

12th TFW Association Story

Friendly Fire Incident at Lei Khe

by Norman Malayney, 12th Association Historian



The following is the best available account of an incident involving a 391 TFS Phantom aircraft flown by a 558 TFS aircrew that was downed by a US Army Howitzer round.

On 12 July 1967, 7th Air Force fragged the 558 TFS for a landing zone (LZ) preparation. F-4C serial 64-0718, callsign Whiskey 21, flew lead in a three-ship flight. The lead crew was Major James A. Rainwater, aircraft commander, with Lt. Tom Plank in the rear seat. Their armament was napalm and a Gatling Gun. The second aircraft was crewed by Major Charles Bowdish and Major Anderson, and the third in the strike was flown by Major Hudson with Lt. Bill Wall; both carried Mk82 high-drag bombs and a gun.

The flight started engines at 0845 and after takeoff proceeded to the target fix of Channel 73/320/20 in III Corps, some 26-miles NW of Saigon. At the rendezvous point, Paris CRP (control and reporting post) directed Buzzard 22, an F-100, to join the flight orbiting at 16,000 feet waiting for artillery that was softening the LZ to be called off. When the FAC (forward air controller) received clearance into the target area the fighter-bombers aligned in trail formation with Major Bowdish, Whiskey 22, following Lead, Whiskey 21. The aircraft descended visually in right turns through openings in multiple broken cloud layers. The flight eventually got below the cloud base and leveled off at 1,000 feet and headed north with the FAC off the right wing.

Whiskey 22 glanced to the right looking for the FAC and when he returned to sight the lead aircraft, he observed a "massive orange fireball." Bowdish said to his backseater, Major Anderson, "Jesus Christ, what's that" followed with "Bailout-Bailout." Emerging from the fireball Bowdish observed various pieces of aircraft and recognized either a napalm can or fuel tank. He then added power and climbed to make a right-hand orbit.

Whiskey 22's crew observed one good chute and about one minute later heard a good emergency beeper signal. As they passed 5,000 feet, Major Anderson called on Guard Channel to Bien Hoa for search-and-rescue. Bowdish joined on Whiskey 23 and the two aircraft continued to orbit the area. Subsequently, both F-4s returned to Cam Ranh not knowing the cause of the explosion was a 105mm Howitzer round striking and destroying Whiskey 21.

Tom Plank's (Whiskey 21 Bravo) recollections which follow were written two days after the event.

[Early morning] I cleaned up to prepare for my fourth mission in-country, having just arrived a few days earlier.

The briefing began at 0710 and I arrived at the squadron by 0630. This was my first mission as lead GIB (guy in the back) and I wanted to prepare the blackboard information. The meeting started on time with Major James Rainwater, my aircraft commander, conducting the flight briefing which was standard for this type of mission--LZ Prep. Intel mentioned there had been enemy fire in the area at the beginning of the month, but none since then.

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After briefing, I went to the O'Club for breakfast, then met Major Rainwater in Personnel Equipment, and we suited-up and walked out to the airplane. This was his second to last mission before rotating to CONUS.

We performed a normal preflight and start-up. Taxi was normal with exception of Major Rainwater asking me if my mask was off due to static on the radio. My mask was on, and the static became bothersome during flight. Takeoff was normal as was the flight to the target, once again, with static problems on the radio.

After arriving on target, Paris CRP instructed us that Buzzard 22, an F-100 would be joining us to deliver ordnance on the LZ prep. We experienced some difficulty receiving the FAC information from Paris due to radio static but finally established contact with the FAC detailing the ordnance our flight carried. We had a 15-minute wait before the FAC ordered us on target. We descended from 16,000 feet through holes in layered cloud decks, the last one at about 1,200 feet. We finally located the FAC and were about to make a dry run over the LZ to familiarize ourselves with the area. The flight up to this point was normal with perhaps a garbled radio the only problem.

The catastrophic event occurred with Plank not knowing it was a 105mm Howitzer that struck a mortal blow. The round impacted his airplane near the refueling door behind the cockpit causing fuel cells to explode into a colossal fireball.

