

# CUNNINGHAM



**O**n 10 May 1972, two Naval Aviators made history in an F-4J. After several months of dropping bombs in support of operations against the invading North Vietnamese, Navy fighter squadrons spent the day engaging MiGs in the heaviest aerial action of the war. Eight MiGs were destroyed, six by VF-96 in USS *Constellation* (CVA-64). Three of the MiG-17s were downed by one VF-96 crew, and combined with two earlier kills on 19 January and 8 May, the victories made Lt. Randy Cunningham and his RIO, Ltjg. Willie Driscoll, the first American aces of the Vietnam War, the first all-missile aces, and the first U.S. aces since Korea.

After their third kill, the two men ejected from their Phantom after their aircraft was hit by a SAM south of Hanoi. The SAR effort required to rescue the Navy's two newest aces was as hectic and dangerous as their earlier MiG fights. The North Vietnamese sent two PT boats toward them, and there was heavy fire from communist positions on shore.

A native of Los Angeles, Randy Cunningham served in VF-96, after training with VF-121, the F-4 RAG. After his return from Vietnam, Cunningham served a tour as a Top Gun instructor, then a tour with VF-154. After a staff tour with Op-05 in Washington, he returned to VF-154 as the Operations Officer. His next assignments were on the staffs of Commander, Seventh Fleet, and of COMFITAEWPAAC. His final tours were as XO, then CO, of VF-126, the Pacific fleet adversary squadron at Miramar.

After he retired as a commander in 1987, Cunningham became Dean of The National School of Aviation, and finally started his own aviation marketing company, Top Gun Enterprises.

*Approach: What is your view of aviation safety, especially relating to crew coordination?*

**Cdr. Cunningham:** I think the team concept is very important, especially in combat. When you're in combat, you have a different kind of safety: it's called survival. If you're a real tactician and a purist, you cover all the things you need to survive, just like you do outside combat. Knowing your aircraft better than anyone else in the squadron, knowing the enemy's aircraft and weapons better than anyone else; that's how you win. In everyday flying, you win by the same tools.

*Approach: Can you differentiate between survival safety in combat and everyday operations?*

**Cdr. Cunningham:** They're the same. The grand word for it is "professional." Pappy Boyington, the World War II Marine ace, once said that a dogfight is won before it ever takes place. The same thing is true in safety: it depends on the time and energy you spend in preparation. Of course, there's the luck of the draw: you can get an airplane that blows up on you. But preventing pilot-error problems involves everything you put into your work before you strap in. Safety is more

than a word. It's an attitude, in combat, flying off a ship in the IO, or at NAS Miramar.

*Approach: You use the phrase "You fight like you train," which has become a motto for today's fighter crews. How did you begin applying that to your career?*

**Cdr. Cunningham:** After I got out of the F-4 RAG, VF-121, in 1969, I was supposed to join VF-96 in the *Enterprise*. But there was a disastrous fire on the ship, and I was delayed in Hawaii, and finally "stashed" at Top Gun. I had done fairly well in ACM with VF-121 – at least I thought I had. Now as I look back, I realize I didn't know beans. I really learned how to fly that airplane when I was at Top Gun.

VF-96 lost a lot of people in the fire and when they returned, they needed to exercise their aircraft. Four or five of us nuggets flew those F-4s every day. I thought, "I have arrived. No more grades, above average or below average. I'm a fighter pilot. I'm actually working."

My COs really believed in dissimilar air combat training (DACT). We fought against F-106s, A-4s, and other F-4 squadrons. Those skippers would fight against anyone who would engage us. It

was the most intensive training I ever had. We dropped live bombs, shot Zanis, we hit the targets. When I met my first MiG, when I dropped my first bomb on the enemy, I had been there.

When I was in the squadron, I wrote 20 questions on the blackboard every day about the MiG's capability for the guys.

The other people told me, "You're not going to see any MiGs out here." When I pulled off target once at An Loc, I told my wingman to set 35 mils in his gun-sight, go to ARM, and set his centerline tank to blow off. An Loc was 800 miles from the closest MiG. When we got back, he asked me why I had him do all that. "There's no MiGs around here," he said.

When I pulled off target on 10 May 1972, I had four MiG-17s firing tracers past my cockpit. Do you think I could have gone back into the cockpit to set up my systems, then shot them? It would have been too late.

