

# When F-4s Collide!

## F-4 Phantoms, Mid-Air Collision

### Cam Ranh Bay AB Air Base

12th Security Police Squadron, Cam Ranh Bay AB Air Base

September 17th, 1966!

Story submitted by [Manuel M. Roybal](#), [Steve Gattis](#), and [Frank Pilson](#)

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September 17th, 1966!  
F-4 Phantoms, Mid-Air Collision  
Cam Ranh Bay Air Base  
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**On September 17, 1966, three F-4C Phantom aircraft took off from Cam Ranh Bay AB Air Base**, responding to a call for air support during a night-recovery rescue of a downed helicopter. After a successful mission, the three Phantoms landed at Đà Nẵng Air Base for service and refueling. The F-4s of the 558th TAC Fighter Wing then took off from Đà Nẵng AB for the flight home to Cam Ranh Bay AB.

**As the lead two F-4s prepared for a formation landing** flying side by side, at Cam Ranh Bay AB Air Base, the third F-4 trailed behind a few miles and maintained visual on the lead air crafts. Suddenly, everything seemed to go wrong: in seconds the two lead F-4 Phantoms slammed together and a hung-bomb from one exploded killing Captains Rocky and Surwald in one F-4, and Captain Rocky in the second F-4. Captain D. W. Browning, who flew with Captain Rocky, instantly ejected and from his parachute helplessly watched the two burning F-4s plummeting in balls of fire toward the South China Sea. The trailing F-4 Phantom pilot saw the brilliant explosion only seconds ahead of his flight, reacted to possible shrapnel and debris took evasive action, then immediately called for search and rescue efforts from Cam Ranh AB. Captain Browning then overflew the explosive falling debris, and the the Air Base, before looping back to maintain surveillance over the crash site.

**A massive response effort launched from Cam Ranh Bay AB Air Base**, including helicopters, emergency rescue boats, flare aircraft, divers, and Security Police armed boat patrols, all searching under high-powered flares and lights throughout the night. Captain Browning, having parachuted from his fatally wounded F-4 was soon discovered and pulled from the South China Sea, alive.

Over the next few days, partial remains of Captains Rocky and Surwald were recovered. They would later be buried together in one plot at Arlington. Captain Edward Mc Cann was also recovered and is buried at Lake Wales, Florida.

In the early years of the war, families of those Killed In Action or Line Of Duty were notified of the tragedy and updates, as in WWII, by telegrams.

The following is the Western Union Telegram from Robert W. Beers, Colonel, USAF, sent to the family of Robert Rocky:

I sincerely regret to inform you that remains subsequently recovered from the crash in which your son lost his life cannot be individually identified. The remains were thoroughly examined by identification specialists, using every method and type of equipment known to modern science. Even with these exhaustive efforts, the remains could not be identified and must be buried together as a group. We realize that relatives receive much comfort from selecting the cemetery for burial of their loved ones. I deeply regret that this privilege is denied because it is impossible to identify the remains of your son. The group will be buried in Camp Nelson National Cemetery, Nicholasville, Kentucky. This cemetery was selected because it is centrally located for the families involved. The Superintendent of the cemetery will arrange for the funeral service. He will notify you of the date and the time as soon as possible so that relatives and friends can attend. My continued sympathy is extended to you in the loss of your loved one.



Through a twist of tragic irony, Rocky was killed three weeks before his tour in Vietnam was over. Rocky was due to return home in three weeks for a month's leave before reassignment to Germany. He wrote letters home saying how he and his wife were going to adopt a child when he returned. He believed he was going to be stationed somewhere in Europe for the second half of his tour. Rocky was so looking forward to coming home and seeing his wife, brother and parents again. In honor of her late husband, Sylvia Rocky established a scholarship fund for children of Air Force personnel. When asked why she chose to do this, she said that her husband had always loved children and he had been a great man. He had written her almost everyday, and he never once complained about the hard times he was facing in combat. Captain Rocky believed the war was a just cause for freedom, and was willing to do whatever it took to win.

Sources: Rocky Family, Bryan Kreher (Monmouth University Student) and NJVVMF.

May the three Captains who perished rest in peace, and may those who witnessed the mid-air collision or participated in recovery efforts, find peace of mind for surely they will never forget.

