

MIKE WELCH USN –TONKIN GULF INCID. 8/2/64

Mike: I'm John Michael Welch. I've always gone by Mike, my middle name. Last name Welch, W-E-L-C-H, just like the grape juice. Born in Utica, New York, 1940. Went to local schools. Went to the Naval Academy and graduated in the class of 1961. From there went into flight training down in Pensacola, Florida. After about 18 months in flight training, I received my wings in December of 1962. I was then assigned to what they call the RAG, the replacement air group. I had training in the F-8 Crusader. After about six or seven months in the replacement training squadron, the RAG, I was assigned to a squadron in San Diego, Fighter Squadron 53 at the Naval Air Station Miramar.

I was born in Utica, New York. Attended local schools and graduated from high school in 1957. I'm in a family of five kids. I'm right in the middle: older brother, older sister, younger brother, younger sister. The older sister and older brother, only one year apart from each another and as well as I am. When it was time for me to go off to college, they were both in college at the time. It was a little bit of a strain on mom and dad, but I'm sure they would have found a way to pay for my college.

However I was always interested in the military. I liked the water. I liked the idea of discipline, and so I applied to the service academies, and I was selected to go to Annapolis. I entered Annapolis in the summer of 1957. Graduated in 1961 and from there was assigned to flight training at my request. In those days, you had to request it. Fortunately I had the physical exam okay. [They would 00:01:53] pass it okay. Then went down to Pensacola. Flight training for the Navy in those days was about 18 months, and that's almost exactly what it took me, getting my wings in December of 1962. From there I was assigned to the replacement air group down in Jacksonville, Florida, flying the F-8 Crusader. From there, once I finished that, and got carrier qualified in the Crusader, I was assigned to Fighter Squadron 53, the VF-53, out in Miramar, California.

Producer: What engineer designed that thing? In my mind, I don't know exactly what it's for or how it works aerodynamically. You got to open it up when you're taking off. Then you're off, and then you close it. Then when you're landing, you got to raise it up again. What is that all about?

Mike: It's called a variable-incidence wing because it varies the angle of attack, which was, of course, the angle between where the airplane was going and where the air was going because that's how you fly. Of course that creates lift. In any event, the Navy is very, very concerned about the speed at which an airplane comes aboard the carrier. There's a direct correlation between landing speed and accident rates at the carrier. The F-8 was developed without the variable-incidence wing, but they found that in order to get aboard the ship ... You're

coming aboard at very high speeds. One of the reasons that they put the variable-incidence wing is that it slows the speed down considerably for landing and, of course, less speed required for take off. It also gives you much better visibility when coming aboard the ship. If you were coming aboard the ship without the wing up, the airplane would be very, very cocked up to the point where you would have difficulty seeing the landing area. With the wing up, the fuselage is effectively lowered. The wing stays where it is. You're really lower the fuselage, aerodynamically speaking. So you're lowering the fuselage, and you can get much better visibility, and you're landing at maybe 15 or 20 knots lower speed than you would if the wing was not coming up.

Producer: Does this mean that planes without that design, like the F-4, have a much higher crash incidents on the deck so it counters?

Mike: No. No, it doesn't. It's just the F-8 was made for speed and agility. Not that the F-4 wasn't, but the F-8, we like to say, was the last of the gun fighters. It was the last airplane built by the Navy that had an internal gun. The F-4 did not. It didn't have any gun until they put a pod on it that was a gun. Interestingly now in the F-18, they've gone back to putting a gun in the airplane. It's funny how that goes, like a lot of other things. In any event, it was built for speed, and in order to get that speed it was designed with a very thin wing. When that wing is clean, that's a very, very fast airplane. It was the first airplane to go over a 1000 miles an hour in level flight. It was just a design factor. The variable-incidence wing was an engineering miracle at the time, but when you stop and think about it, it made a lot of sense. It made a lot of sense. By the way, when the wing comes up, the leading edge droop ... the forward edge of the wing actually droops down at a fairly severe angle, trying to remember where it is, but it was more than 20 degrees.

