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*The following limited information was culled from USAF Historical Research Agency (Maxwell AFB) documents, National Archive files (College Park, MD), redacted USAF Safety Center (Kirtland AFB) report, Chris Hobson's book, Vietnam Air Losses, Stars & Stripes newspaper, and interviews with Donald McCollough and veteran firefighter personnel.*

On 27 January 1969, 559<sup>th</sup> TFS Boxer 03 flight sat parked for an alert mission at Cam Ranh Bay AB. Lead consisted of Major Robert J. Cameron and WSO Lt. Thomas G. Burge in F-4C 63-7441, with wingman Capt. Albert A. Gagliardi and WSO Lt. Hal D. Tidler. The crews readied the aircraft and ordnance in preparation for any urgent requests for assistance.

Early morning of 28 January, Boxer flight scrambled from alert status, taxied out of the revetment, and after an all-systems check, cleared to runway 02 (towards the sea) for a Combat Sky Spot mission (radar-guided bombing). Local weather conditions comprised 1/8 stratocumulus at 3,000 feet, calm winds with a 15-mile visibility and sunrise forecast for 0706 hours.

According to (late B/Gen) Gagliardi:

*“Lead would take off first, and as soon as he broke ground, Number Two would roll. Lead had run-up both engines, released his brakes, and then plugged in his afterburner. Prior to his applying full power and afterburners, I lowered my head inside the cockpit to prevent loss of night vision from the brilliant exhaust thrust. I preoccupied myself with further flight preparations and started to run-up my airplane. When raising my head to see where Lead was located, I observed him swerve in the sand and instantly rollup into a fireball. Realizing a major accident occurred, I turned around and taxied my aircraft back in to have the bomb load disarmed.”*

From available documentation, Lead began his takeoff roll at 0515 hours in pitch darkness. The jet charged down the runway with full-afterburners roaring carrying six 750-pound GP bombs, two CBU-24 cluster bombs, three AIM-7 guided missiles, two 370-gallon wing droptanks and a full load of internal fuel.

The aircraft suffered a tire blowout (according to Gagliardi) and departed the runway 1800-feet from the takeoff end and continued along the left asphalt/concrete shoulder. After racing past the south high-speed taxiway at the 2300-foot point, it swerved left off the asphalt shoulder. It continued tracking parallel to the runway and struck a portion of the BAK-13 barrier (arrestor cable) at the 3500-foot position, then returned to the runway for another 600-feet, now trailing flames in the darkness. It streaked past a standby fire truck parked near the 4000-foot marker that immediately began pursuit.

Again, the Phantom edged left to the asphalt shoulder and this time heavily impacted a sandbagged M-21 (Morest) barrier rewind housing (arrestor cable). The force of collision completely wiped-out the undercarriages. After forcefully collapsing to the ground surface, the heavily damaged jet began sliding sideways trailing debris with its tail section towards the asphalt shoulder.<sup>i</sup>

The aircraft slewed 450-feet through the sand parallel to the runway before a fuel explosion produced a brilliant fireball. At this point it came to rest 35-feet from the runway pointed in a 290-degree heading.

Gagliardi continues his recollections: *“Did you know about the firefighter? We carried Sparrow missiles onboard the airplane. As a result of the fire, one of the missiles cooked off and struck a firefighter—the fin sliced off his arm.”*

A standby fire truck arrived shortly and began to foam the airframe as two other fire-fighting vehicle soon appeared on-scene. The airmen, wearing heat-resistant Fire Proximity Suits (FPS), immediately began battling the fuel-fed inferno.

Despite an imminent threat of exploding fuel cells, hazards of potential detonation of CBU's, and a 750-pound bomb located 15-feet from the tail section, the crash personnel maneuvered the vehicles within 40-feet of the flame-engulfed aircraft. The firefighters immediately began a ground advance towards the aircraft with hand-held hoses spewing foam to smother immediate fire areas as they pressed forward. Those on the trucks directed the roof-turret nozzles to knock down the fuselage flames at longer range. As they quickly extinguished the scattered ground fires, the area became less illuminated. All men were acutely aware they had a minimum factor of one and one half minutes to “cook off” timeline on the CBU's, but continued their steady movement forward knowing the surrounding darkness also concealed unaccounted hazardous ordnances.

