

LAUNCH

A great, early December day in 1965 dawned with USS *Independence* (CVA-62), the first Atlantic Fleet aircraft carrier to see combat in Vietnam, steaming homeward off the U.S. East Coast. The aircraft of *Air Wing Seven* were poised for a mass flyoff, its aviators eager to launch. A big welcoming ceremony waited at NAS Oceana, Va.

Fighter Squadron 41's commanding officer, CDR Robert L. "Big Daddy" Gormley, and his radar intercept officer, LT Harold R. "Wild Bill" Coday, eased their F-4 *Phantom II* into position on the outboard waist catapult. Following two A-4 *Skyhawks* waiting on the two bow cats, they'd be the first of several F-4s to launch. Wild Bill carried the CO's dress blue uniform in his lap because there was no place to stow it in the cramped confines of a fighter cockpit. The skipper would need it for the homecoming ceremonies ashore. Medals and ribbons displaying the commander's combat decorations had been carefully positioned and pinned on the jacket. Wild Bill would ensure the jacket and its imposing array would not be disturbed during the cat launch and short flight to Oceana.

Spotted a few feet from Gormley and Wild Bill, LCDR John R. "Wink" Winkowski and his RIO sat on the inboard waist cat, their F-4 ready to launch next.

Today, I was the RIO sitting behind LT Tom Sanders in another *Phantom II*. We'd be third to launch. We were behind the skipper's fighter, our left side facing his afterburners — but we were sheltered by

the outboard cat's jet blast deflector. When it was our turn to launch, we'd make a hard left turn to taxi to the catapult.

I decided to snap some great photos from directly behind a *Phantom* as it took a cat shot. "Coming home" launch pictures would make an ideal wrap-up to my combat photo journal.

To time and frame the shot perfectly, I raised my helmet's visor, dropped the oxygen mask to one side and held a spanking-new 35mm camera up to my face. Thunderous noise and heat boiled up and over the JBD when the skipper's F-4 went into full afterburner prior to launch. The hulking, heavy jet squatted as the cat fired, thrust flinging the *Phantom II* forward. Then ... hell hit *Independence*.

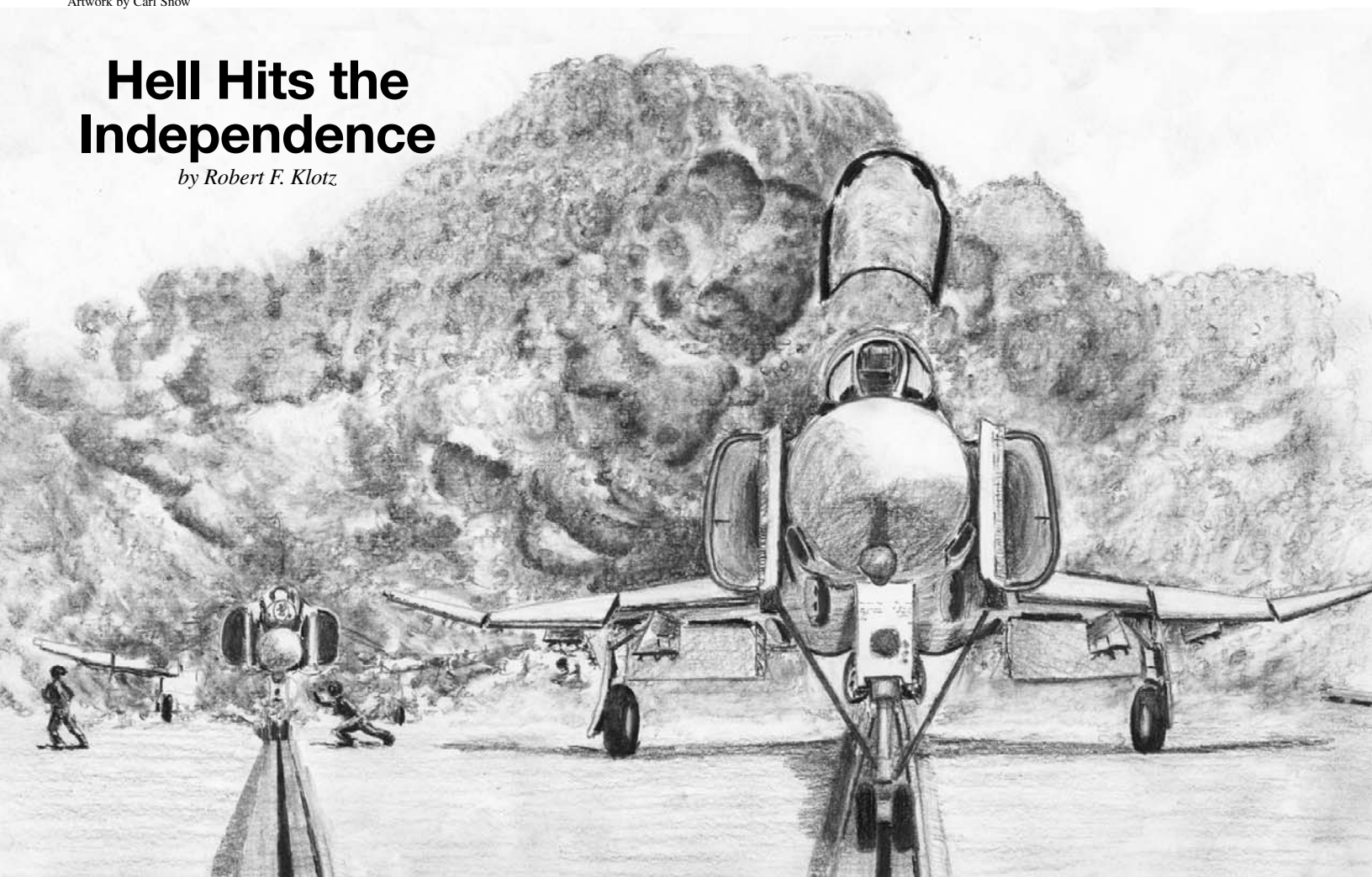
Where the *Phantom* had filled my viewfinder a heartbeat earlier, a huge erupting fireball took its place. It was so massive that I thought the damned fighter had exploded on the catapult. I don't remember dropping the camera, but I recall reaching for the canopy unlatch switch. *I wanted out!* With that fireball coming at us, my precise, now-corny thought was, "*I'm going to be a peanut! Roasted!*"