Producer: That concept never prevailed, [crosstalk 00:05:32]?

Mike: No, it never prevailed again. Although we did have the F-14, as you may recall. It had the swing wing. The wings would swing back, [sweep 00:05:39] back. Then for [solar 00:05:41] flight they would actually come out to be almost 90 degrees to the fuselage. Again, these are just little aeronautical engineering tricks to make an airplane go slower, give it more maneuverability, give the pilot better visibility, yet at the same time maintain the ability to go fast and be very maneuverable and so forth.

Producer: We're getting off into the weeds, but that was interesting.

Mike: Yeah, yeah. It was, to my knowledge, the only airplane that ever had that, but it worked, and it didn't come off. A lot of people were saying that's just going to come right off, but it was built pretty heavily. Qualified in that airplane and

completed my carrier qualifications, day traps as well as night traps. Then went over to Fighter Squadron 53, the VF-53. Arrived there in the early part of 1964. In fact it was New Year's Day I got to Miramar. I recall that very clearly. Following that, we started working up on the USS Ticonderoga in about April or so of that year, and I think in the May/June time frame we left for Southeast Asia. Vietnam was not on the radar at all at that point. We went to Japan for a port visit when we first got to the western Pacific. From there we went to the Philippines for a port visit, working, training flights in between, of course, off the carrier. Then went out to the Tonkin Gulf in July of 1964. Just a routine training mission in the Gulf. There was no active combat going on at that time except, of course, with the advisors. Then we got to the 2nd of August.

Producer: Before we get that far, did you ...?

Mike: I was certainly aware that there were advisors and that things were happening there, but I don't think anybody, at least I didn't, think at that point that it was going to escalate into anything significant. I think we had advisors in other areas of the world at that point as well, so it was not a big deal. But we were aware of it. Certainly, we were aware of it, but we were not flying over Vietnam at that point, South Vietnam at all. We were just out there in training status. It's only a few hundred miles away from the Philippines, Cubi Point in Subic Bay. That's where we were slated to go back to after a couple weeks out there.

Producer: So it was a lazy Sunday afternoon.

Mike: Yes, it was.

Producer: Describe that day.

Mike: Well, it was a lazy Sunday afternoon. Sundays are not days off when you're at sea, but they do reduce the tempo of operations, so it was a slower day than normal. I recall very clearly that morning, we had what they call an [APF 00:08:36], all pilots meeting in our ready room ... Basically five squadrons on board the carrier at that point and some smaller detachments of other helicopters and so forth, but two fighter squadrons, two attack squadrons and one propeller squadron. We still had the A-1 Skyraider Squadron aboard.

The meeting was called because the air wing operations officer was going to each ready room that morning and telling us that the USS Maddox was much further north in the Gulf of Tonkin, up near [Haiphong 00:09:11] [inaudible 00:09:12] [Penoi 00:09:12]. The ship was going to be doing some intelligence gathering up there. There was a possibility that they may encounter some resistance from the North Vietnamese probably in the method of sending [inaudible 00:09:30] boats out, PT boats perhaps. We knew that they had PT

boats. We knew that they were active, and so there was some concern that they might come out and harass. We were made very, very clear that the Maddox would not be going any closer than the territorial limits, which I believe was 12 miles.

I recall one other funny thing that happened that morning at that meeting. Some of the fellows in the back of the ready room were just, I'm not sure why, pulling the chain of this guy a little bit, the air wing operations officer, giving a lot of 'what ifs': what if this happens, what if that happens. I'll never forget the air wing operations officer said, "Don't worry about that stuff. They're not going to come out. They know we'll blow them out of the water if they did." I've always remembered that. But sure enough they did come out.

