

## **Excerpt from *In That Hour of Deliverance: Linebacker, Homecoming, and the End of America's War in Vietnam***

### *A Birthday Present for Uncle Ho*

It was just after 0300 hours when the phone rang in LTJG Joseph “Charlie” Plumb’s stateroom, jarring the 24-year-old fighter jock from a deep sleep. It was 19 May 1967, just five days short of his scheduled DEROS. When Plumb had racked out the night before, he thought the only thing standing between him and the longed-awaited reunion with wife Anne was a routine trip to the *Kittyhawk’s* dentist the next morning. Plumb had set sail the previous November—on Anne’s birthday, no less—and the young couple, nearly inseparable after meeting two and a half years before, had had only weekly letters to tide them over. But now came the operations officer’s voice: the Joint Chiefs of Staff had ordered a surprise mission, and as squadron schedules officer for VF-114, the F-4 driver needed to get himself to the ready room ASAP. Plumb rubbed the sleep from his eyes, mind already shifting to overdrive. If the attack had come down from JCS, it had to be big. And it was. Plumb didn’t know it at the time, but this was to be no routine alpha strike—those periodic Navy missions that hurled every available strike aircraft at a given target set. Today would be all that and much more. The Joint Chiefs had arrayed an overwhelming display of American airpower to deliver one very special message to North Vietnam’s ideological leader Ho Chi Minh on this his 77<sup>th</sup> birthday—make peace or else.<sup>1</sup>

The effort was just one more piece of Operation Rolling Thunder, the micromanaged bombing campaign begun by the Johnson administration in March 1965. Under LBJ’s ever-watchful eye, air commanders were restricted to only certain targets within specific areas of North Vietnam, while others—even those considered high military value—were left untouched. Under this so-called doctrine of “graduated pressure,” Johnson and his advisors believed that

applying just the right mix of restrained airpower and diplomatic overtures would convince Hanoi to cease aggression against South Vietnam. Of course, all of that was well above Plumb's pay grade. He and his fellow pilots simply viewed any alpha strike as one more chance to make their mark, to do the thing they had sailed 8,000 miles to do: hit the enemy hard and maybe even bag a MiG or two—a most coveted trophy among U.S. fighter jocks.<sup>2</sup>

Competition to fly alpha strikes was indeed high. This put Plumb, a junior officer and the Aardvarks' youngest pilot, in a delicate position. Charged with managing the flight schedules, he found himself the frequent target of good-natured hounding from higher-ranking squadron mates angling for the juiciest assignments. But he did his best to resist the pressure, to ensure that each man had an equal share of the so-called “good deals” for his career resume. Good deals, like today's alpha strike, meant stick time and the thrill of combat. So too the night catapult launches, and even the test hops to ensure newly arrived aircraft were up to snuff before entering the mission rotation. Each, in its own way, was personally edifying and career enhancing. But “bad deals”—like standing duty watch or any other thing that involved little to no flight time—had to be done, too. Plumb had seen his share of good and bad deals since arriving on the *Kitty Hawk* in November. But after 74 missions, he'd not yet flown an alpha strike. He intended to remedy that today. The Overland Park, KS native drew out his green flight book and penned himself in for the mission's MIG-CAP—the combat air patrol assigned to defend against the ever-lurking Soviet-supplied fighters. As his time on the venerable aircraft carrier wound to a close, the young pilot reasoned this might be his last shot at downing an enemy bird.<sup>3</sup>

When Plumb finally climbed into the cockpit of his F-4B Phantom II, it was some six and a half hours after the call had first come. Not unusual. The spin-up for such strikes often took longer than the missions themselves. Plumb's fighter, slated as first off the deck this morning, sat

expectantly on the catapult. All that remained was the final aircraft check. As *Kitty Hawk's* deck crew swarmed about completing final preparations, Plumb and his RIO, radar intercept officer LTJG Gareth "Gary" Anderson, ran through the mission once more. The objective was an ammo dump just south of Hanoi, one of many targets. Plumb's formation consisted of 32 aircraft. Sixteen A-6 Intruders would pack the punch, while eight F-4s flew flak suppression. Another eight Phantoms—the MIG-CAP—were to screen some 2,000 feet above the formation, four ships positioned on each flank. As the Aardvark's youngest pilot, Plumb would fly squadron commander Hank Halliland's wing.<sup>4</sup>

