jim in the upper right hand corner, which is in General Olds' SEA scrapbook at the National Museum of the Air Force in Denver. This photo was seen by many million viewers of the History Channel series on "DOGFIGHTS!" and museum visitors.

Over the course of several weeks friends and relatives like LTC Jeff Templin, USA son-in-law to Jim who provided me the Blandford Family Tree (his wife Lisa died in 1997) and a sense of the fun side of Jim Blandford “over Jim's office door was a sign that read "Real Life Fighter Pilot, No Shit". Jeff relates the tribute the city of Tampa paid: “I worked with the Honor Guard from MacDill for Jim's funeral, and with the help of a few retired GO's and Order of the Daedalians, the Mayor of Tampa granted my request to have a 21 gun salute within the city limits.”

Col Ben Fuller, USAF, an F-105 jock recalled the ferry flights to/from Clark and he attested to the fact they were not carrying the 20 mm gun, and they used Doppler nav radar to cross check their normal equipment. Ben was flying a WILD WEASEL mission one day (dive bombing SA-2 SAM sites) against the Kep Airfield and the Northeast railroad when he suffered some battle damage. Unable to make it from the far side of Hanoi all the way back to Takhli RTAFB in western Thailand he opted to try for Da Nang. “When I landed, the first guy up the ladder was Jim who was stationed there. Wow what a surprise. I didn't even know he was there much less flying missions in the F-4.” They both went on to complete their “100 North”

Elaine Corder, Jim's daughter read my account of the battle to save her Dad, Gunfighter 69. She wrote about what happened stateside: “ Hi Bill, I am Jim Blandford's daughter, Elaine Corder. We lived in Sherman, Texas, at the time Daddy was shot down, and I was thirteen years old. It was a Saturday morning and I was leaving for the lake and some skiing when the phone rang and I answered. A reporter was calling about the incident – it was the first we had heard of it. Mother got on the phone and raised heck with the guy for his insensitivity. It is still a very vivid memory. Daddy shared some of the story but generally didn't talk about it very much... I was not expecting to ever hear more about what happened, so it was with great interest and strong emotion that I read the report of the encounter. After 25 years as a hospice/palliative care/oncology nurse, I have worked at the VA for almost a year and have regular contact with veterans. I have learned a whole new appreciation for what our veterans do and give, for their service and the bravery most of us never even think about. Seeing in printed word the situation my father and his crewmate were in was powerful beyond anything I expected.... Because of your valor, I had many more years with my father, who was one of the most remarkable, kind and nurturing souls I have known.”

And as I look over the stacks of emails sent to me by family and friends of the Blandfords, I will take you back to that day in their family business office on Kent Island, Maryland. We are seated at their conference room table and I am reaching out to a large whiteboard where I have described the TACC – NORTH Sector on Monkey Mountain, the array of ChiCom forces focused on the intruder, the flight path of Gunfighter 69 alone, unarmed and unafraid. As I change colors of dry pen to red, I trace the flight profile depicting the Chinese ambush when suddenly... Bob Blandford rushes into the room saying “I've got pictures!”

**Did he ever! He had sent a copy of the MEM issue with my MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY story to Beth in their China office and she searched and found the pilot alive and well living in Shanghai, his biographer, and several photo's of interest!**

**This is the face of the enemy today. This is Wang Zhu Shu, a national hero and a pilot who ambushed Major Jim Blandford and 1stLt Jeremy M. Jarvis over the South China Sea south of Hainan Island. It wasn't their day to die, nor was it his. Pilot Wang was decorated for his skill, service and dedication to the People.**



**The official description of the MiG-17's that participated states:**

*In 1967, on 26 June at 14: 51 min, air defense radar in Hainan Wenchang over 135 km southeast of the County found 1 USAF F-4C fighter, 8500 meters of height, speed of 850 km/h. People's Liberation Army Navy 6 ' 16 mission Deputy King ...benign and Lu JI 6 driving fighter-jet fighters were ordered to play ... Which corresponds with our special intelligence inputs to the TACC-NS.*

*There has been no replacement for the old one, and so the battle of the Golden Medal or Commemorative Medal, a certificate for only a page turned yellow tissue -do small cat, this becomes a litter of Wang. He also received the 2nd third class. Wang seems to be upset about the cheap quality of his decoration*