#### Mid-Air Collision, Cam Ranh Bay AB Air Base, Conrad Gomez wrote:

I arrive'd at Cam Ranh in March 1967 and I worked Security when I got there for the first 7 months. I got to be a pretty good "Ramp Rat" with all those F-4's moving around. and other visiting aircraft. I had heard the story of the two F-4's that had a mid air crash, and as I was on walking-detail along the revetment area, where all the aircraft were coming and going and being loaded up with napalm and 250 and 500 pound bombs, I came across the recovered debris from the two F-4's that had collided and stored for investigation in the revetment area.

I later was on the SAT Team and that's when I took the below pictures of the two F-4s. As you can tell not a lot left of them. They were there for a while longer probably another month or so as we heard they were done with the investigation

Another Day at Cam Ranh!





**Background and Comments from USAF Security Police on duty September 17, 1966**

**Mid-Air Collision, Cam Ranh Bay AB Air Base,  
September 17, 1966**

**Manuel M. Roybal wrote:**

Wow! The graphic art is pretty much the way I remember that horrible event. I still have dreams of that night, and of course all the experiences we as security policemen had to endure. Thank you so very much for the wonderful graphic. I am sure all the other guys that were there will instantly remember that night. I think at some time in our tour of duty we all saw aircraft fall out of the sky or crash on landings and takeoffs. I had just started the midnight shift, as I recall, and was a SAT (Security Alert Team) member on night patrol at the end of the runway of Cam Ranh Bay AB Air Base. We had just started patrol around the base that evening, and I know we stopped at Observation Post #1 and we were there about 30 minutes. We left OP#1 and had started toward the runway to check on another post when all hell broke loose and suddenly a tremendous explosion was heard and two huge balls of fire lit up the whole base and night sky -- two F-4C Phantoms had just collided on final approach -- *what a horrible thing*. Later that evening, we had to go out and search for and pick up debris or anything that remained of the two aircraft or pilots we could find. It was nasty-horrible duty. *Just another day in Vietnam*. [Frank Pilson](#) also recalls the crash and maybe he can pinpoint the exact time or info.

Manny Roybal,  
CRB 1966-1967  
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**Mid-Air Collision, Cam Ranh Bay AB Air Base**  
**September 17, 1966**  
**[Steve Gattis](#) wrote:**

The Cam Ranh Bay AB graphic is outstanding. Each time I look at the graphics, I get chills. The mid-air crash got to me because of the aircraft in front [over flying the base] was what I saw almost right as the F-4s collided on their approach. Thanks for what you are doing. I really think it helps us get beyond the bad memories.

Steve Gattis  
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**Landing Mid-Air Collision, Cam Ranh Bay AB Air Base**  
**September 17, 1966**  
**[Frank Pilson](#) wrote:**

Hi Don: I got your e-mail about the F-4C plane crash of Sept. 1966. It was a long time ago in a land far far away. It has caught me by surprise and backed me up to events of Sept. 1966. I was not prepared for the content of the e-mail and all the sorrow of the last 45 years came out in the form of tears. I put my glasses down and moved from the desk chair to a couch in living room. I called for my wife to read the e-mail and didn't tell her about the contents. My wife came down stairs and read it. I have shared this experience with Joan over the years, and it brought back the war from 9/9/1966 to 12/17/11. I have never wanted to glorify war since I left USAF and Nam.

There was a memorial Service for the above on 9-20-1966, 1930 hours, at Cam Ranh Bay AB RVN, Chapel No-1, APO 96326. I have a copy of the program written for the service.

I had the need to talk to a former tent mate from that time. I called Ray Jones and we talked about the airplane crash. Ray said he was working SAT that night, but we couldn't agree on the time of the crash. Ray told me it was between 2nd and 3rd shifts, which would mean it would be about midnight, although I had thought it was about 3:00 a.m.

I wrote an article about this called [Red Skies](#), published in the VSPA Guardmount in September, 2008. In the story I related that I had received an e-mail about the two F-4Cs crashing over South China Sea in Sept 1966. I was then assigned to the 12th Security Police Squadron, in April 1966, and to a tent with eight skycops of USAF. Over the years, I have told my wife about two F4Cs crashing, and I got me to thinking about the specific details of that night. We were all working Mids 10:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m., and I was working guard duty in the 12th Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW) Bomb dump. My post was overlooking the South China Sea. It seems to me that about 3:00 a.m., the sky turned bright red, which lit up the night sky, with loud sounds and big banging noises. Just as fast as it happened it turned dark again. We called Central Security Control (radio room for base) and reported the incident. Our shift was over at 6:00 a.m. and the USAF gods asked for volunteers to search for debris or any signs of life in the bomb dump area. I think I volunteered for the boat patrol to help if possible. I volunteered for the boat patrol to help if possible. I am not sure what we found (it has been too many years) and later filed the incident away as one of many in that crazy war year.