Getting back to the story, we then started flying our normal training flights that day until around 2:00 or 3:00 in the afternoon. I recall I was in the ready room, and all hell broke loose. We were called to general quarters and the pilots who were actually manning airplanes at the time had their missions changed over the radio or [even 00:10:44] their airplane on the flight deck. We're told to forget the training mission. You're going to be launched and go to this position. The Maddox was under fire. So that got everybody's attention, obviously. Quickly, I was scheduled for a flight, I think, at around 4:00 or 5:00 that afternoon. The flight schedule was scrubbed and the next thing I knew I was ready to be launched at, I think, around 4:00 or 4:30 that afternoon. I do recall getting up to the flight deck and being absolutely amazed that the F-8s that I was manning up had already had Zuni tubes installed. This was not a simple thing to do.

Producer: Tell us what those are.

Mike: The Zuni tubes are ... Zuni, first of all, is a five inch rocket, five inch in diameter, maybe seven or eight feet long. It's a non-guided rocket. That's all it is. Sometimes they will go straight. Sometimes they'll go a little bit off. Sometimes they'll go terrible wrong and just go right straight down. They were consistently inconsistent. But we trained with them. We had trained with them before. I kind of liked it because it would give you a little bit of satisfaction firing something and seeing it actually hit something on the ground. But they were there. They're were actually two on each side. Somehow the ordinance man had been able to get those installed in a very, very short time and loaded with Zuni rockets.

I was launched in that configuration. Given a position to go from the carrier and went up there. It was getting to be kind of dark at that time. It was twilight. When I got up there, the initial planes that had been sent up there had done the damage already. One of the PT boats was dead in the water, one of the North Vietnamese PT boats. The other two or three had left the scene. The Maddox was still up there though they were heading south at that point. I was vectored

out toward that one remaining PT boat and before I got to it, I got overhead, it was not clear to fire, I was called back, so I had a glancing view in the twilight of this PT boat dead in the water. It was foggy and as I say, twilight. I don't recall any bad weather, but it was just getting dark. I got back to the carrier maybe 45 minutes later. I had the in-flight refuel. I do recall that because I'd used a lot of fuel getting up there at a very high rate of speed in afterburner, which uses a lot of fuel. So I in-flight refueled and I was recovered back aboard the Ticonderoga probably about 8:00 that night I think.

Producer: Did you realize when you saw those Zuni tubes loaded on that this was a whole new phase that you were going into?

Mike: Oh, you betcha. It was ...

Producer: What was running through your head?

Mike: What was running through my head was this was what I had been trained to do, and I'm getting to do it. Really, since Korea, this was the first time a carrier had been involved in combat and so it was ... I was pretty excited. I was pretty excited. I didn't have any great strategic thoughts at that point. I just wanted to get up there and do I was asked to do and then get back but, now, I relished it. I really was excited thinking that here I am at the tip of the sphere so to speak.

Shortly after my involvement on the 2nd of August, I think it was the next day, I was asked to ferry an aircraft to Cubi Point in the Philippines. I was there for about the next ten days or so. The reason I was asked to get it, we had to get some airplanes off the carrier because other airplanes, I think photo reconnaissance airplanes were coming aboard, and there just wasn't enough room, so we had to get some airplanes off. This was very typical. We would do this frequently. One or two airplanes would be ferried into Cubi Point. So I missed the 4th. I've read about it and I got my own opinion. I think it was probably not anything. I don't think the boats came out. I've seen enough faults, radar targets to realize that that can easily happen. And the political part, who knows. I think there's still a lot of debate about that.

Producer: Now you were probably back at Subic Bay in the Philippines when the president at that time, Mr. Johnson, got his Gulf of Tonkin resolution.

Mike: Yes.

Producer: Did you realize that this was the beginning of war and this was going to turn into ...? Obviously, nobody could have foreseen this but the long-term melee, at that time the longest war in America's history.

