

THUNDERBIRDS

ROLLS

FALL 2002 Volume 3

You Ain't a Thud Pilot 'til You Go Downtown

May 9, 1964. We had just flown our sixth official demonstration in the F-105 and were off to Hamilton AFB, CA for a whopping big show. Clarence Langerud and I had been taped with Tennessee Ernie Ford in San Francisco a couple of weeks before, so the show publicity was intense. We expected a huge crowd.

We entered for pitch-up in a three ship. Jerry Shockley, our slot pilot, had aborted at McChord . . . most likely a godsend for him. At 50 feet and 400 knots I pitched-up, then looked back over my shoulder to see a terrific conflagration billowing from the runway. There was no doubt . . . Gene Devlin, Left Wing, had crashed. Hamilton asked for our intentions, saying the field was closed. I replied that we would be landing there. At 10,000 feet long and 500 feet wide . . . there would be no problem. Clearance was granted.

Gene's airplane, AF 801, had broken in two just behind the cockpit. He had no time to eject.

The next day 12th Air Force directed us to fly the airplanes to Brookley Field in Alabama . . . and to "handle each of them like a crate of eggs."

A week later the entire Team and their wives and children drove from Nellis to San Diego, Gene's hometown and the site of his funeral. We left him there at the military cemetery on Point Loma. Gene was a publicist's dream and a model Thunderbird. He had a big smile and was always mingling with kids at show sites. He was absolutely dependable and always ready to do more than required. Our left wingman, a fighter pilot, a husband and father was gone.

The accident investigation uncovered a structural flaw in 801. The defect was found to be a trapezoidal-shaped manufacturing joint . . . a plate that was designed to strengthen the connection between the forward and aft fuselage. It should have been rectangular. It wasn't.

Although peculiar only to 801, all the B models were grounded indefinitely. Work on the D models destined for combat was given priority. It would be months before the Bs would receive attention.

The urgency to get the Team back on the road begged the question: Why not the Hun? We were all F-100 qualified.

Luke AFB gave us their best F-100Ds, and we were back in business in short order. When the F-105Bs were finally cleared,

the F-4 was already looming as the next and most probable replacement aircraft.

Less than 2 years later in Vietnam, F-105 pilots were hotly engaged in a ferocious and deadly battle "up North." Going "downtown" cost the USAF 124 Thuds in 1966 alone. Of over 700 Ds produced by Republic Aviation, nearly 400 were lost over Hanoi. More than 150 of our bravest and best fighter pilots failed to return. Many are still carried on the MIA list. Most were killed. Their legacies will forever be embedded on Thud Ridge. As for those who survived, giant shares of their memories are still swirling in the skies over Route Pack 6. Our own Jack Broughton, who so vividly chronicled his combat experiences, proudly wears the title "Thud Pilot" along with all those who flew the F-105 in Vietnam . . . living and deceased.



Hamilton AFB, CA, May 9, 1964

You Ain't a Thud Pilot 'til You Go Downtown

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What is the connection between the F-105Bs flown by the Thunderbirds and the Ds in Southeast Asia? Gene Devlin's accident and the high combat casualty rate experienced by the Thud are in no way characteristic of an inferior aircraft. One was an isolated case of defective manufacturing, and the other was caused by poor strategy from Washington.

Later, our own Thunderbird Team either added . . . or was forced to add . . . the following line to our history: "After only six demonstrations . . . the big jets were not well suited to the air demonstration mission." Someone decided the F-105 couldn't do it . . . after the fact. This statement went uncontested and was accepted as gospel. Then came the Thud pilots and their glorious exploits in the war. The airplane went down in history as one of our greatest fighters, but "the Thunderbirds couldn't hack it."

This matter-of-fact statement has, over the years, tainted a myriad of people's reputations . . . the aircraft designer, the manufacturer, the pilots who flew the aircraft and the men and women who maintained them. In my humble opinion, this



quote placed a wedge between the Thud pilots we respect so much and our Team. The PR statement in essence has us as the originators of the "not suitable for demonstration purposes" statement . . . and the label "unworthy airplane."