I know I later attended the memorial service for five USAF Airmen killed that day: the men who died that night in the mid-air collision, and two others who also died flying the same day. Yesterday, my thoughts were of those five men killed in Nam. Their names are on The Wall and that makes The Wall a very personal experience for me. I think the men died should be mentioned:

- a. Capt [Clifford S Heathcote](#) , 557th TFW, 9-3-1966 (crashed into mountain South of CBR)
- b. [Capt William P Simmons](#) , 12 USAF Hospital, 9-3-1966 (crashed into mountain South of CBR)
- c. Capt Edward D McCann, 558th TFW, 9-17-1966 (CRB AB, mid-air landing collision)
- d. 1st Lt. Robert E Rocky, 558th TFW, 9-17-1966 (CRB AB, mid-air landing collision)
- e. 1st Lt Michael E Surwald, 558th TFW, 9-17-1966 (CRB AB, mid-air landing collision)

In 1966, Cam Ranh Bay AB was a place of sand, sun, and war. Now, that night in 1966 seems so long ago, but I have thought of how there was the sudden sky of red, which reminds me of the old saying: "Red sky at night... sailor's delight" and since then, the "Red sky in morning... sailor's warning", and that has also proven true in life.

**Frank Pilson, LM-28**  
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**Landing Mid-Air Collision, Cam Ranh Bay AB Air Base  
September 17, 1966  
Ferrell F. O'Quinn wrote:**

I was there serving at A Btry 71st Arty Hawk Msl Btry on hill above the Air Base over-looking south toward the China Sea. I could see both F-4s and the pilots as they came in, being eye level, as I was on the hill overlooking the sea. The two were flying side by side, and the F-4 on the right came over the one on the left, in a leap frog maneuver, and came down on the other F-4, and then the planes exploded. I saw the one pilot eject.

**Ferrell F. O'Quinn.**

A btry. 6th Btl 71st Arty. Hawk. Cam Rahn. Bay. 1966-1967.

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**Additional Information: *Courtesy of Together We Served* :**

**The following is a paraphrase of a BIO narrative (*courtesy of Together We Served*) on Capt. Rocky relating the incident leading to the death of both pilots:**

**On September 17, 1966, Robert Edward Rocky** was the rear seat pilot in the lead aircraft in a flight of three F-4C aircraft that landed at Đà Nẵng Air Base after a successful combat mission to provide air cover for a downed helicopter crew. The aircraft returned and were re-serviced and checked and headed back to Cam Ranh Bay AB Air Base.

**The first two aircraft** were in close formation on two-mile final for landing, and **the third aircraft** was several miles behind as they approached the field. At this time, both ground and air observers saw an explosion in the air and both aircraft then crashed into the **South China Sea**, one mile north of the base. **Capt. D. W. Browning** (flying with Captain Mc Cann) was the sole survivor of the collision, ejected and is still unable to shed any light as to how the explosion or collision actually took place. The facts available indicate that the two aircraft were involved in a mid-air collision and that death of the other crew members was instantaneous.

**An immediate search was begun** by helicopters and boats under the lights of high-powered flares and continued throughout the night. Wreckage that could be recovered was carefully evaluated and it was evident that only the one crew member survived.

**United States Air Force  
In Memory of**

**Edward Dean Mc Cann, Captain - O3 - USAF (Pilot)**  
558th TAC FTR SQDRN, 12th TAC FTR WING, 7th AF, USAF  
Length of service 10 years  
Casualty was on Sep 17, 1966  
In KHANH HOA (Cam Ranh Bay AB), SOUTH VIETNAM  
NON-HOSTILE, FIXED WING - PILOT  
AIR LOSS, CRASH ON LAND  
Body was recovered  
Panel 10E - Line 108

*(Captain Mc Cann was interred in Lake Wales Cemetery, Lake Wales, Polk County, FL)*