Mike: No, I didn't have that feeling at all. What I did regret greatly, again strictly from personal and perhaps a career standpoint, is that I was still in Cubi Point when the retaliatory strikes took place at [Vivt 00:15:54]. A great number of airplanes from Ticonderoga participated in that and several of my squadron mates did as well, and they all got an Air Medal for it. They all got the satisfaction of knowing that they'd seen combat and people firing at that and so forth, and I was sitting there in Cubi Point, which was very, very frustrating. As you well know, the air war really didn't start until another year or so.

I got back out to the ship a few days after that. We completed the deployment and got back to San Diego in December of 1964 without any other incidents. I stayed in the Navy, stayed flying fighters. I was very, very fortunate. I was able to stay in the cockpit one way or the other for about 25 years out of my 30-year career. That part was really good. I culminated, not culminated, but at the end, the high point of the career was I was the commanding officer down at the Naval Air Station at Patuxent River in the late 80s. That was quite a satisfying tour and an awful lot of fun. Of course, I was able to fly down there as well. Then it was back to Washington like most captains for the last few years of your career. I retired in 1990.

Producer: Did you have any further deployments to the Vietnam [inaudible 00:17:26]?

Mike: Yes, yes. The next year we deployed again. By that time the air war had started. We were mostly confined to flying close air support missions in South Vietnam with an air traffic controller airborne, not traffic controller but an air [inaudible 00:17:44] spotter. He would spot targets for us and usually drop a smoke bomb or something in the area where he wanted us to bomb. Then we would just set up a pattern. It was almost like a training flight. There was not a lot of enemy fire coming at you. We were just starting at that point to go into North Vietnam on a very selective basis on the so-called alpha strikes where a large number of aircraft, anywhere from 12 to 15, would fly in formation, and then from various sectors, attack a target, coordinating it as they dropped their bombs, so I was involved in that.

Producer: So this was early in the war, right?

Mike: This was 1965, but then I was assigned shortly from '66 through '69. During that time I was still in the squadron, test evaluation squadron out in California developing fighter tactics. Then at the end of the short tour I was re-assigned, again, to a fighter squadron, in this case Fighter Squadron 191, part of Miramar again, on the USS Oriskany. We returned to Vietnam twice. Two combat tours of nine months each, flying, again, over South Vietnam as well as North Vietnam. I ended up with 233 combat missions by the end of the Vietnam War.

Producer: Did they have much resistance? Would they throw much up against you at that point?

Mike: Very little, very little. They had some pretty good Triple-A, but the SAMs [crosstalk 00:19:22] ...

Producer: Explain that for our audience.

Mike: I'm sorry, the anti-aircraft, particularly the 37 millimeter gun, but it was not much different than what you see in the old WWII movies of the gunner just sitting in his seat and looking through some sort of a scope. It was a little more sophisticated than that. They had some radar tracking but not a lot. Probably the most effective firing was what we used called barrage firing where they would have word of the airplanes coming. The airplanes would cross the beach or the shoreline. Their communications network alerted people up and down the coast that they're coming. In some cases, they would just start firing in the air a large number of weapons, just firing them up and hoping that we would fly through them. Not a very effective way of conserving ammunition but certainly very effective if you were unfortunately in the wrong place at the wrong time, you were nailed. But they didn't have SAMs yet.

Producer: When did SAMs appear on the scene?

Mike: I want to say the '67 time frame. We anticipated them because during that [short 00:20:31] tour in between those two squadron tours, two combat tours, I was assigned to the squadron in California, the test evaluation squadron. One of their major projects, and I was involved with it, was developing countermeasures, electronic countermeasures which would actually try to jam their radars on the ground, the SAM radars, warnings that the SAM was in flight. Another device we used was a flare and chaff, chaff being the pieces of tinfoil that you dump out of the airplane and the radar would lock onto those and break the lock on you. All of these were effective to a certain degree, but none of them were a silver bullet. Some people, still using all of that, were still hit by the SAM.

Producer: You mentioned that you were on the Oriskany when that notorious explosion fire.