Instinct screamed, "*Get out!*" But training took over and said, "*Stay!*" I had a better chance of surviving — at least for now — if I stayed in this airplane. As fast as my finger had leaped to the canopy-open slide switch, it now reversed direction. I slapped my mask back on to ensure life-giving oxygen was flowing before snapping my visor down for additional protection.

Artwork by Carl Snow

Hell Hits the Independence

by Robert F. Klotz





Division of VF-41 F-4B Phantom IIs in flight near NAS Oceana, Va., 10 Jun '63.

The fireball and blast wave from the outboard waist catapult expanded and passed over us. Both of our canopies, God bless 'em, held. Tiny heat fractures, or "crazing," appeared in the Plexiglas, but the canopies' structure was intact.

I don't remember Tom or I saying anything until later. I think we just stared at our mirrors and stayed off the radio. For now, we were safe.

Seconds later, we knew a disaster surrounded our fighter. The radios erupted in emergency chatter, "Fire! Fire! Fire! Fire on the Flight Deck!"

Then, "Eject! Eject! Eject!" followed immediately by, "I see one good chute!"

All hands immediately responded. Looking to my left through the remaining fire and boiling smoke, I saw that the skipper's *Phantom* was gone. I didn't know where it was, but someone evidently had ejected from something. For all I knew, the fighter was in pieces, scattered across the catapult and deck.

I was absolutely stunned to see a member of the launch crew appear from behind the JBD, ^{USN} rubbing his eyes. He was naked, his clothes burned off. Only his belt and dungaree belt loops remained, still on fire. We heard later that the crewman had saved most of his money during our cruise, but all that cash — carried in his wallet — was lost when his clothes burned. He ultimately recovered from his burns, and somehow recouped all but \$25 of his hoard.

Then, one of the most skillful displays of flying proficiency I was ever privileged to witness unfolded. Through the chaotic radio communications, skipper Gormley's voice calmly emerged.

"Uh, this is *Alpha Golf 101* — Big Daddy. I'm airborne at three miles, dead ahead, straight and level at angels two. My RIO's punched out, but I don't seem to have any indications of fire right now. Tower, could you direct somebody over to me? Have them look me over? And pick up my RIO, and give me his status? Over."

Outstanding! CDR Gormley was airborne and, at least for now, still flying! He had disregarded all the ship's frantic radio calls, simply



CDR Robert H. Gormley

concentrating on the cat launch and the business of flying his airplane. Even Wild Bill's ejection gave the skipper one less thing to worry about, in case things went south in a hurry.

Wild Bill hadn't waited to clarify where those triple ejection commands had originated. The "eject!" command in his helmet's earphones had been enough for him to pull the ejection rings. He wasn't about to be left behind, maybe to die alone in the next few seconds.

A RIO ejecting from the back seat of an F-4 always runs the risk of a hazard known as "Martin-Baker back," a compression fracture of the lower lumbar vertebrae. It's caused by a

cannon shell firing that propels the Martin-Baker ejection seat upward and out of the aircraft. That's why the skipper, worried about Bill, had requested an immediate rescue. F-4 backseaters are more prone to suffering the temporarily incapacitating and painful back injury because a RIO must brace himself against the aft cockpit's fixed, flat floorboards. A pilot can stretch his legs out, bracing his feet against adjustable rudder pedals, a better body position for ejection.