According to SSgt. Donald W. McCollough, the fire-fighting rescue team shift supervisor, he arrived on-scene in the second truck. Though both F-4C canopies appeared missing, there was mounting concern if any aircrew still remained onboard, since neither member was observed ejecting or otherwise departing the aircraft. The Phantom sat slanted away from the runway; therefore, the right side provided easier access to the wreckage.

After the fire suppression efforts effectively stemmed the flames, McCollough led two linemen who foamed a path ahead towards the cockpit area to rescue the aircrew. A cursory inspection confirmed both cockpits were empty, so the men began retreating from the area. McCollough recalls being positioned near the Phantom's right wingtip, when he experienced a brilliant flash of light—his last recollection of the scene. What happened?

When the aircraft previously impacted the M-21 (Morest) housing, the collision wiped out the landing gear, tore off an external droptank and dislodged several AIM-7 guided missiles. The damaged tank splattered a trail of fuel that had ignited. As one Sparrow lay nearby, heat generated from the flames eventually ignited the rocket motor and the missile fired. It picked up considerable speed and momentum during the 450-foot trajectory heading towards the burning aircraft.

At the crash scene, firefighter Larry T. Eley positioned his truck towards the Phantom's tail section. He recalls observing a small wobbling light, several hundred feet far down the runway, grow brighter as it loomed swiftly closer and smash into the burning wreckage.<sup>ii</sup> A horrific brilliant white explosion rocked the trucks and blew down ground personnel.

The near sonic 12-foot long, 400-pound missile sliced through the left side of the F-4C fuselage behind the rear cockpit and in a split-second, severely wounded McCollough on the opposite side. A guidance fin slashed through the thick cumbersome FPS like a guillotine blade and severed his right arm above the elbow.<sup>iii</sup> The missile ruptured several fuel cells and the subsequent horrendous explosion showered red-hot metal fragments everywhere, resulting in re-ignition of surrounding fuel-soaked areas.

The violent cataclysm knocked McCollough unconscious. The blast ripped apart his Proximity Suit and hot metal from the detonation penetrated both his protective garments and abdomen. The two linemen he directed—Garry Dell and Joseph Hobbs-- were hurled 10-feet to the ground but remained conscious; both incurred burns when the blast tore away their protective fire-suit hoods. The heat and flames

transformed Hobbs' hands into raw flesh and Dell recalls hearing McCollough scream.

Joseph Mahurin, another firefighter blown to the ground, recovered and joined Dell. Following the numbing explosive event, the men located McCollough collapsed on the sand, unconscious and bleeding profusely from the arm wound. Without delay, they promptly dragged him to a pickup vehicle that just arrived, loaded him in the backend and climbed aboard along with Hobbs. The driver rushed the men to an awaiting field ambulance with a flashing red light, parked near a taxiway. Rescue personnel quickly transferred and evacuated the critically wounded McCollough and firefighters to the base hospital emergency room (ER). Approximate time from on-scene arrival to evacuation—at least seven minutes.

The blast wave proved so strong it shook personnel from their seats as flying metal embedded in the fire-vehicle frames. Fearing another probable detonation, all drivers instantly backed away from the fireball and ripped the landlines off the crash trucks.<sup>iv</sup>

Following the massive explosion, the on-scene commander issued orders to immediately withdraw all crash vehicles and personnel to a safe perimeter. One fire truck malfunctioned when the transmission refused to shift into reverse gear. After everyone cleared the burning area, the fire chief ordered the truck be abandoned and its driver recovered to prevent any further explosion injuries.

At first light an HH-43B surveying the crash scene located the missing aircrew. During the 450-foot slide, WSO Lt. Burge “was ejected...and fatally injured”-- his body and seat were located 225-feet from the wreckage. Aircraft Commander Major Cameron appears to have been tossed from the Phantom. The forward ejection seat remained in the cockpit, but his body lay 35-feet away attached to the seat by extended parachute lines.

Ordnance from #441 continued to detonate periodically through the morning. Only the forward cockpit area, wing panels and tail section survived the fierce blaze and explosions. Explosives and Medical Personnel re-entered the area at 1030 hours to recover the WSO and at 1326 hours Major Cameron's body. The accident resulted in cancellation of 16 fragged missions.