Mike: No, I wasn't. I was on it a year later. I'm trying to think of the actual date of that, but I was on it the cruise after. A number of repairs had to be made, of course, in the intervening time. Strangely enough my stateroom on the Oriskany, where myself and another fellow lived for the duration of that cruise, two people had died in that room, not for the fire but for the smoke. A great number of people who were lost in the Oriskany fire were lost because of smoke inhalation not burns.

Producer: That was just an accident. There was not a safety feature that had to be corrected in that.

Mike: I don't know how much you know about the story. We have certain kinds of ... it's not a bomb. It is a parachute flare made out of white phosphorus. The airplanes carry them, and they drop them over an area if you're doing bombing at night, in those days. Right now we've got night vision goggles. We didn't have anything like that then. The white phosphorus burns very, very bright, and it is an unique thing in that it doesn't require oxygen to burn. It can burn floating in the water. It's a very, very potent material.

We do underway replenishment in the Navy where the supply ship comes alongside the carrier and they bring bombs over. They transfer white phosphorus flares over. The white phosphorus flares had been stored in locker down in the hanger deck with a big steel door. There were a couple of seamen down there, young enlisted guys, who were packing away after an underway replenishment. One of them, this is the part I'm not really clear on and I don't know if the Navy is, was either dropped or the lanyard was pulled out of it so that it ignited. They clutched ... the best thing he thought to do was to pick it up and he tossed it in the locker where there were hundreds of other ones already stored and then closed the door and battened it down figuring that that might do it. Well, it did it for a few seconds but then it just exploded. It was right adjacent to the entryway to what they call officers country. It's just where all the officers' staterooms are in the forward part of the ship. That ball of flame just went right straight up in there. Again, it just sucked all the oxygen out and it was very, very violent and the smoke, of course, followed.

233, just counted them up the other day.

Producer: Did they ever get even close with any of that small arms fire?

Mike: To my knowledge, no. I certainly saw a lot of Triple-A. It was just like the movies. You see these little black puffs of smoke, so you know they're firing at you. At night it's even more exciting because you can actually see the tracers. As far as something going right by me or something, no, never had that experience fortunately.

Producer: Did you have some missions over North Vietnam?

Mike: Oh, yes, yeah. I was ...

Producer: How far were you going? What were the targets in that [crosstalk 00:24:56]?

Mike: There were the normal: the bridges, the lines of communication, the roads, sometimes some of the infrastructure, power plants, things of that nature, important buildings. There were a number of restrictions, as you may recall, during that time. There were a lot of rules of engagement. We never were able to really fly over Hanoi. We were not allowed to do much damage to the rice paddies and so forth in terms of the dams that held the water. I always thought that would have been a great way of getting their attention. Most of them were military targets. Obviously, it was very closely controlled. We didn't decide what targets to hit. That came from Washington. Some of the stories I've heard right from the White House itself.

Producer: They were micromanaging.

Mike: Very micromanaging.

Producer: What did you think of a war being prosecuted like that?

Mike: By just the mining of Haiphong, which was finally done, and I think that was a significant part in finally getting the North Vietnamese to the table. Well, they were at the table, but they started negotiating in earnest, I think, at that point. It had been proposed four or five years earlier. If it had the same effect then, it could have the same effect four or five years earlier and, I think, we could have probably saved an awful lot of lives. But it was a political war, there's no doubt about that.

Producer: Of course, I think the hesitation was that they were going to draw the Chinese or the Soviets in ...

Mike: Yeah, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Producer: ... into World War Three.

Mike: Yes, of course. I'm sure there were several good reasons. There was a phrase back then, I think, McNamara developed it, 'gradual escalations.' Even today, I have a problem with that from a military standpoint because it's just like a callus in your hand. The more you use it, it hurts a little bit, but it gets stronger. You use it some more, it gets stronger again, and pretty soon it realizes it can probably just about handle everything. Whereas if you gave them the wallop right off the bat, it might have a little more effect. I don't know. You're right. There are a lot of other considerations.