An A-4 pilot scooted over in a flash to check the commander's damaged F-4. "Skipper, you have a badly collapsed belly fuel tank. Its nose cone is crushed. The tail cone is gone and the tank is empty. You have some badly singed tail feathers but no fire, no other damage and no leaks."

Gormley acknowledged with his thanks. Ultimately, we'd learn that, unbeknownst to the skipper and others, his



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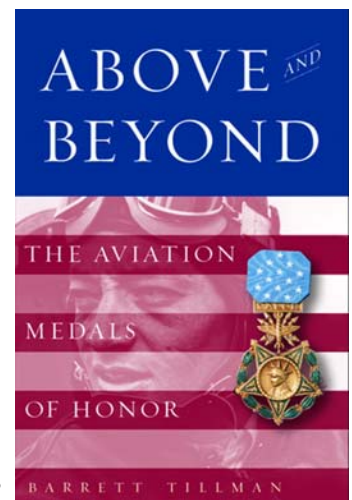
by Barrett Tillman

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USS Independence (CVA-62) with Carrier Air Wing Seven embarked, circa mid-60s.

Phantom's jettisonable belly tank had carried a partial fuel load. Why? Possibly a fueling error. Regardless, that's the worst possible external fuel tank condition for a catapult launch. The tank must be completely full or completely empty.

As the skipper's F-4 was subjected to the catapult shot's rapid acceleration, the belly tank's partial fuel load was transformed into an aft-moving hydraulic ram, sucking the nose cone inward, blowing the tailcone off and dumping jet fuel. That fuel, splashing along the catapult track's full length, was ignited by the twin J79 engines' afterburners. An explosion forced the jet fuel-fed fire into the catapult spaces below deck, burning and otherwise injuring many more of the ship's crew.

Adding to the general mayhem, deck crewmen were blown overboard. Several men dived off the port side, aiming for up-tilted safety netting that ringed the carrier. From there, they could work their way to safety under the flight deck. But some received an unexpected, blast-assisted velocity boost (as if adrenaline wasn't enough), causing them to overshoot the netting and fall to the water some 70 feet below.

Always-ready recovery teams eventually rescued all crewmen from the water, including Wild Bill.

Given the circumstances, CDR Gormley couldn't fault Wild Bill's decision to eject. But the skipper's dress blues were lost, a casualty that turned Big Daddy into one pissed-off CO.

During the wild melee on deck, Winkowski's now completely fire-blackened F-4 — still sitting on the inboard cat — started coming to life. In surreal unison, its two now-jet-black canopies "peeked" open



about an inch, then closed. Again they cracked open for a brief second, then closed. It was weird to watch this strange dance of the canopies. It was a wise precaution, however. Unable to see outside, Wink, a U.S. Navy Test Pilot School graduate, and his RIO were exploring carefully the outside environment. Finally, both canopies opened fully, the two crewmen exited and ran from the aircraft — fast. Their feet hardly touched the deck until they were well within the ship's island.

Wink's F-4 was later declared a "strike" — damaged beyond repair — but it had saved their butts.

Meanwhile, the skipper, now alone and flying a "convertible" (fighter missing one or both canopies) with its backseat ejection rail extended well above the fuselage, really didn't want to be part of the air wing's formation flight to the beach. He requested and received permission from CAG to proceed independently to the naval air station.

Because several press reporters were aboard the carrier, word of the fire as well as rumors of the ejection had raced ahead to those ashore. A single, strange-looking *Phantom* soon appeared overhead NAS Oceana. Below, a band stood at the ready and myriad dignitaries, wives and families waited. At the sight of Gormley's empty aft cockpit, Wild Bill's fiancée promptly fainted.

Back on *Independence*, damage control teams finally restored order and the ship prepared to resume flight operations using undamaged bow catapults.

Tom, my pilot, said, "S--t, Bob, we can't launch! We have a utility hydraulic failure." Damn! Disappointment city. No hydraulics meant no flight control systems, and that meant no launch. Period. Worse, we'd have to go back and face those junior officers. We'd ragged on them earlier because they didn't have a ride ashore, and were stuck onboard until the ship pulled into Norfolk the next day. Something about wives and who'd be smiling first.

But this didn't fit the profile of a normal utility hydraulic system failure. Usually, that system failed on start-up or after some other physical event. Maybe we blew a circuit breaker. I started scanning the breaker panel beside my knee, searching for one that had popped.

Tom interrupted, his voice attesting to the serious danger we had been subjected to only moments before. "Bob, we just lost the port engine! That fireball must've sucked all the air out of it, 'cause it just unwound. Let's taxi over to the island, see if we can get the engine started, and if it's OK, we'll launch off the bow with the others. Sound good to you?"

With the left engine powered up, we should get our utility hydraulics back. "Roger that, Tom. Let's get off this ##%! boat, if we can."

We did all three, as planned, and were soon ashore, smiling big grins. Oh, and the accident review board said the film in my camera was blank.



Now retired, Robert F. Klotz is a former software development contract administrator and acting technical manager for NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory.



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