



LONG AWAITED DEBRIEF: AN NFO MEETS THE MAN WHO SHOT HIM DOWN

By John Sherwood

On 27 April 1972, two Navy F-4 Phantoms from Fighter Squadron (VF) 51 based on board *Coral Sea* (CVA 43) were intercepting a MiG deep in North Vietnamese territory near the town of Bai Thuong. As the flight proceeded on the eighty-five mile vector to intercept, Lieutenant Commander James B. “J. B.” Souder, the radar intercept officer (RIO) in Dash-2, suspected the Phantoms might be

flying into trap. By the time a Navy air controller warned the flight of a trailing MiG, it was too late: an Atoll missile was already in the air and heading toward Souder’s aircraft. He and his pilot, Lieutenant Al Molinare, spent the remainder of the war in the notorious Hanoi Hilton.

“With 335 combat missions and one MiG intercept under my belt at the time, I thought I was the best RIO



Three F-4B Phantom IIs from the VF-51 Screaming Eagles fly in formation. Note the distinctive “corkscrew eagle” paint scheme.

on the planet,” Souder explained. For years after the event, he said, “I was haunted by the fact that another aviator shot me down.” Souder yearned to “meet the man who shot me down, compliment him on his performance, and have him tell me exactly how he did it.” In early 2000, an Army veteran from the war and a travel agent named Doug Reese tracked down this person and arranged a face-to-face meeting between the

former foes. That June, Souder traveled to the country where he had been imprisoned for eleven months.

Although seeing the Hanoi Hilton and the new Vietnam proved to be a “catharsis” for Souder, he was not able to meet with the man he most wanted to see: Colonel Hoang Quoc Dzong of the Vietnamese People’s Air Force. At the last minute, the Vietnamese government had rejected Souder’s request to meet



Above, Hoang Quoc Dzong was flying a MiG-21 when he shot down the F-4 Phantom II in which James B. Souder was the radar intercept officer. The Yugoslavian MiG-21 in this photo is nearly identical to the ones flown by North Vietnam.

Colonel Dzong, the man who shot him down. Discouraged, but not deterred, Souder returned to the United States determined to reschedule a meeting.

The events of 9/11 and the global war on terrorism have transformed American relations with Vietnam. A country that once was a bitter enemy is now emerging as an important trading partner and potential ally. In January 2005, the Vietnamese government finally granted Dzong and Souder permission to meet. Dzong now chairs the Department of Branches of Service (Air Force, Air Defense Force, Navy, Marines, and Artillery) of the Vietnamese Defense Academy, and is one of the country's top defense intellectuals.

The two former adversaries finally met on 15 January 2005 in the Hotel Metropole in downtown Hanoi. To Souder, Dzong proved to be "a fighter pilot to the core," and J. B. immediately took a liking to the Vietnamese fighter jock. The two men shook hands and, over the next four hours, attempted to reconstruct their historic encounter.

During the month of April 1972, Souder had flown 49 missions with ten different pilots and was flying his third flight of the day when his aircraft was shot down. The flight's primary mission was a bombing run against a target in Hanoi, but bad weather forced it to divert to point 30 miles north of Vinh instead. After dropping bombs on some trucks on Route 1A, the flight established a MiG combat air patrol and waited for controllers on *Long Beach* (CGN 9), known as Red Crown, to vector them toward any MiGs in the air.

As the flight was beginning to run low on fuel, Red Crown announced that a MiG-21 had just taken off from Phuc Yen, an airfield 90 miles away. Although the flight had agreed beforehand to return to the carrier if either plane's fuel state dropped below 7,200 pounds, the flight lead elected to take on the intercept. Souder knew that "trying to find a tiny target like a MiG far away, under a solid layer of clouds, and over rough terrain would be difficult." He also "suspected

that a second MiG might try to surprise the flight from behind.”

In the meantime, Dzung, a MiG-21 pilot stationed at Phuc Yen airfield, took off with his wingman, Cao Son Khao. It was a classic trap. While the Phantoms searched for the MiG in front of them, Dzung’s flight snuck up from behind with the help of ground-based radar controllers. Dzung spotted the American F-4s as the two planes were passing over Bai Thuong airfield. Traveling at over 600 knots, he made a 12 G dive, nearly passing out in the process. When he regained his situational awareness, it was Souder’s plane that he saw through his windscreen as he launched the Atoll missile.

Souder was checking his 5 o’clock position when the Atoll exploded below his aircraft, disabling both engines. “We were thrust forward in our straps, and it felt like you’re coming out of afterburner when you’re supersonic.” When the pilot’s attempts to regain controlled flight of the stricken aircraft failed, the two men were forced to eject, landing near Bai Thuong.

Souder did not “refute anything Dzung said,” but he was “extremely surprised with some of the details.” Souder saw a second missile pass by his plane, but Dzung insists that his flight fired only one missile. Although he did not deny the possibility of its existence, Dzung also knew nothing about the MiG Souder’s flight was originally vectored to intercept or who flew it.

At one point in the meeting, Souder asked Dzung what rank he was on 27 April. When Dzung responded, “first lieutenant,” J. B. slowly shook his finger at him and said, “That’s no way to treat a superior officer.” Everyone present, including Dzung, cracked up over the silly joke.

The legacy of the Vietnam War remains significant for both nations, but both are committed to forging ahead as partners on the global stage. At the conclusion of their meeting, Souder and Dzung toasted one another as warriors. As Dzung prepared to leave, he walked over to Souder, hugged him, and



Above and below, Hoang Quoc Dzung, left, and James B. Souder met in January 2005 to revisit the events of 27 April 1972.



said in perfect English, “J. B., we are now friends for life.” ✈

John Sherwood is a historian with the Naval Historical Center’s Contemporary History Branch. More information on Souder and Dzung’s fateful encounter can be found in his book, *Afterburner: Naval Aviators and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).