

“Cherry Girl”

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The SAC Museum’s Very Own MiG Killer



As you drive west from Omaha and just before you reach the Platte River you will find an F-105D Thunderchief mounted on a pylon advertising the Strategic Air Command and Aerospace Museum exit is just ahead. Seems like a sad ending for this Vietnam veteran. To make this even more interesting this F-105D has a rather colorful history and with some monetary and volunteer help maybe it can be returned to the museum rather than deteriorating on a pylon in a Nebraska corn field.



A few fighters in museums have a red star on the splitter plate and a long-forgotten pilot’s names on the fuselage. This memory is pretty much all that remains of an air war in which American airmen fought in the skies above the most heavily-defended territory on earth, North

Vietnam. It is truly a tribute to the fighting spirit of the American airman who flew these missions over North Vietnam. These Air Force, Navy and Marine pilots managed to shoot down 195 MiGs with the loss of only eighty-nine American aircraft in air-to-air combat even though they were weighed down with stringent rules of engagement issued by civilian leaders in Washington DC.

“Cherry Girl”

During 1967 is where the story of the SAC Museum’s F-105D Thunderchief bureau number 61-0069 begins. The Thud as it was called by its pilots was big and it was mean and everyone knew it. It was a huge jet with a length of 64 feet 4-inches and a gross combat weight of 52,500 pounds. It was powered by a Pratt and Whitney J75-P-19W...it was fast, being able to climb to 35,200 feet in the first minute of flight. Its single pilot carried a larger bomb load than a B-17 with a crew of ten did during WW-II. The 105 defied superlatives everything about it spelled size, strength and brut force.

The F-105 originally was designed to be a supersonic strike fighter carrying a nuclear weapon and was never intended for air-to-air combat. But in the skies over North Vietnam it found itself as an aerial opponent of the MiG-17 and Mig-21. The Thud was up for the fight carrying a M61A1 20-millimeter rotary cannon and usually one or two Aim-9 Sidewinder air-to-air missiles along with its compliment of six 750-pound bombs on a centerline rack. This is the way they made their way into North Vietnam “Going Downtown” to hit their designated targets.



The story of the museum’s Thud starts on June 3, 1967 when Capt. Larry D. Wiggins of the 388th TFW was flying a strike mission against the Bac Giang railroad and highway bridge and the adjacent railroad yards. Capt. Wiggins was flying aircraft 3 (call sign Hambone 03) was in the lead flight of a force of four strike and one Iron Hand flights launched from Korat RTAFB, Thailand.

Inbound to the target in a standard "pod" formation, the four strike flights penetrated the SAM defenses.

When the F-105's were about 15 miles short of the roll-in point, enemy 85-mm and 100-mm anti aircraft artillery opened fire. After the flight recovered from the dive-bomb run Wiggins was about a mile behind his flight leader. Approximately 6 miles after rolling off the target the flight leader saw three MiG-17's at 10 o'clock low at a range of 2 miles. He called the MiG's position and started a hard left turn. The second and third flight aircraft followed their leader, but aircraft

“Cherry Girl”

number 4 nearly collided with the second flight off the target and lost his flight in the turn. He elected to remain with the second flight during egress.



Initial maneuvering did not permit a firing pass, and the three MiG's went into a tight left-hand orbit at about 500 feet altitude. The F-105s and enemy MiGs completed a circle and a half before Wiggins had the opportunity and could fire his AIM-9B at the third MiG-17. The enemy plane attempted to evade the missile but was damaged when Wiggins' missile went alongside the MiG and exploded. The aircraft

began trailing a heavy white vapor. Continuing to close on the MiG-17 as it rolled over and started down, Wiggins fired 375 rounds of 20-mm at the MiG when it finally exploded in flame and crashed.



“Cherry Girl”



Many F-105s carried nose art during the Vietnam conflict. And none was more notorious than 61-0069...At some time while being attached to the 357th TFS, 355th TFW and flying out of Takhli, Thailand a spirited artist gave the Thud its notorious nose art “Cherry Girl” to go along with its MiG kill star. Along with “Jinkin Jose” the “Cherry Girl” art work was deemed one of the more outrageous uses of nose art during the conflict. The MiG kill stayed on but the nose artwork offended a senior officer and had to be removed. But the story does not end there.

After returning from the Vietnam conflict Wiggins’ Thud was restored to its Southeast Asia camouflage scheme and rolled out at Norton Air Force Base, California on October 25, 1983 with the historically accurate nose art paint scheme. But, once again it offended a senior officer and the infamous “Cherry Girl” nose art had to be removed after only a few days. After being on display at Norton AFB it was traded to the SAC museum. It arrived at the SAC museum minus

“Cherry Girl”

its engine and landing gear and in poor shape. The restoration crew refurbished the F-105D and it was placed on a pedestal advertising the SAC and Aero Space Museum. Hopefully at some point in time this historic F-105D can be removed from the pedestal and moved back indoors for preservation as a MiG Killer of the Vietnam conflict.