

Dan Cherry's MiG Victory and His F-4D



By Hayden Hamilton

Artist/Photographer John Fleck's rendering of Capt. Dan Cherry's F-4D Phantom II shows the beautiful lines of this airplane in flight. (Painting from the Dan Cherry collection)

As the North Vietnamese offensive continued in the spring of 1972, it became apparent to American Forces that the enemy had to be hit at his supply points. On April 16, 1972, strike forces were sent to bomb fuel depots, warehouses, and truck parks in the vicinity of Haiphong and on the outskirts of Hanoi. These were the first American raids into the Hanoi-Haiphong area since President Johnson's partial bombing halt had been announced on March 31, 1968. As anticipated, the enemy resisted ferociously, firing thousands of rounds of anti-aircraft artillery and about 200 surface-to-air missiles. In the air war, MiG-21s met and engaged American strike aircraft. In the pre-dawn darkness of April 16, 1972, four F-4 *Phantoms* of the 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron roared off the runway at Udorn, Thailand, enroute to North Vietnam. The 432nd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing to which the 13th TFS reports, launched a total of 20 *Phantoms* as part of FREEDOM PORCH BRAVO. Two MiGs were destroyed by a MIGCAP F-4D flight assigned to protect the strike aircraft.

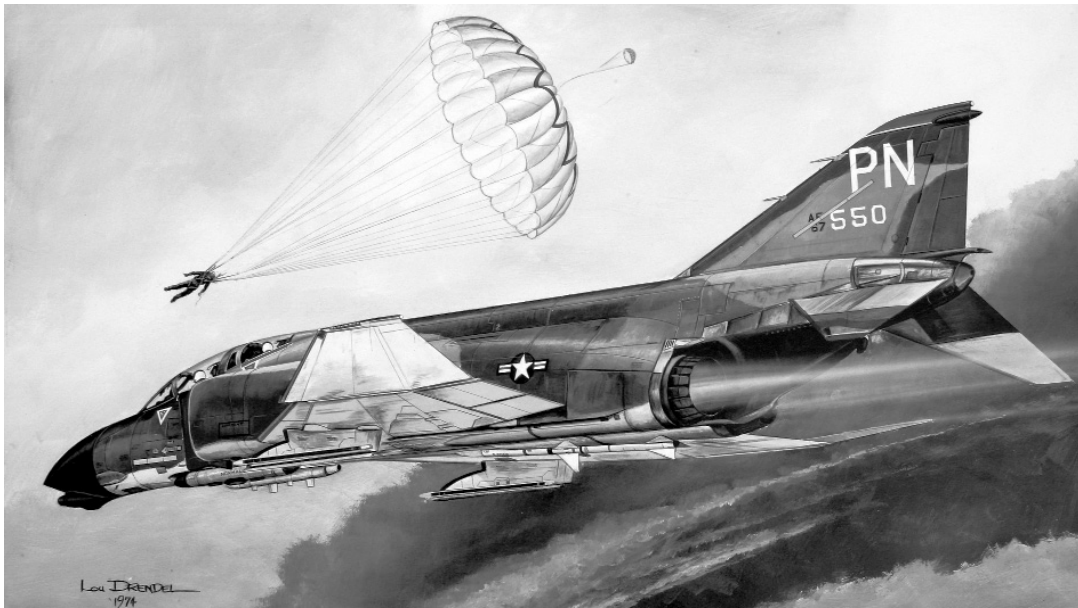
Capt. Frederick S. Olmsted, Jr., and his WSO, Capt. Stuart W. Maas, were assigned to lead a four-ship MIGCAP that was to render cover for strike forces ingressing and egressing the target area as well as provide the first line of defense for Search and Rescue (SAR) forces orbiting close to the North Vietnam border in northern Laos. Flying aircraft 3 in this flight was Major Edward D. Cherry and

Capt. Jeffrey S. Feinstein, with his wing, aircraft 4, flown by Capt. Crane and Capt. Lachman. Major Cherry recounts the events of this mission as follows:

"Olmsted had made contact with at least two MiGs on his radar and was leading the flight to the MiGs. He obtained visual contact with two MiG-21s and called them to us. The MiG-21s passed overhead and Olmsted started a right turn to engage them.

"While in the right turn, our wingman obtained a visual contact with a third MiG-21 and called for us to roll out and turn left. The MiG flew into a cloud layer but we were in hot pursuit. Shortly after breaking through the cloud layer I obtained visual contact with the MiG-21 at 12 o'clock high, in a right, climbing turn. I maneuvered my aircraft into firing position and attempted to fire an AIM-9 heat missile but did not observe the missile launch. (Analysis later showed it appears to have fired but did not guide.)