People ask me why I became an ace, and other guys didn't. For one thing, I was very lucky; I had the chance. But when the chance came, I was prepared. It was a combination of Navy training, and my own discipline.

**Approach:** *For today's crews, how could you apply your wartime experiences to peacetime operations flying around the ship?*

**Cdr. Cunningham:** I'll give you an example. One day we had four flights; we normally had three per crew, but an airplane had clobbered *Connie's* deck, and Willie Driscoll and I were on our third flight, a BARCAP. The ship told us to go to Da Nang, top off all our tanks – at that time we carried *three* tanks – then come back to the ship and trap. They promised to have the deck cleared up. Well, they didn't, and they told us to go back to the BARCAP station so that we wouldn't breach the BARCAP.

I was exhausted. And when we returned we had to go *back* to Da Nang. The ship then called us back, and when we returned, they told us, "Charlie now." I still had fuel in my wing tanks, as well as the external tanks. Now, with all those flights, close to 12 hours of flight time that day, I was dead tired, torching around in burner in the dark, pulling a lot of Gs, trying to burn off gas with the fuel dumps on. I hit the initial at probably 500 knots,



Advantage Cunningham by Mark Waki

put the speed brakes out, and went screaming downhill to try to get down as fast as I could. The whole world went upside down. That wasn't smart; I really made a mistake there. I was put into that box, but I shouldn't have allowed myself to be put into it.

**Approach:** *What happened next?*

**Cdr. Cunningham:** I got back aboard the ship, but the only reason I could make that approach was because we had just received the Mode I capability. We had been practicing Mode I approaches during the day, but I had never used it at night.

I had vertigo so bad, I remember calling Driscoll, "Willie, I don't think I can get this thing on board. I've got vertigo, really bad." He replied, "Duke, I think we're upside down."

"Damn, Willie," I said, "don't tell me that. I need you now!" He had vertigo worse than me. I felt I was in a turn, with a 120-degree angle of bank. All the instruments showed us level. It was a real fight, but I got the plane into the window where I could lock up the Mode I, and the system took over. I remember leaning back in the seat, trying to square myself, to sit in the right position as much as possible. Pretty soon, my head cleared, and when we got fairly close to the ship, I was able to take over manually and trap.

But at one point, I don't know if I could have even gone back to Da Nang. That's how bad it got.

If I hadn't had Mode I, I would have had to go back to Da Nang. I put myself in that situation. We were the only ship on the line at that time, and we did not like to breach the BARCAP. We had tried to launch two other F-4s, but for one reason or another, we couldn't. So Willie and I were the only candidates.

**Approach:** *How does that apply today?*

**Cdr. Cunningham:** I think it's that old can-do attitude. The ship told me, "Go to Da Nang, then come back. No, you can't land now, we need you to go back. We can't launch aircraft. Then do the BARCAP." Even as a jaygee, I should have said, "Sir, I am exhausted." But instead, I said "Aye-aye, three bags full." We seem to learn the pitfalls later in life.

When I was the CO of VF-126, I said, "Hey, guys, I let myself get put in a bad situation where I said, 'I'll go ahead. I can hack it,' and that's really dangerous. There's a point where you need to stop and say, 'OK, what's the hazard potential here not only to me, but to someone else?' One flight is not going to make a career. And I guarantee most of the COs out there will agree." Now, of course, if you do that a lot, they'll probably squint

at you, but I've probably done it three or four times in my Navy career, all in the last five years of flying. That type of decision goes back to being a professional aviator. You know the hazards involved, and it's not just yourself that you're putting at risk.

*Approach: Getting back to your flight on 10 May 1972, after you and Driscoll ejected, you were the objects of a very involved SAR effort, and you hurt your back during the ejection, is that right?*

**Cdr. Cunningham:** Yes. Most injuries during ejections come from the compression during the shot. We were in a violent spin when we ejected. The whole world was going around. I had bombed a target, shot down three MiGs, been hit by a SAM, and rolled my plane out over the water. When it finally exploded, we went into a real spin. I remember trying to pop the drag chute – of course, I didn't know my plane's tail was gone.

I said, "Willie, don't get out" because I could see land and water when we rotated and I didn't want us to become a POWs. We never used "eject" because we'd heard of some instances where people had ejected after hearing the word in a normal conversation.

He said, "I'll stay with you, Duke. The handle is set" That meant he had set the command ejection handle to eject us both when he pulled the curtain.

