



MY TARGET IS

WHAT?!

Embarrassing Non-shootdowns

BY R.R. 'BOOM' POWELL



N

ot all of fighter aviation is aimed at protecting the fair damsel from the marauding Count von Evil. In fact, history shows that fighter jocks themselves have often provided whimsical, if not

overly efficient episodes that have left their mark in the annals of fighterdom.

“Ever shoot down a balloon?”

Sam Flynn was in an expansive mood after winning several rounds of “Horse.” (Ed: a dice game popular in officers’ clubs. If you are not experienced do not play—especially with fighter pilots—unless you are prepared to buy many rounds of drinks.) He recalled:

“Back in my first squadron we tried to once. We had moved our F8U Crusaders to NAS Key West, and when we weren’t standing alert in case the wily, commie Cubans decided to attack, we flew training missions over the Gulf.

“During the morning brief for the alert pilots, the squadron duty officer stuck his nose in the ready room and said that ‘Fat Albert,’ the moored balloon with radar that watched the Florida Strait for those invading Cubans, had broken its tether and was floating away. We were ordered to shoot it down.

“The CO lit up. ‘Men, we have a real live target for a change. Let’s go get ‘em.’

“The first delay came when someone said, ‘Ya know those Sidewinders we’ve got sure aren’t going to do anything against a helium filled balloon,’ and the order was given to drop the heat-seeking missiles from the airplanes.

“We launched in pairs. Nothing quite like tight wing on a ‘Sader in full afterburner. Anyway, by the time we got airborne, that balloon had floated way east and far faster than we expected. And it was high ... very high. ‘Course we stayed in burner the whole time.

Early Chance Vought F8U-1 Crusader at the Naval Missile Center circa 1961. A Sidewinder was carried on each side of the fuselage and gunports for the 20mm cannon are below the cockpit. The belly speed brake has bled down. [Tailhook]



An example of a surveillance aerostat moored at its base. While the electronics and avionics may have changed over the years, the uplifting balloon is much the same as the one which “escaped” from the Florida Keys.



F6F-5K target drone at Point Mugu with mechanics performing an engine check. Drones were given bright paint schemes for visibility.
[Nat Archives/Tailhook]

“By the time we had a tally, Fat Albert was above fifty thou. We weren’t wearing pressure suits, but the skipper wanted the kill bad. He leveled off and we accelerated past Mach. He radioed, ‘Follow me. We’ll pitch up and when the balloon is in your sights give it a long burst. Maybe one of the slugs will hit.’

“Our climb was almost vertical. As ass-end Charlie I could see smoke from the CO’s cannon, followed by No. 2 and 3 before I squeezed my

balloon. Popped up high and fell into the Atlantic? Heck, might still be lying in the Sahara.”

The Saga of 5K

The F6F-5K drone took off from Naval Air Station Point Mugu, California, at 1134 Pacific Time on August 16, 1956. The flight was normal at first, but then the drone turned back toward the coast instead of proceeding to the Pacific Missile Range. The controller’s telemetry signals had no effect. It was almost as if the F6F-5K had a mind of her own.

The sailors who worked on the unpowered aircraft called them “F6 drones” or simply, “5 Kays.” The line on the ramp where the target drones were parked was mockingly referred to as “Death Row.”

Grumman built 12,200 F6F Hellcat fighters. This 5K’s sisters had shot down over 5,200 enemy aircraft for a 19-1 kill-loss ratio. Now the tired airplanes were targets for testing the Navy’s latest missiles.

Painted bright red with yellow camera pods on the wingtips, 5K kept climbing as she headed toward Los Angeles and Hollywood. The men on the ground had a problem; if 5K with over 100 gallons of hi-octane aviation gasoline in her tanks crashed in a populated area it would be a disaster. The Air Defense Command had armed fighter-interceptors on alert at nearby Oxnard Air

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trigger. Next thing I knew, the first F-8 slid back and pitched over. Then two. Then three. The engines had flamed out. I’m staring at three huge Crusaders falling at me!

“That’s when my engine banged and quit.

“Didn’t know which to do first; try for a right or recover from the tumble. Suppose I did both. I remember seeing the altimeter spinning past sixty some thousand. I didn’t even think about the other guys until later. It was a miracle we didn’t collide.

“That’s kind of the end of it. Engines restarted OK. Came into the break at Key West in formation. Never did find out what happened to the

Force Base. Call them and have the Air Force shoot down the uncontrollable drone.

The Northrop F-89 Scorpion is well-named—the tail reaches up and back like the tail of the venomous arthropod. However, the sting of the Scorpion airplane was not in its tail but in the huge pods on the end of its wide, straight wings. Current Air Force thinking was that guns were obsolete; the way to destroy the hordes of incoming Russki bombers was rockets. Unguided, but there were lots of them. The F-89 carried 52 folding-fin, 2.75 inch, unguided “Mighty Mouse” rockets in each

pod. In each of the two Scorpions of the 437th Fighter Interceptor Squadron scrambled from Oxnard was a pilot and radar operator. All four officers were first lieutenants. For them it was a thrill to be sent after a real, live target.

5K had swung northeast, reached 30,000 feet and began a lazy circle near Santa Paula. The Scorpions tried to fire using the Hughes built fire-control system...and nothing happened. There



was a design fault in the system that would not fire the rockets while in a turn.

5K pointed toward Los Angeles again. Desperate, the F-89 crews decided to fire visually rather than try the unreliable fire-control system again, but there was a problem; the gunsight had been removed because, “the new fire-control system would take care of aiming.” Each Scorpion fired

Early model F-89 Scorpion; the two Allison J-35 engines produced 5,440 pounds of thrust each with the afterburners adding another 1,800 pounds—at the cost of high fuel consumption. The F-89 weighed over 37,000 pounds.

