

*A legend in the making is
that of North Vietnam's
Comrade Toon, who after 13
kills, met with death by . . .*

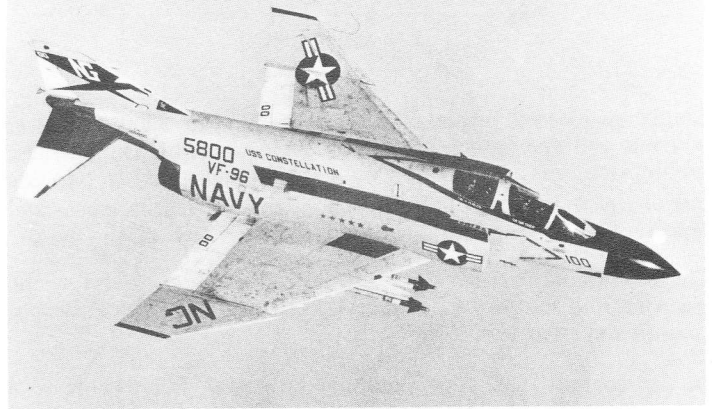
VF-96's FINEST

NUMBER 100 (BUNO 155800)

By Lieutenant David Erickson

For two years in a row, in 1971 and 1972, Fighter Squadron NINETY-SIX captured the Admiral Joseph C. Clifton Award, which is given to the Navy's most outstanding fighter squadron. In 1973 the squadron received the battle "E" and word soon came that USS CONSTELLATION and Air Wing NINE, of which VF-96 was a part, had been awarded the Presidential Unit Citation. CONSTELLATION and more importantly, VF-96 well deserved these awards and had produced an enviable record during its October 1971-July 1972 WESTPAC² cruise. In December, Air Wing NINE pilots hit selected targets over North Vietnam during Operation Proud Deep, the first such bombings since the 1968 halt. On January 19 Lieutenant Randy Cunningham and his Radar Intercept Officer (RIO) Lieutenant Junior Grade Willie Driscoll downed a MiG-21 during a treetop level chase following a protective reaction strike on Quang Lang Airfield. In late March CONSTELLATION and her crew, now in Japan on her way home, were extended and ordered back to the Gulf of Tonkin to help quell the massive invasions from the North. In the next three months her aircrews aided the defenders of the provincial capitol at An Loc. They flew hundreds of strike and support missions in Laos, South and North Vietnam and shot down eight enemy MiGs.

USS CONSTELLATION and her air wing returned home in July. VF-96 was credited with eight of the nine MiG kills and her fifteen aircrews were now seasoned veterans of some 3,000 combat missions. The cruise had also produced the first MiG aces of the Southeast Asian war: Lieutenant Randy Cunningham and Lieutenant Junior Grade Willie Driscoll.



April 1972: Along with 101 (Buno. 155792) and 107 (Buno. 155805), number 100 (Buno. 155800) buddy bombs in IV Corps, near Saigon, South Vietnam. Radar controlled buddy bombing was used routinely when overcast conditions precluded visual dive bombing. In December, 1971, CONSTELLATION Phantoms used this method against North Vietnamese targets flying wing on VA-165's A-6A Intruders during Operation Proud Deep. Photo: David Erickson.

MiG aces pose in front of Admiral Joseph C. Clifton trophy. (Left to right) LTjg Willie Driscoll, VF-96 Commanding Officer, Commander Al Newman, Lt. Randy Cunningham and crew of aces' wing aircraft, Lt. Brian Grant and Lt. Jerry Sullivan. Photo U.S. Navy.



The squadron had lost only one Phantom.³ That airplane, number 100, was officially assigned to the Air Wing Commander and was painted in the air wing's colors, a tradition throughout the Navy given to the first aircraft in each squadron. The loss of number 100 followed VF-96's finest hour: the emerging of the war's first MiG-aces, the downing of six enemy MiGs in a single, vastly outnumbered engagement—including a MiG-17 flown by the famed North Vietnamese pilot Comrade Toon, and an unprecedented three kills by one crew in a single day.