The F-105 was the largest and most powerful single-engine fighter of the time. The conversion to the 105 was simple for maintenance and for the demo pilots. Its handling characteristics at both low and high speed were incredible. In close formation at 500 knots on the deck – even in choppy air – she was rock steady. She turned handily and by using the vertical, could match the F-100 maneuver for maneuver . . . maybe a little better. Inverted flight capability was amazing . . . ever see a better Calypso? All the power you needed and more. Entry speeds at 400. Over the top, sometimes as low as 80 . . . let 'er float . . . and let 'er fall. The loops were very elliptical, allowing us to easily perform two consecutive loops at any show site . . . a double loop. Maintenance was simple . . . standup, almost everything at eye level. Brakes and drag chute systems were flawless. A rope ladder for egressing the cockpit was the only bad feature. Bill Higginbotham tried to demonstrate its utility, but only managed to look like a chimpanzee while trying, so we junked them. We walked down the back of the aircraft to the wing and jumped off the wingtip. Once the C-130 caught up, we had ladders.

I am personally indebted to all the great people who made the transition to the magnificent F-105 possible. To my crew chief, Paul Stevens; to Jack Cheers who crawled into the aft fuselage tank of every airplane to complete the in-house modification to the smoke system; to Jack Achenbach, the greatest Line Chief you could ask for; to the "Preacher"; and to my wife Gloria and our two kids, Susan and Jeff. Of the eight pilots on the Team, four are gone: Jerry Shockley, Gene Devlin, Russ Goodman and Curly Reeder. Ed Palmgren is missing . . . somewhere out there on Thud Ridge.



F-105 ejection seat

The F-105 was an outstanding fighter aircraft, well designed and proven to be suited for its role in combat. It was also an excellent demonstration aircraft as most production fighters have proven to be.

You might have flown the F-105 but you were not a Thud driver unless you flew the airplane past the karst of Thud Ridge, over the thin muddy of the Red River, past the bridges of Haiphong and through the flak of Hanoi. You were not a Thud pilot until you went . . . downtown. While we may never qualify as Thud drivers, we flew her and we loved her.

The next time you enter the gate at Nellis, look to your right. There stands a lone model of the F-105 on a high pedestal. Today, Thunderbirds know this monument as the Devlin Memorial. It shouldn't be any other way.

Gene Devlin was a Thud Pilot.

– Paul Kauttu



Republic Aviation Company built the F-105. Alex Kartveli was the designer. Paul Kauttu and his Team not only recovered from the tragic event of 1964, but flew 121 air shows in 1965, establishing a record never broken by any other aerial demonstration team in history. When Republic shipped the large model to Nellis, it had the name of the Thunderbird 105's only Leader, Paul Kauttu, on the canopy rail. Paul replaced his name with Gene's. In 1975 and with Republic's assistance, the Team added the "Devlin Memorial" plaque to the pedestal, which reads, "To the honor of Capt. Gene Devlin who lost his life on May 9, 1964, while serving his country as a U.S. Air Force Thunderbird. This memorial is dedicated to all whose common bond is uncommon devotion to duty." – Ed

The Phantoms Rest

It didn't have the artistic elegance of the T-38, nor the agility of the F-16, but no airplane in Thunderbird history has had the hair-on-the-chest brutality of the F-4. Like the B-52, the F-4 was not a machine called "she." The red, white and blue paint disguised its deadly purpose about as well as a Gucci suit would make Arnold Schwarzenegger look like Audrey Hepburn, and the men who flew and maintained it seem to know they represented a unique era.

It didn't even start like other Thunderbird airplanes. The F-4 used internal cartridges, explosive devices that sounded like Piccolo Petes on steroids and spun the J-79s to ignition with hot gas that exited the airplanes in a huge white cloud. With the F-4, you knew precisely when it was show time because it told you. From that second on, the thundering beasts sucked the breath from the crowd as they shouldered from the chocks and took off with a sound more felt than heard.

As the airplanes described delicate smoke trails in the sky, it seemed as though it was rodeo time . . . that the pilots rode a fine line separating precision from chaos where the scorching creatures would break from their masters and head in their own direction. The jocks didn't lose control. Loops bottomed at 100 feet, some 30 feet. The Solo munched the 20-ton giant through the Wing Walk and Roll. The continuous thunder of the F-4 was something the Team flaunted, dragging the sound behind them over wide eyes and gaping mouths. But no maneuver was more impressive than the gentlest one.

