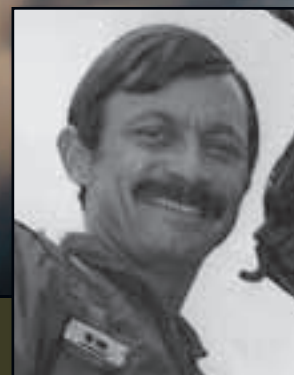


EXCERPT FROM  
“MY ENEMY  
—MY FRIEND”

Story By **Dan Cherry**



Photo illustration by John Fleck depicting the April 16, 1972 dogfight between Major Dan Cherry and Lt. Nguyen Hong My.



**R**ARELY HAS THE EXPRESSION “full circle” been played out in such dramatic fashion as in the story behind My Enemy My Friend. On April 16, 1972, it would have been impossible for (then) Major Dan Cherry and (then) Lt. Nguyen Hong My to predict how their lives would intersect 36 years in the future after meeting for the first time in the skies 30 miles southwest of Hanoi, Vietnam. When they met for the first time in aerial combat, they were each top tier fighter pilots serving their countries during time of war. Each pilot flying the best aircraft at their disposal and locked in fight to the death at 15,000 feet. One would be the victor and one would be the vanquished, but they would both live to meet again in the future and their lives would be changed once again. In this two part story you will learn how this story has touched many lives. This is where it started, and no one knows how it will end.

On April 16, 1972 at the 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron based at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand, the phone began to ring in my trailer at 0200.

“Major Cherry, this is the command post. You need to report to the main briefing room at 0430.”

“What’s going on?” I asked half asleep. “I’m on the Laredo schedule later in the day.”

“You’ll find out when you get here; just don’t be late.”

“Yes sir.” I hung up the phone and reset my alarm in hopes of getting some more sleep. No chance. I could

feel the excitement building. To change the entire flying schedule and to be called in the middle of the night meant it had to be something very unusual.

I walked into a briefing room at 0430 full of F-4 aircrews from all of the squadrons at Udorn, and the map up on the briefing board clearly showed planned routes all the way to Hanoi. This was the biggest strike into the heart of North Vietnam since the bombing halt of 1968. Like everyone else, I felt excited but a bit apprehensive, too. Rarely had any of us in recent years encountered the threats of MiGs, heavy anti-aircraft fire or surface to air missiles. But this mission was going to be much more dangerous than we had become accustomed to.

▲ (top-inset) The April 16, 1972 photo of Dan Cherry was taken just after he returned from the mission where he shot down Hong My. The paint from the red star is still wet.

▲ (bottom-inset) Photo of Hong My is a military portrait of Vietnamese People’s Air Force pilot circa 1972.



*My eyes followed Fredo, watching for any signs of anxiety as he led the briefing.*

▶ (op-top) Phantom "550" at Yokota air Base Japan, in 1972.

▶ (op-middle) Dan Cherry and WSO Jeff Feinstein taxi back to the base after the dogfight with Nguyen Hong My. Greg Crane's aircraft can be seen just to the left.

▶ (op-middle-left) Dan Cherry with a new red star painted on the F-4.

▶ (op-middle-right) Flight Leader Fred "Fredo" Olmsted celebrating at Udorn just after landing on April 16, 1972.

▶ (op-bottom) Jeff Feinstein, Dan Cherry, Fred Olmsted and Stu Maas after the kills, April 16, 1972.

I searched the briefing board for my name and there it was. The 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron Panther Pack, call sign Basco. I was flying Basco 3 with Jeff Feinstein in my back seat. My good friend Fred Olmsted was our flight leader with Stu Maas in his back seat. Basco 2 was Steve Cuthbert and Danny Souell. Basco 4 on my wing was Greg Crane and Gerry Lachman. I smiled. We had flown together before so I felt good about our chances for a successful mission.

Our mission was to escort another flight of bomb laden F-4's from Korat Air Base as they proceeded to their target in the Hanoi area, but apparently Basco was a last minute add-on. The hard reality was we had no tanker support scheduled and less than a full load of missiles. Such circumstances were highly unusual for a mission into the heart of North Vietnam. As a result of the tanker shortage our aircraft were configured with three external fuel tanks to give us the range and endurance needed to get to the target area and back safely.