**Beth, the Chinese lady in the company office in Shanghai, was able to discover that there was a blog dealing with a situation that sounded similar to what she read in the MEM. She found the blog and followed the trail to some text and photographs of Mr. Wang Zhu Shu. Shortly thereafter she was able to confirm that the photographs were indeed authentic and the man shown in retirement was in fact Pilot Wang Zhu Shu, a highly decorated National Hero. She also determined that Wang lived in the Shanghai area. She pursued, on our behalf, additional photos and more information about both Wang and the blogger. And then, mysteriously all her access to Wang and the blogger was denied. This poses a threat to her, her credentials and anybody associated with her. The Blandfords are due for a business trip to China during the last two weeks of September. While we still have unanswered questions we believe this trip could be associated with the activities of Beth and made to look sinister. In no way are we going to place the Blandfords at risk for the sake of a story. Perhaps Wang will volunteer.**



**In this photo we see the blogger looking over Mr. Wang's shoulder with an expression of curiosity.**

**On this page of the book you see Hainan Island, 100 miles diameter, located in the South China Sea. Wang is explaining that the characters depict the Order of Battle for the various deployed forces. Because this area of China is a very large island the majority of forces are a part of the Chinese Navy. In fact, Wang's jet fighter was assigned to a naval unit.**

**Wang is pointing at the Ling Sui base which has control of significant forces. Just below Wang's finger is the area where Gunfighter 69 was shot down. I think the blogger was told the whole story in great detail by Wang but I doubt that anyone in China is ever going to admit to the practice of meaconing. The whole "US aggression" story was a lie; meaconing proves it.**

**Pilot Wang said, and I'm paraphrasing: "I hit the aircraft tail and in a blink of an eye the F-4C was a ghost." The photo is said to be from the MiG-17 gun camera. Major Blandford did not know of meaconing but if it was effective he probably wouldn't. He said he never had a clue that the MiG was engaged until the explosion.**



As I looked at these photos, freshly in from China, I was struck by the words of Jim Blandford sent to me by brother Joe: "he had taken the F4 to Clark in the Philippines for maintenance. He had aborted a couple or three flights due to various equipment malfunctions prior to the flight on 26 June 1967. He was feeling some degree of pressure to get back to DaNang and get back into action and even though his navigation instruments didn't check out completely, he chose to take off and return to DaNang. " Joe arrived in June 1966 and this was June 1967, so he was coming up on his one year tour requirement and he was at the 100 Mission north as well. He wanted to finish up and come home.

"The circumstances leading up to his getting off course were not clear, but he felt that there were some discrepancies in the radar signals/coverage that were possibly caused by unusual atmospheric conditions, leading him to erroneous position information. He had told me that he thought he was making a radar controlled approach, but when he broke out of the overcast, there was no runway that he expected to be in sight, he recognized that something was wrong, he was not where he was supposed to be, he hit the AB's, climbed out, and shortly thereafter, he was hit by the MIG's. As far as I know and as far as the story goes, he never actually saw the MIG's. " He said that all at once, he heard the explosion, all the warning lights and alarms came on, and he realized that he had been hit and ordered Ejection to him and his rear seater, Lt. Jeremy Jarvis." This is where we at Motel, Panama, my F-102's and the Navy heard Jim transmit on Guard channel "MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY Gunfighter 69 going down."



This is Wang Zhu Shu's MiG-17 which fired the cannon rounds that destroyed the unarmed USAF F-4C. The Chinese writing on the jet is Chairman Mao Ze Dong's handwriting "Serve for the people" , a very famous slogan throughout China. This, and other pictures, were emailed to us in July of this year specifically for this story by our source in Shanghai.

Continuing Major Blandford's recollections to his brother Joe: "Both of them ejected, landed in the South China Sea, Jim said that for some reason, during his descent, a sharp piece of metal (possibly from the explosion) kept puncturing his life boat. He said that probably the most dangerous part of the episode to him was getting untangled from the parachute lines once he hit the water. Jim was a very good swimmer, and these comments were very significant. Both Jim and his rear seater, Lt. Jarvis were in the water, they saw the Chinese boat coming toward them, and at the same time, the US Navy helicopter, that we believe came from the Aircraft Carrier, Hornet, came to pick them up. Jim praised the Navy highly."