After landing, the hulking giants headed for show center along the taxiway. Their brute presence, even from thousands of feet away, gave a clear message: the show wasn't over until the Phantoms said it was over. As the line of America-on-the-march reached show center, it turned and formed a Wedge formation. All ten J-79s wailed as the machines headed for the crowd. There, in front of thousands of dropped mouths and wide eyes stood the lone crew chief. He beckoned – dared! – the chained power to head for him! He stood his ground and motioned, ordering the airplanes ever closer. The Phantoms smothered the crowd with their power. Then, in a moment of absolute magic, the crew chief locked his hands over his head and Thunderbird One rested its pitot boom on the man's cheek. The entire air show was punctuated by this precise



moment. Within this tick of time the multitude understood the power of the machines of United States Air Force and the ability of its men to control them. Just as the show started in a split second, it ended. The Phantoms rested . . . and the crowd went nuts.

Every Thunderbird who worked on the F-4 feels a combination of luck and pride. For one Thunderbird, his association with the airplane was particularly exciting.

It was May 20, 1967. Bob Janca (LW 59-61) and his GIB (Guy in the Back) launched from Danang to fly CAP. The sky was clear that day. "MiG!" the GIB called. Bob maneuvered his F-4 to put the MiG-21 about 4,000 feet ahead with zero angle-off. He put the piper on the enemy and squeezed off an AIM-7. The Phantom shook off the missile and it streaked away. In a moment it was all over.



McDonnell Aircraft delivered F-4C number 64-0748 in 1965. Bob Janca was one of many pilots who flew it, but he was the only pilot who earned it a red star. Like the Phantoms of the Thunderbird days, number seven-forty-eight is now at rest.

It is on a pedestal at the La Salle Street Gate at Langley. The bad boy airplane is painted and configured exactly as it was just a few minutes after Bob chocked in on that day in 1967: lizard paint job . . . and a missing AIM-7.

Thunderbird history is a funny thing. It grows not only by achievements made while on the team, but also those made long after. The fact that Bob's MiG – bagged 6 years after he left the Team – appears in Thunder Rolls is testimony to *Once a Thunderbird, Always a Thunderbird*. Bob's MiG is part of our heritage.

– Bob Gore

Reeling in Moby

You stand in front of a crowd that's only a few feet behind you, and they watch you reel in those five great white "Moby Dicks" with confidence that Lead's pitot tube will not harpoon you . . . bringing those beasts to a HALT right in front of you, the harpoon just clearing your shoulder *or* quite possibly your armpit, depending on the height of the strut and the tallness of the crew chief . . . all the while you and five other mechanics wait to disperse with chocks listening to the cheers and roar and applause of the crowd even above the screams of the five beasts' engines . . . well, there is no better reward for all the blood, sweat and tears and hours of work you and your comrades put into those airplanes.

PRIDE is instilled in you at that moment unlike any other time as the crowd cheers you on like a matador in a bullring. It is a wonderful feeling unmatched by anything. The reward for all your hard work has just been fulfilled.

– Mike Jacobssen (CC 72-75)

Carol Knotts: Fan, Friend, Team Historian

Can't remember who the Commander/Leader was when the Team got F-4s? When did we fly our 232nd show – and where was it? Who followed the Pattillo brothers as Left and Right Wing? Ask Carol Knotts, our Historian.



An Air Force brat who grew up riding her bike along the Barksdale AFB flight line, Carol knows more about Thunderbird history than anyone who ever wore the Patch. The Team was only 2 years old when her school newspaper assigned Carol, then 14, to interview one of the Thunderbird pilots. When she saw the red, white and blue jets streak overhead, it was love at first flight. Since then, she has corresponded with

Team members and alumni almost daily, saving every letter and photo in a vast library that occupies most of her home. So respected is her knowledge that she was asked to assist in fine-tuning the facts in the 21-Day Orientation Program, a pamphlet on Thunderbird history and operation which new members must memorize.

I was the Team's Air Show Coordinator and one of two Information (later Public Affairs) Specialists, so I got to work with many seasoned writers in search of photos and anecdotes. Typically, we would search through our archives and give them whatever they needed. Most of the time we never saw nor heard from them again . . . and we never got our photos back.