My eyes followed Fredo, watching for any signs of anxiety as he led the briefing. Fred Olmsted had already been credited with one MiG-21 kill, but this morning his emphasis was on mutual support and the admonition that no MiG kill in the world was worth losing a wingman. He explained his aircraft was equipped with a top secret device which enabled his WSO Stu Maas, to interrogate the MiG's onboard radar transponder and to positively identify the MiG as hostile as soon as he had radar contact. Fredo went on to emphasize the Air Force had such confidence in this new technology that the rules of engagement had been changed to authorize us to shoot beyond visual range. I knew this technology gave us a huge advantage, but there would be more than 50 friendly airplanes in the same general area of our assignment. The last thing I wanted to do was shoot down one of my buddies.

We all discussed the new high tech advantage at length and decided because the equipment was new, and none of us had actually used it in a combat situation, we wouldn't trust it enough to fire without a positive visual ID on the bogey. We agreed to stick together as a 4-ship, but we would break up into elements and fight in 2-ship formations if necessary. In the briefing we talked at length about fuel conservation and the fact that we were going to be a long way from home without any scheduled tanker support. Fredo emphasized we must watch our fuel closely and jettison our external fuel tanks at exactly the right time. "Our Bingo is 8000 pounds," he said, "and as soon as the first centerline goes dry, we're going to jettison them and we'll all do it together." There were very

strict airspeed and G limitations for jettisoning that tank and it had to be done at slow speed before crossing the border into a high threat area.

Briefing over, it was off to the personal equipment shop to pick up harness, g-suit, helmet and survival vest. I jumped in the "bread truck" shuttle van alongside the others and headed to my aircraft. That's when I first saw her. Phantom 550. There was nothing unusual about her appearance. Just one of our typical F-4D's except for the PN on the tail. Seeing those letters I knew she came from another squadron. She looked good in the early morning light and Jeff Feinstein and I checked her over closely. We noted five missiles loaded, three Aim-7 Sparrows, and two Aim-9 Sidewinders. The other missile stations were taken up by ECM pods to help ward off the surface to air missiles we were sure to encounter.

With the preflight complete, Jeff and I climbed into the cockpit and strapped in. I turned the battery on, checked the intercom with him, started the engines and the big Phantom came to life. What a powerful sound she made! Two J-79's winding up; generators switched on line, cockpit lights flashing and then the radio check. "Basco Flight, check in," was Fredo's call. "Two, three, four" came our team's response. We were ready to taxi. Chocks were pulled, power revved up, and Phantom 550 rolled to the end of the runway for a last minute check from our maintenance crew.

Inside my gut, the butterflies and rapid breathing had begun. It was a familiar reaction, like the feeling the football player gets just before the first hit of the game. As a pilot I knew it was normal to be apprehensive of dangers ahead, but I shook off the feeling and turned my eyes toward my crew chief. With an enthusiastic thumbs up and a salute from him; a "cleared-for-takeoff" call from the tower; Basco flight pointed four noses down Udorn's runway 12. At 0730 Basco Flight lit the burners and roared off into a hazy early morning sky. Each airplane was configured with a 600 gallon centerline tank, two 370 gallon wing tanks, two Sidewinder heat seeking missiles, three radar guided Sparrow missiles and two ECM pods. With all that fuel and armament on board, each F-4 weighed over 50,000 pounds.

After take-off and join-up, we proceeded north into Laos, reached the rendezvous point over the Laotian village of Ban Ban, and began to orbit while we waited for the strike flight to arrive. The minutes dragged by with no sign of the Korat flight, so we began to calculate our options if our primary mission canceled. If we waited much longer our low fuel state would preclude any combat action.



Finally, with our fuel at a critical point, Fredo decided to proceed with our secondary mission which was to patrol for MiG targets of opportunity in an area approximately 30 miles south west of Hanoi.

Our centerline external fuel tanks began to run dry and remembering the very stringent G and airspeed limitations for jettisoning that tank Fredo pulled his nose up and the rest of us followed. We climbed, slowed down, and punched off all four tanks in unison. Then the noses came down, the power came up and we turned to put Hanoi on the nose as we picked up speed for our dash into North Vietnam.

As soon as we crossed the border into North Vietnam we picked up surface to air missile (SAM) and antiaircraft radar strobes on our radar warning gear. The enemy was locking on to us as we searched visually for SAM launches and on the radar for MiGs. The Navy had the primary responsibility for the coastal areas and we didn't want to infringe upon their territory, so we turned due south midway into North Vietnam. We flew in a tactical spread formation to an area we called the "fish's mouth," an area where Route 7 extends into Laos, all the while searching for any bad guys. When we reached Route 7 we turned 180 degrees and headed north toward Yen Bai airfield west of Hanoi.