It was sure to be a hot mission. North Vietnam's capital stood as the world's most heavily defended city, ringed by Soviet-supplied SA-2 surface-to-air missile sites, anti-aircraft guns, and MiG-17 fighters out of Gia Lam Airport and surrounding airfields. The SAMs were of particular concern. Developed in the mid-1950s, the V-750 *Dvina*, as it was known in the communist bloc, was the first proven Soviet surface-to-air missile and had successfully shot down American U-2 spy planes over the USSR and Cuba in 1960 and 1962, respectively. The Soviets began supplying the North Vietnamese with SAMs and operational training with the advent of Rolling Thunder in spring 1965. As long as a telephone pole and weighing nearly 5,000 pounds, the SA-2 pulled Mach 3.5, had a maximum effective range of 19 miles, and a ceiling of some 60,000 feet. And a direct hit wasn't necessary. The aim was to simply get the missile close enough so the shrapnel blast from its 288-pound fragmentation warhead could tear an enemy aircraft to bits. Crude but brutally effective. Still, the SA-2 operated as part of a fairly sophisticated system. A typical SAM site consisted of six missiles on mobile launchers, support and technical crews, computer-assisted Spoon Rest detection radar, and a Fan Song radar guidance system. Spoon Rest could pick up enemy aircraft up to 70 miles out. From there, Fan Song took over both target

acquisition and guidance, tracking up to four aircraft simultaneously. Upon SAM launch, the radar could then guide up to three missiles to target. By May 1967, the United States had lost nearly 100 aircraft to the SA-2 and would lose many hundreds more by war's end.<sup>5</sup>

Back on the deck of the *Kittyhawk*, all was now set. Air boss CMDR Bill Russell at last issued the order.

'Pilots, start the jets!' his voice bellowed through the bullhorn.

Plumb pulled the canopy shut and fired the Phantom's twin-J79 General Electric engines to a deafening roar, each capable of nearly 18,000 pounds of thrust. Plumb and Anderson worked the final launch checklist, some 50 items long, eyes scanning the dizzying array of switches and gauges. And then came the run-up signal from the yellow-shirted catapult officer, index finger twirling in exaggerated circles. Plumb throttled to full power, the Phantom rumbling and roaring, straining for release.

"Ok, Gary," he said. "I'm saluting."

This was the pilot's final signal that all was well. A split-second later, Plumb felt a four-G sledgehammer drive into his chest as the catapult hurtled the aircraft across the flight deck. The F-4 hit 170 miles per hour in less than three seconds, screeching clear of the deck and rocketing over the Tonkin Gulf's sparkling turquoise waters. It was just after 10:30 hours.<sup>6</sup>

The sky was brilliant, clear, and blue. Perfect weather for an airstrike. The young pilot, callsign "Plumber," pulled back on the stick and spiraled upward for a rendezvous with an A-3 Skywarrior, a quick top-off to replace the 2,000 pounds of fuel he'd already burned. Indeed, no one wanted to run low on gas in the middle of a MiG fight. Nicknamed the "Whale" because of its prodigious girth, the A-3 was originally designed as a nuclear bomber. But the Navy had repurposed it as an aerial tanker. The Skywarrior could haul nearly 24,000 pounds of fuel and

was the largest aircraft capable of carrier launch, evolving into the Navy's most effective tanker of the war. The Whale lowered its fuel drogue, a 60-foot hose with a basket-like contraption resembling a big badminton birdie at the end. It was a tricky maneuver. Plumb needed to guide his refueling probe into the basket, while both pilots struggled to steady their aircraft in the buffeting air currents. Once he'd topped off, Plumb climbed up and away so his squadron mates could get a drink. Then the formation pointed its collective nose west and rocketed toward the North Vietnamese coast and the mist-shrouded Truong Son mountains beyond.<sup>7</sup>

Plumb scanned the scene, awestruck as aircraft from three carrier groups stretched to the horizon. Strike aircraft from five Air Force bases would also join the fray.

"I felt really, really good," he says. "Felt proud to be a part of that flight and part of this war effort to defend our freedoms and the freedoms of our allies."<sup>8</sup>

When the *Kitty Hawk*'s formation reached the mountain range, it dropped to 3,500 feet and banked starboard to follow the ridgeline north. Below, a valley of deep green rice paddies skimmed past. Plumb looked up to his port and spied forested peaks blurring frighteningly close. Just as it should be. Hugging the ridgeline would hide them from SAM radar—at least for a while. Ironically, despite being one of the era's premier jet fighters, the F-4B at the time had no instrumentation to alert a pilot when a SAM had locked on. When Plumb joined the Aardvarks the previous year, one of the old-timers took the youngster aside.

'Stop by Radio Shack and pick up a fuzz buster,' he was told. 'They're on the same frequency as the SAMs.'

Used by lead-footed drivers to avoid California Highway Patrol speeding tickets, the radar detector might just save his life over North Vietnam, too. From then on, Plumb suction-cupped the little black box to his windscreen whenever a mission might involve SA-2s. Simply

run the little white wire under the G-suit and torso harness, plug in the earpiece, and voila...instant “SAM buster.” The box would let out a warble in the user’s ear when a SAM locked and fired, the tone intensifying to a shriek as the missile drew closer. Trouble was, the fuzz buster fix still couldn’t tell pilots which *direction* the missile was coming from. All a man knew was that he was locked. In such situations, pilots were trained to “jink,” sudden corrections to the aircraft’s flight path to confuse the enemy and prevent a good tracking solution. Of course, when he didn’t know where the SAM was coming from, a pilot might just jink himself right into the path of the big missile.