"We were now in an 80 degree climb with an 80 degree right bank. Capt. Feinstein obtained a full system radar lock-on and I made two more attempts to fire a missile at the MiG but observed no launch. We went over the top with the MiG in a descending right turn. Our wingman took the lead with us assuming fighting wing formation. Our wingman fired all four of his radar missiles at the MiG and missed. During



A Lou Drendel painting of Cherry's combat success over a North Vietnamese MiG-21. Other aviation paintings by the artist can be found on his Web site at: www.aviation-art.net. (Painting reproduced with artist's permission)

this time he lost his radio and did not hear our repeated radio calls to break out of the way so we could shoot. While he was shooting, Capt. Feinstein obtained a full system lock-on on the MiG.

"We regained radio contact with our wingman, passed him on the right, and reassumed lead position in the element. Most of this time our planes were in an 80 degree right descending turn. I fired one AIM-7 radar missile which impacted the MiG-21 just aft of the right wing post. The MiG's right wing immediately separated and the aircraft went into a wild, gyrating spin to the left, trailing smoke and aircraft fragments. Capt. Crane and Lachman in aircraft 4 also observed the missile impact and explosion. The MiG pilot ejected immediately and I, along with Capt. Feinstein and aircraft 4, observed the parachute and the pilot. I estimate that we passed within 500 feet of the MiG pilot's chute."

Cherry would go on to a long and successful career in the USAF. Reaching the rank of Brigadier General and leading the Thunderbirds along the way before retiring to Bowling Green, Ky.

Reunion with his F-4

Cherry's *Phantom*, an F-4D, Serial No. 66-7550, would soldier on for nearly another 20 years before being retired from its final assignment with the 906th Tactical Fighter Group based at Wright-Patterson AFB, Dayton, Ohio. Unlike a large number of the retired *Phantoms*, 550 would get another lease on life, although not in a flying role. The Veterans of Foreign Wars post in Enon, Ohio, was looking for a suitable display for the front of their facility. The F-4D was

moved to their location and placed on display in 1991. Over time enthusiasm for the display waned and the aircraft began to deteriorate due to the harsh weather conditions.

In 2004 Cherry was asked to arrange a tour of the USAF Museum by a number of friends in the Bowling Green community. "A group of guys about my age, in their mid-to-late 60s, have a group that gets together early every morning and goes on a real fast walk. We've been doing it for over 15 years and it's turned into as much a social gathering as anything else. Because of my Air Force

background they wanted me to set up a special tour of the museum. About eight of us went to Wright-Patterson and we had a big weekend planned. After the museum we planned to take in a ball game in Cincinnati. At the museum a member of the staff came down to greet us. He told us, 'You know, there is an airplane that should be of interest to you guys from Kentucky and it might become available sometime soon.' I knew what he was talking about because I had briefly seen my old airplane about two years prior. When the VFW had gotten permission to put it on display they had contacted me and told me that they were going to display it and wanted to know if it might be possible to come up for their ceremony. As it turned out, I couldn't do it for some reason. I wasn't retired at the time and I just couldn't get away. After the tour everybody wanted to go over to Enon and see my old *Phantom*. We went over and found it. It was sitting in the middle of this field in front of the hall, and it was in pretty bad shape. Grass was growing up all around it and it just had dirt and bird droppings all over it. Even so, it was great to see the airplane again and know it had survived, but it also was sad in a way as well, because it was in pretty bad shape. They had good intentions, but



McDonnell Douglas F-4D Phantom II, 66-7550, c/n 2085, seen at Yokota AB, Japan, November 26, 1972, about seven months after Dan Cherry's MiG engagement. (Photo by N. Nishimura from the Douglas Slowiak collection)



66-7550 with the 8 TFW during GUNSMOKE 1981 at Nellis AFB, Nev. The aircraft still carries the red star for Cherry's MiG kill on its ramp. (Photo from the Paul Minert collection)

they just hadn't been able to take care of it."

After visiting the airplane, the rest of the group was enthusiastic about obtaining the F-4D and moving it to Bowling Green. Cherry wasn't convinced it was a good idea. He recognized that just getting the airplane to Kentucky and placing it on display was only the beginning. Without long term care, the plane would quickly descend back to the current state of disrepair. The group was not deterred and persisted in trying to convince General Cherry to come on board. Eventually he relented. "One of our friends is a retired attorney here in town and also a real bona fide historian had done a lot of research on aviators from this part of the country who had distinguished themselves. These aviators stretched all the way from WWI through to space exploration. Many of these stories, as remarkable as they are, are just not known to people. Most folks have never heard of these significant stories. So we started talking about putting together a plan to build a park that we would call Aviation Heritage Park. It would be a place to display artifacts that have some historical ties to a person, a real person, from our area. This really struck a positive note with me personally because I was a little apprehensive about just getting my *Phantom* here and then leaving it at that. I didn't want this to be self-serving in any way."

