

Bailout at 22,000 Feet

The Last Flight of RB-29A – “Tiger Lil”

by Joe Del Campo

Location: Brooklyn, early February 1952. The Korean War is raging on, continuing images on the television depict soldiers and Marines slogging through mud, snow, freezing temperatures and worse: being wounded or killed. You're 19 years old about to be drafted. You ask yourself, “Do I want to be drafted? Your answer, “No, I don't think so.” Since being drafted was not on Walter Lentz's “to do” list and few choices, if any, remain – What does Walter do?

He joins the United States Air Force, of course, with the intention of training to be, of all things, a cook. Well, what happened to Walter thereafter was a far cry from what he expected. The Air Force had other plans for Walter. He was put through a series of aptitude tests over a three-week period, after which, because Walter is a pretty smart guy and scored high on the tests, he was put on flying status, eventually completing gunnery school and flight training in Texas. Subsequently, he was assigned as a gunner to various multi-engine aircraft, starting with the B-26 bomber, and lastly, in the latter part of 1954, being assigned as a gunner/observer on an RB-29A, tail number 42-94000, formerly known as “Tiger Lil” based at Yokota Air Force base, Japan.

“Tiger Lil” was a World War II era B-29A Superfortress bomber which, at the end of the Korean War, was stripped of her identifying markings, including the famous “Tiger Lil” nose art, and assigned to the 91st Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron. In August of that year, the aircraft began conducting various reconnaissance and intelligence missions 15 miles offshore over international waters, flying up and down the coast of Russia. These where, understandably, referred to as “Yo Yo” missions.

On November 7, 1954, an 11-member crew, including Walter, took off from Yakota Air Force Base on what was described as a routine photo mapping mission for the Army in the area of northern Hokkaido Island just south of the Russian-held Kurile Islands which became part of the USSR after World War II. At approximately 35,000 feet altitude, in late afternoon, getting ready for a second run, after a totally uneventful flight, Walter observed two Russian Mig-15's pull up alongside the right side of the aircraft. The one Mig-15 was so close Walter waved at the pilot who returned his wave. Shortly thereafter, the Mig-15's peeled off, one them taking up a position behind Walter's aircraft.



Immediately the Mig-15 pilot began firing his 20 MM cannons at Walter's plane. Walter screamed out, “They're shooting at us!” Standard operating procedure at the time was, if fired upon, fire back. Walter requested permission from Captain Anthony Feith to fire the automated 50-caliber machine guns at the attacking aircraft. Captain Feith replied, “Negative, I want to save the mission.” At this point, the captain began his descent in an effort to dodge the Mig-15's.

During the descent, each Mig-15 made two passes firing at the RB-29A. Upon reaching altitude of approximately 22,000 feet, the gunner/observer across from Walter screamed out, “Number one engine fuel tank is on fire!” Captain Feith gave the order to bail out.

Walter said when he heard the captain give the order to bail out, he was overcome with fear, almost paralyzed. The other gunner, apparently thinking nothing of it, opened the hatch to the bomb bay and dove out. Walter was so scared, he just crawled over to the opened hatch and more or less fell out, wearing nothing more than a flight suit sans a fleecy flight jacket. Remember, it's November, and the air temperature at 22,000 feet is frigid. He remembers thinking, while tumbling earthward,

“I'm not supposed to pull the rip cord until I see the ground detail changing color, from brown to green,” which, according to the prior instruction he had received, would indicate you were at a proper altitude for parachute deployment.

Thinking a million thoughts he tumbled end over end toward Mother Earth. He finally pulled the ripcord, but because of his tumbling, became entangled in the shroud lines which resulted in the chute filling up with air, oscillating and then collapsing, causing Walter to fall like a rock and scream like a banshee. Again the chute would fill up with air, oscillate and collapse. According to Walter, this happened four or five times. He later learned from some of his fellow crew members whose chutes had deployed he could be heard screaming from thousands of feet away during his total descent.

Fortunately, prior to Walter slamming into the ground, the chute deployed, crash-landing him into a tree. Aside from a few scrapes and bruises, Walter said, “I felt fine. I was suspended 15 feet above the ground, when all the sudden the branch began to give way, gently lowering me to the ground. I unbuckled my parachute harness and walked away in search of my fellow crewmen.”



The survivors the day after the attack.

He linked up with one other crewman, eventually being guided to a village by a “local” on horseback. Ten of the eleven crew members survived and were ultimately transferred back to Yakota Air Force Base via helicopter. The 11th crewman impacted into the cliffs and fell into the water where he drowned. “Tiger Lil” flew on for several minutes after the crew bailed out, finally crashing into an unoccupied farmhouse on Hokkaido Island and burst into flames.

On March 15, 1993, a front page headline in the U.S. News and World Report: “America's Top-Secret Spy War – In the 50's and 60's, the U.S. lost more than 130 airmen in missions against the Soviet Union. The truth never came out. Until now.”