Comrade Toon had long been known to U.S. pilots as an aggressive fighter pilot and was notorious for his threats and challenges made over Radio Hanoi. He skillfully flew all the MiG series aircraft in the North Vietnamese inventory, but preferred the MiG-17, presumably because of its firepower (1-37mm and 2-23mm cannons) and phenomenal turn rate. According to secret U. S. intelligence sources (details of which cannot be disclosed here) Comrade Toon was credited with shooting down 13 U. S. aircraft.

Early on the morning of 10 May the frag came in from 7th Air Force that Air Wing NINE was scheduled for three Alpha Strikes in Route Package IV--the area including Hanoi and Haiphong. MiG activity had been sporadic, however two days earlier southwest of Hanoi, the Cunningham/Driscoll team had shot down their second MiG when it attempted to engage their wingman.

The first strike that day hit petroleum tanks in the Haiphong area. VF-92, sister squadron to 96, was assigned MiG Combat Air Patrol (MiGCAP). Wandering northwest of the target area the two



MiGCAP Phantoms swooped in low over Kep Airfield. Caught unaware climbing out after takeoff, a pair of heavy-laden MiG-21s took a salvo of heat seeking Sidewinder missiles. One MiG tumbled in flames to the ground; the other maneuvering violently, somehow escaped destruction. Perhaps, this explains the unusually fierce MiG reaction encountered on the next strike of the day.

The target was the rail marshal yards of Hai Duong, on the rail line between Hanoi and Haiphong with the defenses of both cities protecting it. The first aircraft began catapulting from the deck of CONSTELLATION at 11:30. It would take nearly half an hour for the twenty-seven aircraft to rendezvous and move into their position in the wedge shaped Alpha Strike formation. The gas hungry Phantoms, requiring tanking to be at their best combat

potential, would be last into position. Eleven Phantoms were airborne, seven from VF-96. Lieutenant Cunningham in number 100 and his wingman each carried 2,000 pounds of ordinance and were briefed to be first over the target, using the Mk-20 Rockeye bombs for FLAK suppression.

Honeybee,⁴ the air wing's official call sign and the nickname of Air Wing Commander Gus Eggert, aimed the strike group toward the "hourglass", our coast-in point. The "hourglass", formed by a silt of the Red River delta, was chosen for ingress on deep penetration missions because of its relatively safe position between the heavily defended Haiphong Harbor to the north and Nam Dinh to the south.

Above: All thirteen F-4Js of VF-96 were similarly painted with the exception of number 100 (Buno 155800) which additionally had the Honeybee and six colored stars of the air wing's six squadrons. Distinguishing markings: front cockpit — CDR GUS EGGERT, aft cockpit — ENS. I. M. FEARLESS, turtleback — Admiral Joseph C. Clifton Award, Fuselage — Honeybee and stars (fore and aft) yellow, black, green, red, blue, orange, forward tail — black triangle contained silver silhouette of MIG-21 shot down 19 January (removed from all aircraft after 10 May). Photo: US Navy

A gradual descent from 15,000 feet was started to a lower, more maneuverable altitude as the formation approached the coast line.

The descent allowed the bomb heavy aircraft to maintain speed as well as reach a lower altitude, better to defeat the surface to air missiles (SAM). Pilots and crews completed their combat checklists, double-checked fuel states and transfer, opened chaff dispensers and adjusted electronic counter measures (ECM). The formation tightened as it passed over the rice patties and dikes below in anticipation of the barrage of defenses always there to meet them.

Honeybee made the turn and headed due north for Hai Duong. It was unusually quiet except for an occasional blip of enemy search radar painting the formation. Off to each side of the strike group the A-7 Ironhand aircraft nav-launched their anti-radar Shrike missiles at the highest threat SA-II missile sites. Ahead lay the rail yards partially hidden beneath the haze layer. Puffs of anti-aircraft fire began forming over the target. Pilots pushed throttles forward and accelerated toward the river as planes split for their assigned targets. The A-6s were first to roll in because they were



limited in pilot visibility and direction of roll in. The skies were now filled with 37mm and 85mm bursts as the defenses of Hai Duong came alive. Voices tensed as pilots called in and off target, now obscured by smoke and bomb explosions. Aircraft turned hard out of their bomb runs snaking through the barrage of FLAK traps. Ambling overhead, Honeybee directed his bombers in their attacks. Lieutenant Cunningham and his wingman, unable to detect a concentrated source of anti-aircraft artillery (AAA), rolled in last on their secondary target, released their bomb load and climbed back overhead to provide fighter cover.