That's when it started. Stu Mass in the back seat of Olmsted's airplane picked up two bandits on his radar at twenty miles. "I've got two bandits on the nose for twenty" was Stu's radio call. We turned slightly putting the bandits on the nose. Then Fredo called. "Let's get rid of 'em Basco." Eight external wing tanks immediately separated from our Phantoms. We increased power to gain more speed. Stu maintained his radar contact and called out the range as we closed to fifteen....ten.... five and then we picked them up visually.

"There's a MiG-21; there Dan!" Fredo exclaimed. Sure enough, two silver MiG 21's passed over us about five thousand feet higher than we were and on a reciprocal heading. Olmsted called for a hard right turn and we cranked it around, trying to keep the two MiGs in sight. I was on the outside of the turn leading the second element, so I fell behind on the turn away from me. Halfway through the turn, my wingman Greg (Baby Beef) Crane called out a third MiG at twelve o'clock level to me and climbing into position behind Olmsted's element. It was a camouflaged MiG-21 closing fast. Apparently the North Vietnamese had set a trap using the two silver MiGs for bait. The camouflaged MiG stayed low, and as we started our turn he climbed and accelerated hoping to roll in behind us as we chased the silver bandits.

I rolled out of my turn and headed directly for the camouflaged MiG giving my Weapons Systems Officer (WSO) Jeff Feinstein a running commentary on the MiG's position so he could try to acquire him on radar. The MiG pilot saw us and turned hard left directly into a cloud. The tops of the clouds reached 15,000 feet, and we were skimming them at 450 knots when the MiG disappeared. I thought to myself, I'll never see him again, but I figured I might as well go in the clouds after him. We might get lucky and acquire him on radar or spot him on the other side of the cloud bank.

After what seemed like hours in the clouds searching for the bandit on radar, I became nervous and pulled up. The threat of SAM's around Hanoi was significant and our primary defense was early visual acquisition in order to take evasive action and out maneuver the missile. The more time we spent in the clouds, the less chance we would have to see a missile coming at us. Finally, we popped out on top of the cloud bank and searched the horizon in all directions. We didn't see a thing. I thought we had lost the bandit for sure.

In the meantime, Olmsted and his wingman were still in hot pursuit of the other two MiGs. I made a hard right turn in the direction I had last seen Olmsted heading. As we rolled out of the turn, my hawk-eyed wingman Baby Beef Crane spotted our MiG again. "Two o'clock high. He's right above you, Dan," Greg called. And there he was, at two o'clock and five thousand feet above us in a climbing right turn. I picked him up visually, went to max afterburner and pulled up to get into firing position. As the nose of Phantom 550 tracked toward the target, I had a beautiful set-up for a heat seeking Sidewinder shot. The sun was behind us and there was nothing except the MiG and blue sky in front of us. I pulled the nose out in front of him, selected HEAT to arm the missiles and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. I squeezed again....still nothing. Rechecked the armament switches....all O.K.....squeezed again....nothing....squeezed again....still nothing. Despair. I was in perfect position—a situation that I had waited for all my life—and I had a bad fire control system.

I maintained good position behind the MiG as he climbed above 25,000 feet over the top and started down in a diving spiral trying his best to get away. Baby Beef was out about a thousand feet, in perfect fighting wing formation. I knew he must be wondering why I had not taken the shot when I had the chance. At that point, my confidence in my aircraft's fire control system was shattered! When Greg called out—"I'm taking the lead, passing on the left"—I acknowledged, "Roger Beef, you've got it." I rolled around Greg into fighting wing formation as he lined



up the MiG in his sights and started firing his missiles. His first Sparrow malfunctioned and fell away like a bomb. His next one went into a corkscrew spiral and missed the MiG by a mile. Greg and Gerry Lachman couldn't get a radar lock-on and consequently were firing in the bore sight mode with the radar slaved to the axis of the aircraft. Beef smoothly tracked the MiG in his gun sight—keeping him highlighted in the radar beam—and fired his last missile. It tracked perfectly, heading straight for the MiG. Exactly at the critical point in time prior to missile impact, the MiG pilot performed a break maneuver by turning hard into the attack. The Sparrow cruised right by his tailpipe without detonating.

Pushing my fears aside, I calculated my enemy's next move. I knew his hard break maneuver dissipated all his energy and we would maintain the advantage. Just one obstacle stood in the way of a kill—our lack of fire power. All we had left were my three Sparrows and no assurances they would fire. I made up my mind to stay at his six o'clock and vowed he would not get away from us. Even if my Sparrows didn't fire, I would chase him until I hit "bingo" or a minimum fuel state, and then run for home. I also remember thinking if my missiles failed to fire, I could try to ram him. In hindsight it would have been a foolish move, but it accurately reflects my aggressive, must win attitude at the time.

