

Rucker. Both pilots fired Sidewinders which exploded close to the target, but the MiG was not seriously damaged and evaded by heading north at high speed. Appropriately, Nargi's kill (the squadron's 160th) was scored on his 111th mission. It was the 19th and last F-8 victory.

In 1969 VF-111 earned a Meritorious Unit Citation for its cruise aboard Ticonderoga. Then in 1971 came transition to F-48 Phantoms prior to joining Air Wing 15. That November the Sundowners prepared for their seventh and final Vietnam War deployment, flying from the attack carrier Coral Sea.

On March 6, 1972, one section of F-4Bs escorting an Air Wing 15 strike into North Vietnam was vectored by a radar control ship to a single bandit near Quang Lang. The lead pilot, Lt. Jim Stillinger, dived on the MiG-17 while Lt. Garry Weigand stayed high to provide cover. Stillinger made four yo-yo passes but the MiG's tight turns prevented him from gaining a favorable firing position. The F-4Bs were armed only with missiles, and the one Sidewinder Stillinger fired went wide. Stillinger then called that he was disengaging and broke off as Weigand came down.

The MiG was straining to stay within gun range of Stillinger at about 500 feet altitude and apparently did not see the second Phantom. Weigand's first 'Winder knocked off the MiG's tail; there was no ejection. Notified of four more bandits in the vicinity, both Phantoms departed the area low on fuel and returned to Coral Sea. Weigand's kill was the Sundowners' 161st in three wars, nearly a unique record for U.S. Navy fighter squadrons.

Six weeks after Stillinger and Weigand's successful combat, strikes were ordered against major cities in North Vietnam for the first time since 1968. VF-111 Phantoms were among the first Navy aircraft to penetrate the Red River Valley in four years. They also flew top cover for Air Wing 15's part in the mining of Haiphong Harbor and other coastal waters in May 1973, winning another Navy Unit Citation.

In the spring of 1974 the squadron was back in the South China Sea aboard Coral Sea, supporting the evacuation of South Vietnam and Cambodia. Sundowner Phantoms flew patrol and recon missions, and also provided air support to Marines on Koh Tang Island during recapture of the freighter Mayaguez.

More recent honors for VF-111 came in 1975 when the squadron won the Chief of Naval Operations Safety Award and was selected as the West Coast entry for the Admiral Joseph Clifton Award, presented annually to the Navy's outstanding fighter squadron. Now flying F-4Ns, the Sundowners are well into their third decade with a history and tradition which might be the envy of any fighter squadron in the world.

REFERENCES

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3. Op. Cit., 1976.
4. Correspondence with V.E. Graham, 1976.
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6. Lt. Don Meyer, informal account written in 1943.
7. Maxwell returned to combat with a vengeance, flying with VF-4 off Ranger and VF-51 off San Jacinto, where he gained eight victories in 1944.
8. Meyer, Op. Cit.
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11. Ibid.
12. BuAer number 03430, squadron number F-23.
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14. Masoner flew with VF-19 from Lexington (CV-16) in 1944, gaining 10 more victories.
15. Morison, S.E., "History of U.S. Naval Operations in WW II." Vol. 6, page 140.
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20. Interview with H.B. Moranville, 1975.
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22. Ibid.
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25. Saggau, Op. Cit.
26. Correspondence with R.E. Clements, 1976.
27. See AAHS Journal for Winter, 1975. "A Sundowner's Adventure" by B. Tillman.
28. Correspondence with E.G. Fairfax, 1976. Dr. Alvin Coox of San Diego State Univ. established the VIP's identity as Vice Admiral K. Hatakeyama, on an inspection of Japanese defenses in southern China.
29. "Crusader Fighter Report" of 1968.

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A 44-YEAR-OLD SALUTE TO ROBERT SHORT



Nokiji Ikuta as he appears today.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Readers will recall Martin Cole's "Robert Short; The Making of a Hero," that appeared in Volume 15, Number 1. It tells the story of an American volunteer pilot, flying for China in 1932, being shot down by Japanese when he alone was involved against six enemy aircraft. His courageous bravery resulted in China honoring him as a national hero, and erecting a commemorative monument. (For monument, see page 240, Volume 19, Number 3.)

It is not known whether the monument still stands, but the memory of Robert Short's bravery still lingers with ex-Lieutenant Nokiji Ikuta, who is credited with the victory. In 1974 Ikuta learned that the dead flier's brother, Ed Short, lived somewhere in Washington state. He decided to try to reach him, giving a letter to a Japanese newspaper editor who was headed for the Pacific Northwest. The editor didn't stay long enough to learn that Ed Short was living in Seattle, and consequently the letter went undelivered.

Sometime later in Japan the editor met the Japanese wife of American Air Force Colonel Ellis B. Craig. Recently, Mrs. Craig returned to her home in Lakewood, Washington, bringing with her Ikuta's undelivered letter. She managed to locate Mr. Short and gave him the two-year-old letter, which reads:

"You may be surprised to receive this letter, so I will first introduce myself to you.

"My name is Nokiji Ikuta and I was a Flight Lieutenant of Japan.

"Now I would like to inform you the following: I confess it was I that staged a big air battle against your brother, Mr. Robert M. Short at Soshu, China and knocked his plane out of the sky on February 22, 1932. Then your brother was a guidance teacher belonging to China Air Force. It is 42 years since then. The year(s) flowed on. How time flies!

"The drift of affairs in the world has been changed and I have been spending a routine life as a common citizen. But my heart is still high in the air and I always [will] remember your brother. Though I shot down his plane, but at heart I respected your brother, First Lieutenant Short.

"What's more, we all the Japanese airmen praised Mr. Robert M. Short with all our heart[s].

"When I looked back over the years, I realize that your brother fought bravely. In addition, his exploit has always lived in my memory.

"Anyway, he challenged [us] with only one plane against our six ones. I am sure his valor would be handed [down] from generation to generation. We had no superior in courage. . . . Sincerely yours, Nokiji Ikuta."