Producer: And the other strategy of war of attrition, meaning not taking territory. I guess you guys were all college graduates as officers. Did you ever sit around and debate some of these concepts?

Mike: Yeah, you would, but, as I recall, we were all very accepting. We were good loyal military men. It came down through the chain of command and still we pretty much accepted that in the end. I think we probably talked about it. Obviously we read the papers, and we knew that there was a great deal of controversy, but we were just trying to do the best we could. I think that's what most people felt.

Producer: When you would come back to the states and you saw all this political dissension, how did that strike you for a man in uniform?

Mike: It was very disappointing. It was frustrating because, again, I thought we were doing the will of the government. We took our oath. When we took our commission and we would follow the orders of the president of the United States, and that's what he was ordering us to do. I think most military people are very faithful to that oath. So watching people tell us we shouldn't be doing it, hearing them say that, was very, very frustrating. It was a very sad time. I was born in 1940 so I remember the end of WWII. I certainly remember relatives and friends of my parents coming home and how they were treated. Then seeing how we were treated, coming home from Vietnam obviously was very, very differently. It was frustrating, disappointing. It just hurt a little bit.

Producer: Did you pause to think much about the fact that of most of the fellows that were shot down ended up in Hanoi and the notorious Hilton? Most of them were Navy guys. Did you reflect on that much or did you say I can't focus on this type of fatalism and worry about that later?

Mike: We thought about them a lot, don't get me wrong. You just can't focus on that. If you're worried about getting shot down, you shouldn't be flying. You just have to go out. Fighter pilots are kind of a cocky group anyway. If you think you're going to be shot down, you shouldn't be flying. It's never going to happen to you is our attitude. It won't happen to me. That's just the way you have to believe and behave.

Producer: When was your last deployment in the Vietnam conflict?

Mike: It was 1973, '72, excuse me. Came back in '72, late '72. Then shortly thereafter I was assigned to a job in Washington in the personnel bureau as an officer assignment officer. I was actually in a position of assigning other officers, contemporaries of mine, to squadron duty or to ship [tour 00:30:42] duty or whatever. I had been there about a year or so, and that's when the POWs started coming home, '73.

Producer: When you were over there in late '72, how different was it from your earlier deployments?

Mike: Not much different at all. I mean maybe some tactics had been tried and proven. We certainly learned early on and found out later, it seemed to happen in just about every war, WWI, WWII, Korea, is that can't go in low. We always thought you go in low to stay below the radar, but I mentioned that barrage fire. That got us every time. Once again, speed is life. The faster you go, the better off you are. That was a lesson learned. These were common sense things when you stop and think about it. My frustration was we were still hitting some of the same targets we were hitting the year before because we would do a lot of damage, and they'd rebuild. Then we'd go in and bomb them again. Not that I started to question the strategy or the tactics, or the strategy I should say. It just seemed like there really was no end to this. Clearly they were not bending.

Being on the carrier was a very unique experience. I was at war. You would fly over these targets, and you'd drop your bombs and occasionally somebody would get shot down, but when you got back to the carrier, it was a very civilized world. We would have to dress for dinner every night. You would have to put on your dress blues, white shirt and a black tie. Go down to the ward room. We had white napkins, linen napkins, nice silver. The stewards served you your meal. It was a very civilized, very nice way to fight a war. Whereas the poor fellows that were on the land or even in some of the more secure camps, they had a very, very difficult time. Just day-to-day life was difficult, whereas we had air conditioning. It was kind of a strange feeling saying you were in the war, but you still had all of these really civilized things around you, nice clean bed, clean sheets.

Producer: You didn't see necessarily the television programs and news reports coming back from the United States.

Mike: Oh, no, no. We didn't have that. Today they do, but, no, we didn't have anything like that. We'd have Stars and Stripes, the newspaper, published by the services. It would come out of Tokyo, and every couple of days you would get a copy. It was two or three days old. It had some national news in it, but that's about all you got.

Producer: How dangerous was it to ...?