It was my intent to catch the MiG's and destroy them before they reached the safety of Hainan. The MiGs would have none of it. They were probably aware of the capabilities of the F-102 or the F-4C in a fair fight. Wang's MiGs had too much of a head start so there was no chance to get them now, and no other MiG pilots wanted to play.

And that's when the Deuce pilot saw the Chinese ship. I gave the Deuces on-scene legal authority to kill the threat to our friendly forces. Their successful attack was the only way we could buy time for Navy SAR to reach the Gunfighter 69 aircrew in time. There were many options open to the Chinese, but they opted to call it a day. They got what they wanted – enough half-truths to create a propaganda attack against the United States during the Glassboro Conference.

Bear in mind that I do not believe that pilot Wang played any role in *the ambushing of an unarmed plane* whose pilot believed he was flying an international flight route over open ocean. Wang was flying a well-rehearsed profile for an air-to-air attack. The Chinese command & control officers who guided Wang and the other fighter pilots that day, as well as the air surveillance crews, were all very much aware that they were creating an ambush and its purpose was to lure the American off course along a specific route that had the appearance of an air raid on Chinese territory.

At this point I knew Navy SAR had our guys taken care of, the CHICOM ship paid the price, and our Deuces were in the pattern at Da Nang. Now we returned to our primary mission – the air war in ROLLING THUNDER, BARREL ROLL, and STEEL TIGER.

Sitting here tonight, 43 years later, I'm going to make an observation with an editorial comment. In the event that I wrote about tonight I am a principal – these things happened to me. The Chinese went far enough to execute their plan to the point of the shoot-down, but they failed to obtain two POWs. Fair enough, they contacted the New York Times, provided some facts and a bushel full of propaganda lies and that marginal success was the end of it for them. The NYT got another 'Special to', and an opportunity to spout their Leftist propaganda against the war – and against Truth. A phone call to our unit in either Da Nang (Monkey Mountain) or Saigon (Blue Chip) would have easily produced any number of interviews worth more than what they settled for. The Air Force failed miserably when they provided answers to the public via the NYT. There were equipment problems, documented at Clark AB, before



takeoff. But the Air Force fell in lock step with the NYT (and the Chinese) when they said there were equipment problems, bad weather, and comm failures to warn the pilot of his violation of Chinese airspace. If they had provided the truth the American public might get enraged that an unarmed American aircrew was lured off course and into a trap, shot down, and nearly captured as POWs. What I don't understand is how the Air Force can treat this incident with kid gloves, and then totally overlook the fact that several on-scene Air Force officers attacked and sank a Chinese ship presumably killing a number of sailors who are being characterized as "would be rescuers". Jim was debriefed in the Pentagon and it wasn't easy on him. But Jim didn't have any knowledge of what really happened to his aircraft. It seems we should be given a medal, Silver Star or DFC you name it, or conversely we should be court martialled. You can't have it both ways.

I'm happy things turned out the way they did. I never lost a wink of sleep over the decision I made – it was an act war, and it was legal. I wish I had met Jim Blandford when he came here to Kent Island in 1997 for the wedding of a nephew. He was minutes from my house and we had so much to share. I will confide that my motivation here is tied directly to the plight of POW/MIA families. If I could prevent a POW situation I would, as I did on 26 June 1967. What I hear from the Families, many times over, is their lament as to how many years of goodness they've lost. And it's true.

With that thought in mind I'd like to close with the words of Lt. Col. Jim Blandford's daughter Elaine Corder as she describes how it feels to have those 32 years after the shoot-down:

Know always that your actions made a big difference in many lives. Jim Blandford touched countless hearts in his lifetime, and he was especially beloved by the children and young people lucky enough to know him. He was cherished by his family.

So I enjoy the words of those Blandfords who recently found me, content to know we all did well on that day over the South China Sea. Air Force pilots have their MiG kills painted as a star on their jets. And on the rear hatch of my "inferno red" Jeep Liberty there is painted a black silhouette of a Chinese warship. The words ring true today: "Splash one!".

**Willi Pete**

aka William R. Peterson  
Former Lt. Col. Selectee, USAF  
HQ USAF/IN, NSA, CIA  
TLC Brotherhood #1095