I stirred the controls around, and the rudder was completely gone. I finally got out only, "Willie, e..." and he was gone. He punched us both out. He was primed.

That type of coordination not only gives you confidence, but those are the kinds of things that you are talking about safety-wise that you build into your training. Two guys working as a team is a lot better than one guy trying to do everything.

Now, as far as hurting my back, I can remember tumbling, and the seat-man separation. When the chute opened, the riser came by my neck. I had a burn and a bruise on the side of my neck where the cable or the metal piece on the drogue gun hit me. The snap and the jolt really gave me a lightening bolt of pain, right up my back.

We'd never been in a parachute. Before I hit the water, I dropped my raft because I wanted to get out of the parachute as

quickly as possible. I wanted to get away from the enemy gunners who were shooting at us and not to get tangled in the chute. The wind picked up the raft and began swinging it. And every time I'd be on the upstroke of that pendulum, the parachute would tuck under the downwind side. I thought, "Criminy! that thing is gonna fold up and stream!" I tugged on the other side. Later, I talked to the PRs and they said it would not have done that, but I didn't know it at the time.

The raft hit, and I remember looking down, like a fat man trying to see his toes. And my MK-3C life preserver which went all around my waist obscured my view, and I leaned way forward against the risers. I released my koch fittings in that position, and from 20 feet, I did the biggest belly flop into the water.

I was under water, fighting my way to the surface. My hand hit something really fleshy, and I thought, "Oh, man, shark!" It turned out to be a rotting corpse of a North Vietnamese that had floated downstream. He was decaying, and his teeth were showing. I didn't need that at the time. You can imagine the panic.

I told Willie later, "Willie, I thought it was you, at first, but the guy was too good looking."

*Approach: Did you keep your flight gear in the water?*

**Cdr. Cunningham:** As soon as I hit the raft, I settled down and looked for my pistol. I was shooting on the way down because I wanted them to know I was armed. I had reloaded three times. I got in the raft and I was still concerned because I was still close to the beach. I could see WBLCs (water-borne logistics craft). I got out of the raft to maintain a lower profile and hung onto it. Then, I started to throw away my helmet, but I remembered my training which told me to keep it for the helo pickup. I started swimming out to sea, and I deflated my MK-3C, because I was floating so high and I couldn't swim.

When the helo arrived, I let the raft go. That could have been a mistake. If the helicopter had not been able to get me, I wouldn't have had my MK-3C or my raft. If the helo had been hit, or had to leave, I'd have had a problem. But there were actually three helos there from the *Okinawa*. I thought the odds of losing all three helos were less than my chance of

getting shot. I had no flotation devices by that time. I had also thrown away something that would have made me more visible if the helos had lost sight of me.

*Approach: You touched on your attitude toward personal safety during your command tour at VF-126. Can you elaborate?*

**Cdr. Cunningham:** I think safety is a function of leadership. When a CO assumes command, he looks back at all the COs he has had. The CO I had in VF-154 let me do my job as Operations Officer. Another CO of mine was such a micro-manager that nothing got done in the squadron. In fact, he caused hazards because everything was tied up.

Another skipper really looked after the troops, made sure they got awards, and the things they really needed. I thought about that. In contrast, I knew one admiral who was such a poor leader, he nearly destroyed his command. The only time we ever saw him was when we were in trouble. I remembered him, and I swore I would never conduct myself like that. He did not foster a good safety atmosphere, keeping us under the gun all the time.

Of course, there are times when a leader needs to hold the reins in, but he doesn't need to grind everyone under his thumb. I heard of one fighter skipper who said, "Everyone's gonna fly combat in this squadron. I don't care who they are; they going to pull their load." A CO needs to look at every person in his squadron, officer and enlisted, because everybody's different. You can throw some crews out over blue water because you know they can get back aboard the carrier. But you wouldn't take a newly arrived nugget in the IO and throw him out there on his first night CQ. We were doing really well. In VF-126, we never had a mishap. But there were a few instances that made me stop and think. I talked to my admiral and said, "Admiral, we really need to square ourselves away." I imposed my own safety standdown.

*Approach: What was the reaction from your squadron?*

**Cdr. Cunningham:** They understood. They knew the potential for hazards. The key is, again, you fight like you train, and you live like you train. Otherwise, you'll die like you train.

– Peter Mersky