Mike: We probably lost as many people in operational accidents during Vietnam as we did in combat. When I say operational, for reasons other than combat, either trouble getting aboard the ship. Once in a while, you lose an airplane on a catapult. Something would go wrong on the takeoff. Then we'd have mid-air, people that were flying too close to each other. Somebody's not paying attention, and he would hit ... You don't need to hit much to disable the airplane in flight. There were a number of ... I wouldn't say as many operational accidents, but there were several.

I want to point out, there was an interesting study done during Vietnam. It's interesting during war, this happened several times, people would come out with various studies and analysis and things that they wanted to do to see how people react to war. One of them was a bunch of flight surgeons came out and told us that we had to stop drinking coffee. Somebody had come up with some idea that coffee was making us too nervous. The air wing commander kicked him off the boat. He said, "You guys are crazy. We're not going to do that."

The one that I wanted to tell you about. My favorite story about that though is that a group came out. They wanted to test to see how tense we got in combat, in other words, heart rate and blood pressure and that sort of thing. For several days, people were layered up with ... It wasn't really that bad, but we'd go off and either drop a bomb or whatever when we were in combat. They had little recorders that then they would take back. When the results of this study came out, they found the highest pulse, blood pressure going up to the highest limits was when we came back to land on the carrier. We were more tense landing on the carrier than we were in combat.

After I thought about that for a while, I think that's probably true because it's different every time. I've got 102 night carrier landings in the Crusader, which was considered a very difficult airplane to bring aboard in the daytime. I tell people, I always joke that I can tell you about each one them because you do remember just about every carrier landing. Every one is unique even though they look the same, you just do something slightly different, a little bit here, a little bit there, and it can screw up the landing or it can make it a little bit better. You just try to keep refining that right down to the tenth of a millimeter.

Producer: Did you ever have that cable that grabs on the ... did you ever have it snap?

Mike: No. Unfortunately I watched a plane right in front of me, the tailhook broke, and he went off the side. We never recovered him. He should have ejected. He was told to eject by the air boss, who's the guy down on the ship running the flight deck. He was told, over the radio, "Eject, eject, eject." He just [dribbled 00:37:12] off the end of the deck.

Producer: Do you think he was trying to pull up [crosstalk 00:37:17]?

Mike: I think he was trying ... I know he was [inaudible 00:37:19]. He was only doing about 60 knots at that point, and he just didn't have enough deck left to get the speed to fly. Yes, the cable had broken from time to time, but that's very rare, very rare, and tailhooks break from time to time, but that's very rare too.

Producer: Generally if that catapult, when you're taking off, throws you out, you've got enough momentum then to fly your [crosstalk 00:37:48] ...

Mike: Yes.

Producer: ... to get going.

Mike: We've had in F-8, in the photo version of the F-8, there was a reconnaissance version, they had a particular problem in one of the landing, the two landing gear, where the wheels are, I think it is one side or the other or maybe both have a habit of being over-pressurized during the catapult stroke because the catapult ... you actually pull down before the catapult stroke and then when the steam is released, you've launched, and so you're coming up on the hydraulic cylinders where the wheels are, the landing gear. The photo Crusaders, for some reason, had a problem with that strap being over-serviced, over-pressurized. It'll actually break. The wheel would come off during ... Now you just had a big steel peg down there in the catapult track while the catapult is still pulling it forward. What it would do, of course, is twist the airplane, and the pilot had virtually nothing he could do. He would just spit out over side. That happened to one of our photo pilots during one of those deployments.

Latitude and longitude point. I want to say 16 north, and 110 east. It was just latitude and longitude somewhere in the middle of the Gulf of Tonkin maybe 50 miles off the coast of Vietnam. It was probably on the same level north/south as what we used to call the DMZ, the demilitarized zone between North and South Vietnam.

Producer: And how many ships of the [inaudible 00:39:31] would be there?