Number 100 and his wingman arced their Phantoms over the target. Without warning, the MiGs hit. Slashing in high and fast from the northeast an estimated twenty-two MiGs hit the strike group.

Lieutenant Cunningham was first to be heard, "MiG-17, MiG-17! Brian, he's on my tail . . . I'm dragging him, get'm baby."

Going into afterburner and baiting the enemy pilot, the pilot of number 100 hoped to lure the 17 into an easy kill for his wingman. But the camouflaged MiG, only interested in hit and run, slashed across his tail firing his belly cannons, dumped his nose, lit afterburner and accelerated toward the ground.

Seeing his wingman similarly engaged, Lieutenant Cunningham reversed direction of his Phantom and pulled hard on the stick until the glow of the enemy's afterburner was in the piper of his gunsight. Squeezing the trigger the heat seeking AIM-9G gave him his first kill of the day. The Sidewinder tracked straight toward the MiG and blew up. The aircraft disintegrated in a ball of fire and plunged to earth.

It was a classic dogfight. Confined to a small area directly over Hai Duong, airplanes were everywhere. A-7s and F-4s fought to break the gun tracking of MiG-17 and MiG-19 aircraft. Anti-aircraft fire filled the sky. SAMs streaked skyward indifferent to the presence of defending airplanes. Burning remains of enemy planes arched across the fight. Two dirty-gray square parachutes, complete with a red circle in the middle, floated toward the ground.

Turning back into the fight, the crew of 100 spotted another black nosed Phantom with two MiGs tight on his tail. Number 100 maneuvered down and to the outside of the turn in order to get a shot from dead six o'clock. Each time he was in position for a shot, the MiG would fire causing the Phantom to break into the fire and disturb his tracking solution. But another enemy aircraft gave him his shot by slashing in on the Phantom from the belly side. The F-4 was forced to change direction and bring the first attacker into position for number 100's second kill. He had the tone as the Sidewinder left the rail and flew straight to the tail of

the attacking 17 before detonating. The MiG rolled slowly, followed seconds later by the pilot's ejection. Cunningham later recounted, "I flew right past him. He had on a leather helmet and goggles like World War II. If you lined up ten gommers today, I could recognize him. He didn't even wave."

Running low on both fuel and missiles, the Honeybee ordered the fighters to disengage and get out of there. Separated from his wingman at the onset, number 100 turned and headed for the water.

Disengaging after destroying two MiG-17s, Lieutenant Matt Connelly spotted number 100 and called him, "F-4 heading 180, heads up, you've got a MiG coming up behind you. It's a 17, you can outrun him." Selecting full afterburner and dropping his nose, 100 accelerated away from the threatening enemy, who, no longer interested, turned back toward the north.

Shifting his eyes back forward Lieutenant Cunningham spotted another dark object on the horizon. He turned and pointed toward it and now identified it as a MiG-17 accelerating toward him. Later, through intelligence sources, he would learn this air-



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Self portrait of author Lieutenant David Erickson in the Phantom. All squadron aircrews wore lightweight form fitting helmets, a distinct advantage in a high-G combat environment. Lieutenant Erickson was assigned to Fighter Squadron 96 from 1971 through 1973 as a pilot and Landing Signal Officer. During that time the squadron made two combat cruises to Southeast Asia aboard USS CONSTELLATION and he flew over 200 combat missions, seeing much of the action in North Vietnam. In addition to the missions in North Vietnam's Route Pac IV and VI (Hanoi, Haiphong and the NVN Panhandle), CONSTELLATION pilots flew missions in all four Corps areas of South Vietnam and most of Laos.