**Robert Edward Rocky, Captain - O3 - USAF (Pilot)\***  
558th TAC FTR SQDRN, 12th TAC FTR WING, 7th AF, USAF  
Length of service 4 years  
Casualty was on Sep 17, 1966  
In KHANH HOA (Cam Ranh Bay AB), SOUTH VIETNAM  
NON-HOSTILE, FIXED WING - PILOT  
AIR LOSS, CRASH ON LAND  
Body was recovered  
Panel 10E - Line 110  
Wall at Panel 10E Line 108

**Michael Edward Surwald, 1LT - O2 - USAF Reserve (Pilot)\***  
558th TAC FTR SQDRN, 12th TAC FTR WING, 7th AF, USAF  
Length of service 1 years  
Casualty was on Sep 17, 1966  
In KHANH HOA, SOUTH VIETNAM  
NON-HOSTILE, FIXED WING - PILOT

AIR LOSS, CRASH ON LAND

Body was recovered  
Panel 10E - Line 111

*\* The remains of both Captains Rocky and Surwald were not fully recovered, yet enough of their remains were identified and placed together in a plot at Arlington National Cemetery, Virginia, Plot: Section 46 Site 549 )*

Cam Ranh Bay AB Air Base  
Memorial Chapel Service  
brochure Provided by Frank  
Pilson



CAM RANH BAY AFB, RVN  
Chapel No. 1 APO 96326

20 September 1966

1930 Hours

MEMORIAL SERVICES FOR

Captain Clifford S. Heathcote	557 TFS
Captain Edward D. McCann	558 TFS
Captain William P. Simmons	12 USAF HOSP
First Lieutenant Robert E. Rocky	558 TFS
First Lieutenant Michael E. Surwald	558 TFS

\* \* \* \* \*

IN MEMORIUM

Father, in Thy mysterious presence kneeling,  
Pain would our souls feel Thy kindling love;  
For we are weak, and need some deep revealing  
Of trust and strength, and calmness from above.

Lord we have wandered forth through doubt and sor-  
row, and Thou hast made each step an onward one;  
And we will never trust each unknown morrow;  
Thou wilt sustain us till its work is done.

Now, Father, now in Thy dear presence kneeling,  
Our spirit yearns to feel Thy kindling love;  
Now make us strong; we need Thy deep revealing  
Of trust, and strength, and calmness from above.

By: Samuel Johnson

\* \* \* \* \*

Eternal light shine upon them, O Lord,  
and may their souls and all the souls

INVOCATION

Chaplain Dunser

PRAYER

OLD TESTAMENT SCRIPTURE

MEDITATION

Chaplain Colson

NEW TESTAMENT SCRIPTURE

Chaplain Gellacher

CLOSING PRAYER AND BENEDICTION

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RECORD OF SERVICE

CAPTAIN EDWARD D. McCANN

Born: 8 November 1933

Extended Active Duty: 1 October 1961 -  
17 September 1966

Died: Cam Ranh Bay Air Base, Republic of Vietnam

Awards: Air Medal  
Distinguished Flying Cross

Captain McCann leaves his wife June Grace and three children; Karen, Mary, and Maurice, who reside at Lake Wales, Florida

FIRST LIEUTENANT MICHAEL E. SURWALD

Born: 26 August 1943

Extended Active Duty: 14 November 1964 -  
17 September 1966

Died: Cam Ranh Bay Air Base, Vietnam

Awards: Nominated for the Air Medal

Lieutenant Surwald was not married and resided in East St. Louis, Illinois.

FIRST LIEUTENANT ROBERT E. ROCKY

Born: 12 November 1939

Extended Active Duty: 26 June 1962 -  
17 September 1966

Died: Cam Ranh Bay Air Base, Vietnam

Awards: Air Medal  
Nominated for Distinguished Flying Cross

Lieutenant Rocky leaves his wife Sylvia Clara

CAPTAIN CLIFFORD S. HEATHCOTE

Born: 29 April 1935

Extended Active Duty: 15 March 1958 -  
3 September 1966

Died: Cam Ranh Bay Air Base, Vietnam

Awards: Air Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster  
National Defense Service Medal

Captain Heathcote leaves his wife Pamela who resides in Tampa, Florida.

CAPTAIN WILLIAM P. SIMMONS

Born: 9 April 1933

Extended Active Duty: 26 June 1961 -  
3 September 1966

Died: Cam Ranh Bay Air Base, Vietnam

Awards: Air Medal  
Vietnam Service Medal

Captain Simmons leaves his wife Marilyn and three children; William Jr, Robert, and Margaret Lynn who reside in Leland, Mississippi.