“That sort of thing really increases your pucker factor,” Plumb says with a wry chuckle.<sup>9</sup>

And now it was time to leave the protection of the mountains. The formation banked starboard once more, rocketing northeast toward Hanoi. The flak suppressors would go in first, afterburners blazing to draw fire away from the A-6 strike element. Plumb and the MIG-CAP anxiously scanned for enemy fighters. As if on cue, Plumb’s headset crackled to life.

‘MiGs Hanoi. Twenty west,’ came the laconic call.

It was one of the big EC-121 early warning radar platforms orbiting off the coast. Two MiGs had launched 20 miles west of Hanoi and were burning toward the formation. Plumb felt a surge of adrenaline. Would this finally be his chance? Would his 75<sup>th</sup> mission at last see him get his MiG before triumphantly returning home to Anne and America? He edged further outside the formation, eager to get the first crack.<sup>10</sup>

But it would be no easy feat. Since the start of Rolling Thunder, North Vietnam’s MiG-17s had given as good as they got. On paper, it shouldn’t have even been a contest. Initially designed as a premier over-the-horizon interceptor tasked with shooting down inbound Soviet nuclear bombers, the sophisticated Phantom II outshined the MiG in almost every category. Its

top speed of nearly 1,500 miles per hour—more than twice that of the Soviet fighter—made the F-4 the world’s fastest interceptor. Moreover, the U.S. aircraft boasted advanced radar and laser-guided missiles, while MiG-17 pilots were relegated to unguided underwing rockets, along with a 37mm and two 23mm autocannons. But it was these cannons—coupled with the MiG’s superior maneuverability—that gave the Soviet fighter its unlikely advantage. The jet was, quite simply, a born dogfighter. Despite the F-4’s sophisticated design—and their own training—Phantom pilots soon found themselves in relatively slow, tight-turning air duels in the skies over North Vietnam. And unlike their adversaries, F-4 drivers had no autocannon with which to fight. MiG pilots’ penchant for hitting formations from the sides and rear, rather than head on, also helped mitigate the Phantom’s speed and impressive climb rate. All of this saw North Vietnamese pilots achieve a nearly one-to-one kill ratio prior to 1969. Only after the Navy created its Fighter Weapons School at Naval Air Station Miramar in March 1969 did the tables begin to turn. Known colloquially as “TOPGUN,” the school reintroduced old-school dogfighting tactics that had fallen out of favor in a Cold War age of potential superpower conflict. Along with the widespread addition of the 20mm M61 Vulcan cannon to later F-4 models, this ultimately helped Navy pilots achieve a 12.5-1 kill ratio by war’s end.<sup>11</sup>

‘Lindfield Two, pull it back in,’ came the order over Plumb’s headset.

It was CMDR Halliland admonishing his young wingman for breaking formation. Chagrined, the over-eager Plumb tightened back on his CO’s wing. Just then, his onboard warning system alerted—a SAM radar antenna was sweeping the formation. Plumb’s fuzzer, however, remained quiet. No missile lock...yet. Group commander Royce Williams issued the preplanned jink command, and as one the formation maneuvered abruptly to starboard. Plumb and Anderson scanned anxiously about. No missiles in the air.

‘Resume,’ came the command, and the formation recovered left to its original flightpath.

Suddenly, Plumb’s earpiece warbled to life, frequency intensifying to an urgent whine. SAM lock. If they could just spot the thing, Plumb would wait until it had almost struck home before pulling his Phantom into a violent six-G barrel roll. The SA-2 was not built to correct course at that point, and the silver-orange sparks from its tail would likely whizz harmlessly past. But if they couldn’t spot it....

‘Gary, do you see it?’ Plumb called.

‘I don’t see a thing, Charlie.’

BOOM!

**End of Excerpt**



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> J. Plumb, Author Interview, Transcript 1; J. Plumb and G. DeWerff, *I'm No Hero*, p. 34-35

<sup>2</sup> J. Plumb, Author Interview, Transcript 1; J. Plumb and G. DeWerff, *I'm No Hero*, p. 37-38

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> J. Plumb, Author Interview, Transcript 1; J. Plumb and G. DeWerff, *I'm No Hero*, p. 41-44

<sup>5</sup> Ibid; Air Force Museum, *SA-2 Surface-to-Air Missile*; C. Hobson, *Vietnam Air Losses*

<sup>6</sup> J. Plumb and G. DeWerff, *I'm No Hero*, p. 41-42; J. Plumb, Author Interview, Transcript 1

<sup>7</sup> Global Security.org, *KA-3B/EKA-3B*; J. Plumb, Author Interview, Transcript 1; J. Plumb and G. DeWerff, *I'm No Hero*, p. 42-43

<sup>8</sup> J. Plumb, Author Interview, Transcript 1

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> J. Plumb and G. DeWerff, *I'm No Hero*, p. 45

<sup>11</sup> Air Force Museum, *Mikoyan-Guervich MIG-17F*; Boeing, *F-4 Phantom II Fighter*; J. Guttman, *F-4 vs MIG 17*