F-4B at entrance to NAS MIRAMAR, home of the west coast fighters. Traditionally, the winner of the Battle "E" paints the aircraft in its squadron colors. Airplane combines the markings of Bun 155800 and present 100, Bun 155580. Photo: David Erickson

Opposite upper page: 100 (Bun 155800) launches from the deck of CON-
STELLATION in early April on barrier combat air patrol (BARCAP). Air-
craft is configured in standard CAP configuration: two AIM-7E-2 Sparrow
IIIs on aft stations 6 and 7, a 600 gallon centerline tank, and four AIM-9Gs
on wing stations 2 and 8. Photo: David Erickson

craft was being flown by Comrade Toon, looking for his 14th kill. As the planes passed head on, the MiG started firing short bursts from his cannons, causing number 100 to jinx to avoid the fire. Lieutenant Cunningham pulled hard on the stick, climbing his Phantom straight up. Looking back over his shoulder, he expected to see the MiG in a tight level turn below him. Much to his surprise, he found himself canopy to canopy in a slow speed scissors with the quick turning fighter and knew he was in trouble. Twice number 100 split for separation and turned back into the fight only to find himself in the same compromised position, now getting critically low on fuel. A third time he maneuvered his Phantom, accelerating for separation, hesitated a few more seconds and then pitched back into the MiG-17, now with advantage. The MiG was ahead of him, belly side up and as if the pilot had lost sight, dipping his wings trying to spot the black nose Phantom. The pipper was brought smoothly up to the enemy's tailcone and he fired his last Sidewinder. The missile streaked right past the enemy's tail and at first appeared to miss, but seconds later a trail of smoke poured out behind the crippled aircraft. It descended straight ahead until it impacted the ground. No ejection was observed.

Number 100 made the final turn toward the beach and climbed out for the coast in an effort to conserve what fuel remained. Egressing south of Haiphong, the crew of 100 didn't hear the missile warnings being broadcast. Neither one saw the SAM until the last moment. The aircraft shuddered as the missile exploded beneath it. Everything appeared to be normal as the aircraft continued its climb, but shortly the hydraulic gauges started fluctuating. Flames, fed by fuel streaming from punctured fuel cells, trailed the plane. As the needles dropped to zero, the nose started to pitch up. Fighting now with his only control left, Lieutenant Cunningham rolled the Phantom using manual rudder. Each time the nose pitched above the horizon, he used all his strength on the rudder to force the nose back down, and as it started down, selected opposite afterburner to keep the nose from getting dangerously low. Lieutenant Cunningham struggled to keep the

heavy Phantom airborne and managed to wrestle 100 the last ten miles to the sea.

Flames streamed one hundred feet behind the plane. As the aircraft crossed the coast line the fire burned through the remaining controls and number 100 went into a spin. Screams from other pilots seemed in vain as the burning plane plunged toward the gulf. As 100 passed 10,000 feet, two chutes blossomed and floated to the water below. Strike aircraft turned and headed back toward the beach. Seconds later, number 100 hit the water and sank in the Gulf of Tonkin. It appeared as if the chutes would drift back over land, but the wind caught them and deposited the two aviators a few miles off shore.

Despite the rescue aircraft being hampered by shore batteries and SAM fire, within the hour Lieutenant Cunningham and Lieutenant Junior Grade Driscoll were safely returned to the deck of USS CONSTELLATION where they received a hero's welcome.

REFERENCES

¹The Navy battle "E"--for excellence--is awarded each year to operational units with the best record, taking into consideration combat performance, safety record, training, administrative, maintenance, and operational inspections.

²Western Pacific, 7th Fleet

³The entire air wing did not fare as well. Two A-7s were lost; one due to engine seizure, the other was downed by anti-aircraft fire (AAA) while flying a road reconnaissance mission over the North Vietnamese panhandle. One A-6 from VA-165 was lost to an SA-II during Operation Proud Deep on a strike in the Vinh area. VF-92 returned less three Phantoms: one crashed half a mile behind the ship attempting a single engine landing; on May 10 two F-4s were hit by AAA over Hai Duong; one went down in the target area, the other managed to limp back to the carrier heavily damaged. One helicopter from HC-1 caught fire, landed and sank in the gulf.

⁴The Honeybee was represented on the side on number 100 along with six stars in the colors of the air wing's six squadrons. During the 1970 WEST-PAC cruise aboard USS AMERICA number 100 had an additional two stars representing the air wing's tanker/ECM and helicopter detachments.