

Misty to the rescue. RF-4C in trouble.

by Dick Daub

The Intake, Journal of the Super Sabre Society
Vol. 1, Issue 4, Summer 2007, pp 31-32

PROLOGUE: Dick Rutan is a famous aviator. In 1992, he became the first pilot to fly around the world un-refueled in the now-famous Voyager aircraft designed and built by his brother Burt. Before he achieved aviation immortality, Dick was a regular-type F-100 pilot in Southeast Asia. It was early in this tour that he volunteered for "Misty", a TDY assignment with the original Fast FACs at Phu Cat AB, RVN, flying F-100Fs.

This story tells of a mission on which a Misty crew helplessly watched as the only USAF general officer to die in combat during the war in Southeast Asia met his fate. With Dick Rutan flying from the back seat (a common practice to rest the usually very tired Misty front-seater during refueling), this Misty crew had just backed off the tanker when a Mayday call came through. An RF- 4C, call sign Strobe 01, was exiting North Vietnam after taking a hit—and its rear cockpit was filling with smoke. Water Boy, a GCI site, confirmed the dire situation that Strobe 01 was dealing with: they were losing hydraulic pressure and heading for feet wet. Dick Rutan, an old head with Misty, maintained aircraft control as they started to hustle towards the stricken Phantom. The front-seater, Don Harland, a new guy with Misty, hung on for the ride of his life as they turned towards a point north of the DMZ, and Dick urged their Super Sabre onward even faster. Rutan called Water Boy, offering to make a visual check of the battle damaged fighter. In response, Water Boy vectored the F-100F towards the RF-4C.

As the Mistys joined with Strobe 01, Harland spotted a small hole in the forward belly area of the recce bird where flames flickered ominously inside the lower camera bay of the RF-4C. As they moved closer, they could see smoke coming from the seams in the belly area just aft of the camera bays. Moving to the right wing, they could see flames in the right camera bay too. Crossing back to the left side, they relayed the information to the Strobe crew. Strobe 01 confirmed their info and said they were heading out to sea for a possible ejection. The Misty crew relayed the situation to Water Boy and started the Search and Rescue process. The nearest SAR package was located at Da Nang AB, RVN, and could be there in short order. Rutan remembers thinking, "Good! These guys won't be in the water long."

As Misty cruised on their left wing, the crew aboard Strobe 01 began what should have been a picture perfect controlled ejection: straight and level at 10,000 feet, ideal speed, under control, and a rescue package already en-route. Rutan recalls

thinking this would be quite a sight; since he had never seen an actual ejection up close, and had heard all about the F-4's notorious Martin Baker seat, known as the "back breaker" for its complicated system. They waited expectantly. Then, things began to go awry. Two minutes went by and no ejection. Rutan later learned from the back-seater that the front-seater did not want to be automatically ejected after the back-seater went, but instead wanted each cockpit to command their individual ejections. And so, because he was the ranking crewmember, the decision was made: each pilot would eject themselves individually.

As the Mistys watched, the back-seater's ejection went perfectly: the rear canopy opened and separated cleanly, clearing the tail by a good twenty feet, the seat rose in its tracks, the rocket fired, the seat shot straight up, and was very stable. When the rocket burned out the drogue chute opened, tilting the seat back 90-degrees so that the pilot was flat on his back as the seat cleared the tail. Looking back over his shoulder, Rutan watched the chute canopy deploy normally and the seat separate cleanly. As the back-seater swung serenely beneath the fully inflated canopy, the Mistys turned their attention to the front-seater's ejection.

Rutan now says he couldn't believe the horror they then beheld! The front cockpit was filled with smoke and fire, and the white dot of the pilot's helmet was barely visible through the smoke and flames. The pilot sat motionless, head erect, seemingly oblivious to what was happening. The flames seemed to be coming up from the front foot wells, through the cockpit and out the open rear cockpit. As the flames streamed over the back of the Phantom a thick cloud of black smoke obscured the tail; and still, the pilot sat there—motionless.

31 Rutan screamed over the radio, "Strobe 01, Bail out! Bail out!" The Misty pilots watched in grim horror as the RF-4 entered a shallow dive. Rutan made several radio calls to the doomed fighter and moved in quite close, as if being closer would allow the pilot to hear him. Harland yelled, "Oh my God! Look at it burn!" Rutan, quite close now, screamed again, "Strobe 01! BAIL OUT! BAIL OUT!" At one point Rutan was so close that the stricken Phantom began rolling into a right bank. Then, as he pulled away quickly, the RF's wings rolled level, and its descent steepened, headed directly for the beach. The intense heat had charred the top of the canopy, and the pilot was no longer visible. Paint began to blister all over the fuselage, and small explosions rocked the plane as the oxygen system cooked off, sending panels flying and leaving the entire nose a charred mess. At about 500 feet the old Phantom gave one last gasp, pitching up slightly, and then dove straight into the beach, hitting about a hundred yards from the surf. Rutan, still barking on the radio, had stayed glued to the wing until he heard Harland screaming, "Goddammit Dick! Pull up!" (Today Rutan freely admits, had it not been for Harland's impassioned pleas he might've plowed right into the beach on Strobe's wing.) Dejectedly, the Mistys turned back to find Strobe 01

Bravo and notified Waterboy of 01's fate. Asked if there was any chance of survival, Rutan replied, "Negative survival, negative survival." They located Strobe 01 Bravo still descending in his chute at about 5,000 feet. To the west, however, a motorized sampan was heading straight for the helpless back-seater. Not knowing if it belonged to the good guys, they buzzed the boat in an attempt to turn it around. When the sampan continued on course, they put a burst of 20mm close across their bow, prompting the boat to come about and head back to the beach. Soon the Jolly Green arrived and picked up Strobe 01 Bravo. Amazingly, the Mistys returned to the North and continued their morning mission. (Most of us would've considered landing, I would suspect?) When they landed they were met by a sea of bird colonels. It was then they learned that the front-seater was General Bob Worley. Rutan had recorded the mission, and they were dispatched to Saigon on a Scatback T-39 courier. Everyone wanted to hear "the Misty tape." Sadly, General Worley had been on his champagne flight. With his death, TAC air and all fighter pilots lost one of their strongest, most vocal advocates at Tan Son Nhut, which was chiefly populated with SAC and Army folks running things. It was a sad day as well for the two Misty pilots. As Rutan looks back on it all these many years later, he says that to this day he cannot explain what made him stay on the general's wing for so long. "Desperation," he says after thinking about it, ... "the psychology of combat."

EPILOGUE: Dick Rutan flew with Misty from January to August, 1968. He was shot down on his 105th, and last, mission over North Vietnam, becoming one of only twelve Mistys to fly more than 100 Misty missions. Fittingly, he and Chuck Shaheen ejected ten miles out to sea and were picked up by Jolly Green helicopters. (In all, Rutan flew 325 combat missions.) In 1986, after retiring from the Air Force, Rutan made his record-setting flight around the world in *The Voyager*, the first unrefueled flight of such length. Four days after the flight, President Ronald Reagan awarded him the Presidential Citizens Medal of Honor. He was also a co-recipient of the 1986 the Collier Trophy for outstanding aviation achievement. In a quote from his book, "Misty. First Person Stories of the F-100 Misty FACs in the Vietnam War," Major General Don Shepperd says, "Dick is famous. He is an unusual man, a gifted pilot, an adventurer, a world record holder; but most of all, he is our Misty comrade and friend."

Source:

<https://vdocuments.site/issue-4-summer-2007.html>