Aviation Heritage Park

The group formed a non-profit corporation and gained the support of the local city and county government. The county filed the paperwork with USAF Museum to obtain the airplane and designated the Aviation Heritage Park organization as their agent for the removal and refurbishment of the airplane. Worldwide Aircraft Recovery



66-7550 sits forlornly in a field in front of a VFW post in Enon, Ohio, in 2005. (Photo from the Dan Cherry collection)

was hired to move 550 from Ohio to Kentucky. In November 2005 the airframe was disassembled and then reassembled at the Bowling Green-Warren County Regional Airport. In May the Vietnam era paint scheme that the fighter wore when Cherry downed the MiG was reapplied. According to Cherry, "We took great pains to restore it exactly as it looked back in 1972. We wanted to be precise as to where the green and the brown camouflage paint blended together and certainly we have all the markings exactly like they were in 1972. We're real proud of the outcome." In order to finish out the display, the group is looking for the complete instrument complement for the front and rear cockpit.

Now that the first exhibit has been prepared externally, the group is hard at work preparing the site for its display. "We've got engineering and an architectural firm engaged, and a conceptual design completed. We broke ground in the spring of 2007 and phase one was completed with 550 in place by the end of the summer. The group is now busy looking for other artifacts that we can put on display. Our conceptual design has room for a total of seven aircraft. With the *Phantom* being the initial display, we'll add others as resources permit. However, we don't want to put airplanes on display just because we can get them and they are handy. They have to have a story to tell about a real person or persons that have some ties to either Western Kentucky University here in Bowling Green, or this part of the state of Kentucky. That is our kind of niche. We are hoping by doing that we will be an inspiration to the younger generation of kids that may aspire to a career in some form of aviation."

Cherry sums up the goal behind the Aviation Heritage Park, "We see the *Phantom* and every other artifact as much more than a monument. More than anything else they are designed as an educational tool. That is why we want to display all the artifacts down on their landing gear so that we can have platforms on-site and hoist school groups and tourism groups up to actually look in the cockpits so they can try to personally experience what it might have been like to fly that particular airplane.

For more information on the Aviation Heritage Park, visit www.aviationheritagepark.com.

Meeting the MiG Pilot

All of the activity surrounding the preservation and display of Cherry's MiG-Killer *Phantom*, has led to another quest. That is the hunt for the pilot of the MiG-21 he downed that April day.

"I was in casual conversation with the same group of guys who started this process, and one of them said 'Wouldn't it be great if you could find the pilot of that MiG?' The more I thought about it, I thought 'Gee whiz, that would be something.' I personally would really like to meet the guy. At the time of the shoot



Brig. Gen. Dan Cherry's, restored F-4D-30-MC Phantom II, 66-7550, on the ramp at the Bowling Green airport prior to being installed in the Aviation Heritage Park. More information about the Aviation Heritage Park can be found on their Web site: www.aviationheritagepark.com. (Photo by John Fleck from the Dan Cherry collection)

down we believed he was Vietnamese, not Russian or Eastern Bloc. We don't know that for a fact, but it was rumored that he had several kills to his credit. I don't know what his name was, but I know he survived the shoot down because I saw him very clearly and up close in his deployed parachute. It was also rumored he went back and flew more missions. I would eventually like to facilitate a meeting between the two of us. The Vietnamese Air Force kept excellent records of their engagements so we just need to find the right person who can help us track him down."

Working through friends, Cherry made contact with a reunion show on Vietnamese television. They worked through the Ministry of Defense to identify the pilot as Nguyen Hong My. The producer of the show, called "As If We Never Parted," contacted Cherry in December 2007, asking if he would appear on the show. Cherry agreed and in early April 2008 he made his first visit to Vietnam since the war. On



In April 2008, Gen. Dan Cherry meets Nguyen Hong My, the North Vietnamese MiG-21 pilot he shot down 36 years earlier on April 16, 1972. They are at a Vietnamese War Memorial in the Hanoi area. (Photo from the Dan Cherry collection)

April 5, Cherry was in their studio where the show's host introduced him and told the audience about his life. She then introduced My and related his background including four years of flight training in the Soviet Union

and his war service. My broke both his arms bailing out, but would go on to fly for two more years after recovering from these injuries.

Cherry reported that he was nervous, wondering how he would be received. My smiled as he came out and shook Cherry's hand. Through an interpreter, My said he was glad to meet Cherry. My indicated that he had never thought about looking for the pilot that had shot him down. Following the war, he studied English and finance, and worked for an insurance company.

The two pilots hit it off really well, resulting in them traveling together to Hanoi where My lives. My invited Cherry to have dinner at his home and meet his family, which resulted in an enjoyable evening. The two spent a couple of days visiting and touring various historical sites in the Hanoi area including a number of military museums that ordinary tourist seldom have the opportunity to see. The visit resulted in the establishment new friendships that will extend beyond the brief meeting.

Cherry has invited My to visit Bowling Green and is assisting My is trying to locate the family of an American plane he shot down.

Sources

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