Mike: It was used as a reference point obviously. You'd say I'm 20 miles south of Yankee Point or whatever, or Yankee Station. At any given time, I think there'd probably be two or three carriers in that area, and then maybe 10 to 12 support ships, destroyers, replenishment ships and so forth. Later on in the war, Dixie Station came online and that was off South Vietnam. It was a much lesser tense environment because we knew the North Vietnamese, if they were going to fly down in the airplanes to attack the carrier or cause any trouble, they had to go over a number of other ships. We'd have them on radar long before they got down there, so some of the battle conditions aboard the carrier were much more relaxed. When you got further north to Yankee Station itself or even north of Yankee Station, you were on a continue alert status and things were much more tense.

Producer: Where they just, I guess, smart enough not to even contemplate flying out and attacking Yankee Station?

Mike: I think they were probably smart enough. I don't think they could have done much damage anyway. They might have had a couple of small bombs, but that

would have been a significant escalation, I think. Attacking a carrier is a lot different than just a ground war. You're attacking a piece of the United States really in that case. But that's just my opinion. The other thing is that we always had what we called a combat air patrol, CAP, north of Yankee Station. It was basically between the carrier and North Vietnam. That was basically 24 hours a day, at least two airplanes up there. It was a boring, boring flight. You just ...

Producer: Just reconnaissance.

Mike: Just reconnaissance. It was just you're up there in case they came out, so it was a barrier patrol. The ships, we always had one or two destroyers pretty far north. They had good radar, and they could see if the North Vietnamese launched aircraft.

Producer: Did they ever launch any aircraft?

Mike: Oh, yeah. Yes, they did. I mean not to come out and attack the ship, but they certainly were airborne. There were a number of MiGs shot down. A number of our aircraft got shot down by MiGs. We suspect that there were probably some Soviet and Chinese pilots. I don't know if that's ever been verified. We do know there were a couple of very, very good North Vietnamese pilots who had a number of kills to their credit.

Producer: Did any of your squadrons ever come up against these guys?

Mike: Not while I was there. That's the ultimate dream of a fighter pilot, of course, is to get into a good old fashioned dogfight and prevail. No, that never occurred on our deployments. Most of the MiG activity was during the so-called alpha strikes when we would go in. They had radar too. They could see us coming, and they knew it was coming, so they would launch their aircraft to try to pick off some of that alpha strike. We always had fighter cover for the alpha strike. There were the bombers. Then the fighters were escorting them on either side or behind or on top, whatever. That's where most of our kills occurred. It was during an alpha strike. The fighters who were escorting it would engage the MiGs.

Producer: As you look back, how do you reflect back on the experience?

Mike: I think it was probably the high point of my career. It all happened, like you say, when I was very young. It was very exciting, very exciting. I'm trying to remember the saying of Hemingway, I think, "Every man has a woman and a war," and that was my war. It was a great experience. It's not that you enjoy it. I think like anybody who's ever been in combat, you don't look forward to it, but let's face it, that's what you're trained to do. That's what you're hired to do. That's why the taxpayers are paying you. So it's an experience that you don't

want to do if you don't have to, but if you're asked to do it, you do it obviously. It's like any job, if you do it well, you get a lot of job satisfaction from it.

Producer: How was it to watch the fall of Saigon in '75 after all this.

Mike: It was very, very frustrating. I think we just lost our will. I'm going to say we, I mean the American people, and I can understand it. I mean it's happening today in Afghanistan and Iraq. It's not that we gave up, but the American people, I think, just don't have the will to see those through. I'm not saying that's bad. I think back in the Vietnam days, that was when we had the so-called domino theory. If one country would fall, it would tip the next country and so forth. I still subscribe to that. I think we did the right thing by going in there. It certainly stopped them. I mean the dominoes didn't fall. They were talking in those days the Philippines going, possibly even Korea. That didn't happen, so I feel from that standpoint that we did make a difference.

Producer: Mike, thank you for sharing your stories.

Mike: Mm-hmm (affirmative). No, thank you.

Producer: And thank you for what you di-