Ejection: An explosion produced such force that left no doubt an ejection was imperative. I glanced at the front cockpit Master Caution Light Panel and every warning light was lit. The strike caused the aircraft to pitch-down perhaps 10-degrees and thus appeared to have hit aft of the cockpit area. Major Rainwater shouted to bailout, and I ejected without hesitation, having practiced the procedure many, many times. Due to my height, I pulled the lower ejection handle and as I left the aircraft, I felt severe heat and seemed to be engulfed in flames. I thought, perhaps I would burn up, but as I tumbled, I felt the fire blow out and then the chute opened. The system worked as described in the Dash One. Ejection altitude was about 1,000 feet in a 10-degree nose down attitude with a right roll.

Decent and landing: As I opened my eyes immediately after the chute deployed, I observed the burning wreckage on the ground but did not witness the impact. The black smoke area was about a mile in front of me as I drifted towards the scene and off to the left a little. I never witnessed Major Rainwater eject.

At this point, I performed my descent procedure – checked the chute, opened my mask and pulled the survival kit release handle. I prepared for a tree landing in a rubber plantation by covering my face with forearms and keeping legs together. The chute hung up in the trees and I remained suspended about six inches above the ground. The average tree height was 15 feet. In brief, I ejected, felt intense heat and the opening of the chute, and landed in the trees in a matter of a few seconds.

Ground time: I released myself from the chute and opened the survival kit. I saw a small clearing about 20 yards away and made my way over. It wasn't actually a clearing, but where the undergrowth was less dense. I retrieved my radio and put the beeper on for a few seconds and then attempted to broadcast. By this time many army choppers were circling overhead and had spotted me. I establish radio contact and was informed that a rescue helicopter was on its way.

An army chopper arrived and threw me a rope which I tied around myself in horse-collar fashion. They were unable to haul me directly up due to the short rope and the chopper was not equipped with a winch. The army said they were sending in a rescue chopper with a winch-operated tree penetrator and left, which upset me since my right chest started aching.

I seemed to hear tree limbs breaking around me which, for all I knew, may have been VC looking for me. Meanwhile, I went to recover the accessory kit to prevent the VC from accessing it. After retrieving it, I returned to the pick-up position. An army chopper arrived shortly and lowered the winch-operated tree penetrator. I put on my helmet, climbed on the penetrator and gave the crew thumbs-up. Total ground time was around 15 minutes.

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Post Rescue: The chopper delivered me to the Lei Khe dispensary. My burns were dressed as I rested on a cot because the right side of my chest was extremely painful. Two hours later, a Dust-off [helicopter] flew me to Bien Hoa for immediate loading on board a CH-3 chopper for transport to a Tan Son Nhut dispensary. The following day they transferred me by stretcher on board a C-130 to Cam Ranh for admission to the 12th USAF Hospital.

According to comments of the 12th Hospital flight surgeon examining Plank:

Major Rainwater sustained fatal injuries because his parachute did not fully deploy...Plank correctly gripped the lower ejection handle with his right hand, then grasped his right wrist with his left hand to keep both arms in toward his body to preclude flailing of both arms during ejection...Due to the urgency of the situation, he failed to lower his visor and received superficial flash burns to the right side of his face and neck, as well as deeper second-degree burns of the right wrist and distal forearm...No portion of his gloves or flying equipment was burned or scorched...It is believed the rush of air slid the right sleeve of his flying suit up the arm, thus exposing an area of bare skin of his right lower forearm not protected by his flying gloves to the flash fire...Other injuries involved contusion of the costochondral junction of the right 11th anterior rib without overlying soft tissue injuries. The mechanism of this injury cannot be logically explained...Because of the intense blaze that enveloped his cockpit area after the hit, as attested to by several witnesses, it is questionable his survival would have been possible had he hesitated initiating ejection a few more seconds...The parachute deployment, descent and landing were uncomplicated.

No one provided Plank with a full explanation regarding the circumstances of how a Howitzer round destroyed his Phantom fighter-bomber.

In 1979, Plank was assigned to TAC HQ at Langley AFB for a staff tour. He became paired with Lt. Col. William "Billy" Mitchell who handled plans while Plank managed the operations for a special project. In their initial meeting, Plank noticed that Mitchell wore the Army Combat Infantry Badge and Parachutist Badge in addition to USAF Senior Pilot wings. Plank mentioned his bailout and Mitchell surprisingly replied he had witnessed the event firsthand. Mitchell then began providing information to fill in the gaps and add perspective to what transpired.

