

"Hue Citadel? Where's that?"

As far back as 1968, Dick Martel has been trying to get anybody/everybody that he could to let him recount this story. He claimed that we were the only Raps to bomb inside the ancient Hue Citadel during the '68 Tet, maybe even the only USAF fighters to do so. He talked about the crappy weather and the problems we had getting into the target area, etc., etc. Of course, the fact that he picked up a hole in his wing from some lucky gunner "proved" that we really had a "hot" mission. Since I am the only one of us that can verify the story, I felt that it was time to come clean and let everyone know that he didn't dream the whole thing.

The 604th detachment at Pleiku was settling down for a "truce" to celebrate the Vietnamese Tet holiday (1968). We had been flying 100% of our missions over the Trail for the last two months, and really weren't that concerned with the in-country stuff. That all changed the first night of Tet. As I remember it, Don Dalton or Phil Cox walked through the MACV O-Club looking for the most sober pilots and told'em to get down to Ops for some serious flying. Seems that the bad guys had broken the truce and just about every major installation in the country was being attacked.

Well, a few of us got off the ground and tried to hit some trucks along the Trail, but most just left the club and headed on down to the flight line. By the time I landed, an attack was in progress on the base from a ravine between us and an Army base we called Engineer's Hill. Gunships were strafing the bad guys and you could hear lottsa small arms fire. As I walked toward the ops building after my fruitless mission over the Trail, Engineer's Hill received a massive mortar barrage and 122mm rockets started to come in on our base. We spent the next hour hunkered down in a house trailer that had sandbags stacked all around it. That morning we quit flying over the Trail and began flying close air support for the troops in I and II Corps.

A few days later Dick Martel and I were paired up on alert. The horn blared and we raced to our tiny jets. A quick check with the command post informed us that we were to get our butts up to I Corps and check in with some guy with a "Big" call sign. I don't remember if it was Big 03, Big 07 or whatever. Whatever, neither of us had ever heard of the FAC callsign or the controlling agency - Waterboy. As we got closer and closer to the DMZ, we finally realized that Waterboy was the furthest north control station in South Viet Nam! The mission was getting more interesting all the time.

Standard check-in with the CRC - Waterboy. Fly to such and such radial off of such and such TACAN, then contact "Big so and so". No big deal. I was still really green, despite some neat missions that had gained attention in the press and resulted in my tactical call sign - Boy Wonder. A few minutes later, things really turned to worms and my short-lived reputation was on the line.

The weather was really crappy. There was a solid overcast from 15,000 ft or so all the way to the deck. As we checked in with the FAC, an F-100 flight from Phu Cat was telling the FAC that they couldn't get in. The FAC was giving them a hard time about not being able to get to the target area. As I recalled, the flight lead said, "Call it a weather abort, call it anything you want. But we can't get in."

"Oh great," I'm thinking. No problem for my fearless leader, though, who proceeds to tell the FAC that we'll let down and take a look. I tucked in real close and hung on as we entered the clouds.

Maybe ten seconds later, Dick Martel comes across on fox mike to say that his TACAN has gone down. Without pausing to take a breath he calmly says, "Take the lead, Two, get us down."

GASP! I was now leading my first flight in combat.

"O.K.," I thought. Gotta do something for those troops on the ground (Marines, it turned out). So he slid back on my wing and we continued to descend through the murk. We did so for another few minutes, all the time hearing the FAC tell us to turn west and look for a river that would lead us into the target area.

Not being all that familiar with the geography or the latitudes, I chose 060° as a good heading to let down. Wasn't 30 seconds until Waterboy was screaming at us about penetrating North Vietnamese airspace. Nothing was going to rattle the Boy Wonder, though, I had my plan and wasn't gonna give up so easy! We continued our descent and Dick kept asking if I could see anything below. "Negative, but we'll stop at 1,500 or 1,000 feet if I can't see anything," I replied.

Around 1,500 ft I could see dark splotches below and told Dick on fox mike that we were about to break out and I was continuing the descent. Passing 1,000 feet he called me again. I reiterated my "dark patch" sightings and kept pressing on, all the while Waterboy is ordering us to turn. A few seconds later we were skimming the ocean, literally, like about 200 or 300 feet!. Thank god we didn't have radar warning gear! A half a mile in front of us was a U.S. Navy frigate that we had to

pull up to avoid (we were really low). If that sucker had thought we were bad guys, a missile would have been heading our way and radar warning gear would've been screaming in our ears.

As we turned back toward the coast, I asked Dick if he wanted the lead back. "No, two, get us in there," he shot back. "O.K., Major, let's do it," I thought.

Well, we found the river, flew up the thing and got with the FAC. The ceiling actually got better the further inland we went. The FAC tells us to look for this walled compound a half a mile north of the river. Then he says that we have to drop inside of the sucker on a funny looking building in order to save some grunts along the walls. We were carrying a mixed ordnance load. I'm not exactly sure what the inboard stations had, but think it was nape and 500 lb bombs. I had CBU pods on the outboard stations and Dick had either 250 lb bombs or rockets. In any case, I couldn't use the CBU and eventually had to fly up northwest of the target and jettison the things in the river.

To keep things short, we pounded the place and got the usual rave reviews about how great we hit the target. Not bad, either, since we dropped everything at 1,100 or 1,200 feet using low angle deliveries.

After getting rid of my CBU, we rejoined and climbed out to the south. Clearing the clouds, our battle damage check revealed that Dick had a hole in his aileron or something. No big deal - we cruised on home. For months afterwards, Dick tried to get anybody around to listen to his account of the harrowing mission, especially the part where we confronted the Navy cruiser at 200 or 300 feet above the waves.

Long afterwards, I was notified to attend an awards ceremony where the England AFB Commander presented me a DFC for that mission. I hadn't realized that Dick had recommended me for anything other than a chance to be upgraded to flight lead status. Just goes to show you. I wasn't a flight lead for another two months, and that was only after I had deadsticked my jet into Tan San Nhut.

So there you have it. Let's compare my version with Dick's in the next War Stories volume.

Boy Wonder