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The F-89's primary armament was 104 unguided 'Mighty Mouse' 2.75-inch aerial rockets.



A late model "Long Nose" F-11A Tiger in US Navy advanced training squadron VT-23 with two squadron mates in the contrails. The cannon ports are low on the jet intake. [Tailhook]

a salvo of 42 rockets. They all missed 5K. The errant rockets did start brush fires near Castaic and Newhall and ignited several oil well sumps of the Indian Oil Company.

For the Air Force crewmen the frustration level was rising fast. On their final runs they fired all the rockets they had left. Not only did they also miss the drone, but they fell into the city of Palmdale.

Imagine the shock to the teenager driving with his mother when a rocket exploded in front of their car, blew out a tire, and put holes in the windshield, hood and radiator. A woman sitting in her home with her six-year-old son had a chunk of shrapnel go through a window, ricochet off the ceiling and lodge in her cupboard. And more fires were started. About 500 firefighters

5K had sliced through power lines along a highway. The splices were still there.

Looking back, one has to wonder how effective the Air Defense Command with its F-89s, F-86 "Dogs" and F-94s—all firing unguided rockets—would have been against attacking Soviet bombers? And, perhaps predating current concerns by 60 years, was the county supervisor who worried about "the Navy sending them robot-like planes up."

Tiger versus Tiger

The sleek Grumman F11F-1 (designated the F-11A in 1962) Tiger's career as a first line fighter lasted only four years; primarily due to its short "legs." However, it was used for advanced training, as well as by the Blue Angels until well into the '60s. At the Naval Air Station Kingsville, Texas, fighter pilots who were now instructors were bored because they didn't have a shooting war.

One fine day, a student on one of his first flights in the Tiger had a malfunction in the pitch system that gave either full up or full down elevator when the landing gear was lowered. After a couple of attempts at troubleshooting, and much advice over the radio, it became obvious that a landing was impossible and a controlled ejection was in order. The student was carefully briefed to head for the Gulf of Mexico and when over the coast, put the throttle at idle and pulled the face curtain. Well, the stud got most of it right. In the panic of the moment, he "sort of" left the throttle

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needed two days to put them all out.

The Air Force sent in an ordnance disposal team to deal with the damage of 208 2.75 inch explosive rockets. They discovered 13 duds at Palmdale. That was a good thing considering where they hit.

5K? She continued her leisurely flight east until she finally ran out of gas. In 1997 a team specializing in locating wrecks found 5K in the Mojave Desert primarily from electric company records.

at a cruise power. In the meantime, his squadron commanding officer had prematurely called the admiral, Chief of Navy Advanced Training at the Naval Air Station Corpus Christi—on the edge of that city—to report that the emergency was over and everything was OK.

The same CO had to call back less than 10 minutes later to report that not only hadn't the wayward Tiger crashed in the Gulf, but if the admiral wished he could look out his window and watch the F-11 circling over the city.

Enter our "hero," a Marine captain instructor just airborne leading an air-to-air gunnery mission. He is sent on the ideal fighter mission—to shoot down a defenseless, non-maneuvering target. Not as easy an assignment as it sounds. While the Tiger was not maneuvering, it was flying in a circle. And he could only fire his cannon when both he and the other F-11 were heading toward the Gulf and the city of Corpus Christi was not in the way. After four firing runs the errant Tiger was still happily droning along and the Marine's frustration level rising fast. On his fifth try, the target Tiger gave off a puff of smoke and started to descend just as the shooter ran out of ammo and had to head home with low fuel. The captain had a shoot down and mentally had a kill marking painted on his jet even before he taxied in. To one and all he boasted of his prowess and airmanship.

The squadron safety officer and his investigative team had been

out in the prairie on the King Ranch checking the crash for a couple of hours when Captain "Ace" arrived to gloat over his kill. With a small smile, the safety officer greeted him and asked him to count the bullet holes in the bellied-in Tiger.

There were none.

The straying F11F had run out of its limited fuel supply and made a gentle glide to a smooth landing. The Marine captain was a lot quieter for the remainder of his time in the squadron.

Stories like the above abound in USAF, USN and USMC fighter circles and no one enjoys telling them more than the pilots themselves. It's a deadly business but humor is never far away. ✚

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TIGER VERSUS ITSELF

In September of 1956, Grumman test pilot Tom Attridge experienced one of the most bizarre events in aviation—he shot himself down. Flying an early model F11F-1 Tiger, BuNo 138260, over the Atlantic south of Long Island, he was on the second test run of firing the four 20mm cannon at supersonic speeds. Accelerating in afterburner, he entered a shallow dive from 20,000 feet. He fired at 13,000 feet for four seconds, then a longer burst. Passing 7,000 feet something hit his windscreen. Attridge slowed down to take pressure off the windscreen and said a hole in his right intake duct was the only other apparent damage. However, he also could not go to more than 78% power without the J-65 engine running rough.

Two miles from the Grumman field at Bethpage, after lowering landing gear and flaps he saw that at 78% he was not going to make the runway. When he pushed the throttle forward the engine quit. The Tiger bellied into trees, the right wing and stabilizer tore off, and the Tiger burst into flames. Attridge managed to get out despite being injured.

Investigation revealed three hits: windshield, intake and nose cone. The 20mm slug that went into the intake was found—much chewed up—lodged in the first stage compressor section. A combination of the boresight at 0 degrees to line of flight, the half-G descent and drop in projectile velocity and trajectory resulted in the Tiger flying below and catching up with its own cannon fire after eleven seconds.

Early (short nose with refueling fitting) F11F-1 flown by a Grumman test pilot. A catapult launching bridle is attached to hooks on the belly. [Nat Archives/Tailhook]