Mitchell, a 1965 graduate of the US Military Academy West Point and a grandson of airpower pioneer Brigadier General William L. Mitchell, who is regarded the father of the United States Air Force, completed two US Army tours in Vietnam: his first as a Green Beret on special field operations, leading combat patrols; he then volunteered for a second tour and served as aide to Brig. General Bernard Rogers, 1st Cavalry Division. The general liked monitoring support air strikes and Mitchell accompanied him in a UH-1 Huey helicopter for the 12 July LZ prep.

The Howitzers at Lei Khe fired 105mm rounds from the base's southwest corner to soften up an area 2 1/2 kilometers east in a rubber plantation. The apogee of each round was 14,000 feet. The Howitzers fired five rounds a minute followed by a one-minute cool-off period, then repeated to fire another five rounds, etc. The rules of engagement did not allow bombing in South Vietnam without being under direction of a FAC. The FAC called for the artillery to cease operations, and this appeared to happen. But the lull was coincident with the one-minute cooling period. It appears someone in the arty chain of command misinterpreted the shutdown order or faulty communication occurred.

The FAC cleared the flight to the LZ. As the lead Phantom approached, Mitchell caught a flash of artillery fire and notified the general, who attempted to shut it down. Too late! They both observed a round strike the Phantom aft of the cockpit area, instantly creating a massive fireball explosion. Large flames trailed the aircraft as it dipped 10 degrees and began to roll right earthwards. Mitchell estimates Plank ejected in 30-45 degrees of bank, while Rainwater ejected in 90-120 degrees of bank, impacting the ground before full chute deployment.

The general's helicopter landed at Lai Khe and it is presumed he first went directly to where the artillery was for an explanation of what went wrong. General Rogers with Mitchell then visited the army dispensary to speak with Plank.

The side-effects of morphine that Plank received for his chest pain clouded his mind. The general elected to inform him that a friendly artillery round struck the jet and his front-seater "didn't make it." Mitchell recalls that Plank, emotionally

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distraught by this revelation, became belligerent and, as tears welled up in his eyes, began swearing invectives at the general.

After hearing Mitchell's account of the incident, Plank surmised:

Because of my violent (cursing) response, I was given a second morphine shot. I do not remember the morphine injection or my aggressive reaction to Rogers telling me of the friendly arty. I seem to recall that I was reacting to being told Rainwater was dead. This news may have blocked any recollection of being told the incident was caused by friendly arty. Perhaps my mind couldn't accept so pointless a death for Major Rainwater. It was a tragic set of circumstances.

Years later, Plank related the incident to a retired Army artillery officer who served in Vietnam. He said that the 105mm Howitzer round must have failed to detonate when striking the Phantom. He said if the round had exploded the aircrew would have instantly perished.

After Billy Mitchell completed his second Vietnam tour, he transferred to the Air Force, went through pilot training and then served a third tour in Vietnam at Danang AB as an F-4 aircraft commander.

Plank, a 1965 graduate of the US Air Force Academy, upgraded to the front seat of the F-4 and continued his 23-year Air Force career as a fighter pilot. His assignments included serving as an exchange pilot flying the Harrier "Jump Jet" with the Royal Air Force, a remote tour as a FAC flying the OV-10 Bronco at Osan AB, Korea, and a tour as an A-10 "Warthog" squadron commander at Myrtle Beach AFB, SC. He retired in 1988 as a Lt. Col. at Eglin AFB, FL.

Was an investigation document completed on the friendly fire incident? A search of US Army files at the National Archives, so far, has failed to locate a report. A researcher at the Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL, stated there is no mention of the incident in their files. A search by a staffer at the Air Force Safety Center, Kirtland AFB, NM, said there were two mishaps on 12 July 1967, but neither was an F-4C. He said the AFSC does not investigate "incidents", only "mishaps." So, based on his experience, the loss of F-4C serial 64-0718 due to friendly fire at Lai Khe was most probably considered an incident and a "combat loss." However, in a 1977 Center for Naval Analyses document, the section entitled, "U.S. Air Force Fixed-Wing, In-Flight Combat losses in S.E. Asia" does list the cause of the loss of F-4C serial 64-0718 as "unknown gunfire." But the entry on this loss erroneously shows both Rainwater and Plank as KIA (killed in action), thus adding to the "fog of war" in the reporting of this friendly fire incident.

As for Plank, the absence of an investigative report is but a minor frustration when compared to the tragic loss of Major Rainwater. During a visit to the Vietnam Wall many years later, Plank did a rubbing of "JAMES A. RAINWATER Jr" (panel 23/line 63), an American patriot who made the ultimate sacrifice.**