Upon arrival at the hospital ER, medical staff rushed McCollough to the operating room to save his life. Besides the concussion and hemorrhagic shock from blood loss, he suffered multiple penetrating abdominal wounds, along with second- and

third-degree burns to his leg, abdomen and face. v After numerous surgeries, he slowly regained full consciousness two weeks later. Experiencing memory loss from the concussion, physical trauma, and effects of pain medications, McCollough retains vague recollections of the previous events as told to him by visiting firefighters.

The following summary is from Star Stars & Stripes newspaper by TSgt. John Harvey and details McCollough's final hospitalization at Cam Ranh Bay AB:

*...Lt. Col. Harry Falls Jr. commander of the 559<sup>th</sup> TFS, whose men were lost in the tragedy said:*

*“McCollough displayed devotion to duty, bravery and valor above and beyond the call of duty when he attempted to save our men. He didn't have to approach the burning aircraft so closely, but he did. He earned the respect of all our men with his selfless action.”*

*Falls and the men of the 559<sup>th</sup> were determined to show McCollough their appreciation for his courageous action. They suggested voluntary donations, not for charity, but as a small token of their respect for his gallantry. In less than three days, the amount exceeded \$1,100, with donations pouring in from all three fighter squadrons.*

*Then the day (19 February) before McCollough was air evacuated to CONUS, all officers in the 559<sup>th</sup>—except a few who were flying combat mission at the time---gathered around McCollough's bed. As a memento of their appreciation they present him with a plaque bearing a photograph of two F-4s, the squadron insignia and the signatures of all the officers in the 559<sup>th</sup>. And as Falls presented the plaque to him, McCollough looked around at the assembled pilots and said quietly, “You didn't have to do this for me.”*

*But the pilots knew better. They knew how much this man had given of himself to save two of their own. He was a hero.*

Next day 20 February, 12<sup>th</sup> Hospital placed him onboard a stretcher-carrying C-141 air-evacuation flight to Japan and CONUS accompanied by a personal doctor at all times. According to firefighter Larry T. Eley, at departure the fire unit personnel lined-up all the crash trucks on the tarmac with nozzles pointed skyward. Standing at attention, the men saluted McCollough as the jet transport took off and climbed for altitude.

McCollough spent five months at Great Lakes Naval Hospital, Great Lakes, IL, undergoing further surgery, skin grafts and medical stabilization. Then six months

at Walter Reed Medical Center, Washington, DC, for prosthetic fitment, physical therapy and rehabilitation. During hospitalization he received the Airman’s Medal.

Three days after discharge home from Walter Reed, the American Fighter Aces Association members hosted a special dinner for Donald and his wife Mary. The association learned of his act of heroism and voted to award a rare \$500 honorarium and certificate of honor praising his disregarding personal risk in attempting to rescue the aircrew.

Discrepancies: The accident report states the F-4C came to rest, “positioned 110 degrees to the active runway heading.” In other words, pointing in a direction of 110 degrees. According to an accident scene photo and firefighter recollections', the tail section lay closest to the runway and the aircraft pointed 290-degrees from the active runway heading.

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<sup>i</sup> Driving his fire truck back to headquarters from the jet engine test cell, Raymond Kastner observed the jet collide with the Moresst housing, then slide sideways along the sand and slow down when a fireball erupted. Ray Kastner, Firefighter, interview 18 Feb. 2014.

<sup>ii</sup>

“We arrived just moments prior to the missile impact. I’m waiting for the order from my crew chief to drive the truck closer to help. An airman in the back yells, ‘You just drove over some bombs.’ I looked back and spot a light far down the runway. Try to imagine... on a dark night... moving a flashlight back and forth as fast you can, and...follow the light. That’s what it looked like... I then observe the speeding light impact in a split-second followed by an explosion.” Larry T. Eley, Firefighter, interview 19 Feb. 2014.

<sup>iii</sup> The aluminum color Firefighting Proximity Suit, protected a firefighter from extreme temperatures when attacking aircraft fires. Constructed of material containing asbestos to withstand high fuel temperatures, they proved heavy, bulky, and the inside suit became sweaty hot, even with the protective material.

<sup>iv</sup> George Corbat, Firefighter, interview, 18 Feb. 2014.

<sup>v</sup> Garry Dell visited McCollough a few days after the event and recalls Don’s visible upper body was black all-over.