I radioed Greg that I was taking back the lead. No answer. "Basco 4, break left!" Still, no answer. We were both in max afterburner (AB) so I couldn't easily overtake him, and he was too far out in front for me to risk the shot. I certainly didn't want to hit him by mistake. I continued trying to pass and take the lead, calling him again to break out of the way so I could shoot.

"Break left, Beef, I've got him wired!" I yelled into the radio.

I called Jeff in the back seat. "I've got the piper right on him Jeff. Lock him up!" Immediately Jeff performed his radar magic and the analog bar popped out on the edge of the gun sight indicating a good radar lock-on.

It seemed to take forever for me to pull up line abreast with Greg, but when I did regain lead of our two-ship formation I clamped down on the trigger. Whoosh! To my amazement, the big AIM 7 Sparrow smoked out in front of us. We were in a right descending turn, accelerating through 500 knots and closing on the MiG as the missile fired. It did a big barrel roll and appeared to travel too far out in front of him. I realized it was just pulling lead. The missile rapidly closed the 4000 foot

distance and impacted the MiG in the area where the right wing joins the fuselage exploding in a huge fireball. "Got him! I got him!" I shouted.

The explosion blew the right wing completely off the MiG and it immediately went into a hard spin trailing fire and smoke. After one turn of the spin, the MiG pilot ejected and his parachute opened directly in front of me. I quickly turned away to avoid flying through the chute. I also wanted to be sure that Jeff could see the MiG pilot and his airplane going down in flames. There were too many pilots who failed to get credit for their kills because no one else witnessed them. We had a lot of good witnesses that day.

The whole experience had a dreamlike quality about it. This is like in the movies, I thought. There we were, smoking by this guy just as his parachute opened. We must have been almost supersonic with the afterburners cooking, and I knew we were no more than a hundred feet away from him when we passed. Even then I got a good look at him and distinctly remember his black flying suit and his white parachute with one red panel.

We could still hear Olmsted's element. He must have been close to us but cloud cover kept us from seeing him. Within a minute of my victory, he locked onto one of the silver MiGs. The MiG leader had rolled inverted, headed for the ground and run away, but the wingman seemed disoriented. Fredo knocked off the outer half of the MiG's right wing with his first missile, and the MiG went into a hard descending left turn. Fredo pulled up to gain separation, descended, and fired a second AIM-7. His second missile hit the MiG dead center. It exploded in a huge fireball, leaving nothing but fluttering debris. I'll never forget Fredo's radio call to our controlling agency. "Disco, this is Basco. Scratch another MiG-21."

By this time we were low on fuel and I had one thought. Let's get the hell out of here before more MiGs show up! We did not have enough fuel or missiles to fight again that day. We dove for the deck, leveling off just above the treetops and headed for Udorn. Checking our fuel state, we considered trying to find a tanker, but there were too many guys egressing North Vietnam that really needed the gas. We did our best to economize on our fuel consumption and pressed for home. Remarkably, we all landed safely with less than a thousand pounds of fuel.

I was proud to be part of Basco flight that day. Our leader had shown great courage; the flight members had been thoroughly trained and briefed; and we did exactly what we said we would do. We had flown

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(page 4-top) MiG-21 pilot, Lt. Nguyen Hong My (left) with his colleagues from the Vietnamese People's Air Force prior to April 1972.

(page 4-middle-left) Dan and Hong My just after meeting for the first time on April 5, 2008 in Ho Chi Minh City on a live TV show.

(page 4-middle-bottom) John Stiles, Dan Cherry and Nguyen Hong My at EAA AirVenture 2012.

(page 4-bottom) Photo illustration of Dan's F-4D Phantom 550 by John Fleck.

the entire mission with only our original fuel load, shot down two MiG-21's after a five minute dogfight—without help from radar controllers—and arrived home safe and sound.

In 1972 I had no way of ever comprehending that my destiny would be linked to the MiG-21 pilot that I had just shot down. Not in my wildest imagination could I have ever thought that this F-4D Phantom II "550" and I would meet 3 decades later and that it would guide me back to Vietnam in 2008 to meet the Vietnam People's Air Force pilot Lt. Nguyen Hong My.

Thirty-six years later we would meet on a live TV show in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam where our lives would be altered again. 🌍  
For more information visit [www.myenemymyfriend.com](http://www.myenemymyfriend.com).



▲ (inset) Dan and Hong My greet each other for the first time during the live TV show in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) on April 5, 2008.



(main-photo) The newly restored McDonnell Douglas F-4D Phantom 550 in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

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