Then along came Carol. She was a junior college science teacher. I thought, "Here we go again – and she's not even a writer!" In fact, she hadn't written an article since high school.

I thought I would spend a few days as a glorified babysitter answering questions and trying to run down information for her. Together we looked through boxes of potential photos for her book *Diamond in the Sky*, which turned out to be a beautiful pictorial history of the Team. As we opened the first box, she began telling me about the history behind each photo. Somehow I knew this was a knowledgeable, selfless and trustworthy person. For our one-of-a-kind photos, she would take photocopies and return the originals. Amazing! She remains one of the most honorable and giving people I have ever met.

When the Diamond crashed in 1982, Carol called me at RAF Bentwaters, England, to tell me. The next day she flew at her own expense to Las Vegas to assist with arrangements for the memorial service. Carol is not just a Thunderbird fan, she is a true friend of all Thunderbirds and her work as our Historian is not only about our history, but part of it.

– Vickie Graham
(Air Show Coordinator,
Information Specialist 76-78)



A view from the Thunderbird No. 3 position during the Trail to Diamond Roll.

Bench Stock

- In 1969 **TSgt. Ron Mackey** (Avionics) had a brother serving at the same time on the Blue Angels. Petty Officer Mackey served as a Flight Engineer.
- **Doug Roach** (Log/RW/Slot 73-75) may have the record for the number of combat sorties flown in Vietnam: 516, according to one military historian. Doug says, "There are combat sorties, and there are combat sorties. It wasn't like all of mine were downtown," referring to sorties over Hanoi. Still, Doug has 38 Air Medals. Those who served on the Team with him wonder if all his sorties were . . . "as scheduled." He now works for the U.S. Congress – again! Talk about the love for combat.
- Boss **Chris Patterakis** (LW 66-67, C/L 75-76) is taking on one more Air Force mission. The former fighter and airline jet pilot is now flying . . . a desk.

"Am I nuts?" asked Chris. "I have generous pensions; I'm building my own 70 percent scale, all-metal P-51 Mustang; I don't like bureaucracy; and I'm politically *incorrect*."

Our past TBAA Board Member is now Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Air Force. To answer the Boss's question: Chris, you're not crazy. Your country called and you answered. It's what you do. It's who you are. Only a patriot sets aside a P-51 for his country.

Chris and Vickie now reside at 5903 Mt. Eagle Drive #216, Alexandria, VA 22303; (703) 329-4860.

• **Cat Eschenbach**, wife of Doug (CC 80-82), has published her first novel, *Celebrate Me Home*. Check your local bookstore or contact Cat at Cat777Sagg@aol.com.

Tribute To Gregory Scott Kolligian



Gregory Scott Kolligian

We are always saddened to hear of the loss of one of our own. It was quite a blow to me on 3 May 2001 when we lost a dear brother and a wonderful friend. Honorary Thunderbird Gregory Scott Kolligian departed this life and took his final flight. The year since his passing has given me no comfort.

There are so many wonderful memories of this great American that this entire issue of *Thunder Rolls* could be dedicated to him, and we would still not be able to cover it all. However, let me share a few of my thoughts about this very special person.

I first met Greg and his wonderful wife, Zoe, during an air show at Hanscom AFB, Mass., in 1975. After our greeting their first words were, "All of you must come to our house for dinner tonight." The invitation was presented in such a way that we could not say no, nor did we want to. It confirmed once again in my mind that there are a lot of wonderful people in America and that by being a Thunderbird, I was in the right organization to meet many of them.

During the evening Greg shared many stories about teams who had been in their home. Most of the funnier ones centered on Stan Musser, Doyle Ruff and Mack Angel, and I'm sure if we were to have dinner with him tonight, the names of Thunderbirds from that time in 1975 until now would roll from him easily. Greg Kolligian was the most humble, compassionate and caring individual I have ever known. He had a wonderful, quiet, loving personality that set him apart. When you were in his presence, he made you

feel as though you were the most important person on earth, and to Greg you were.

To know the Marine fighter pilot was to love him. It is still a wonder to me how a single individual could embody so many of America's great values and live them every day. He brought synergy to every situation and to each person with whom he came in contact. He made the whole much greater than the sum of its parts while making each of us feel more special than we were.

Greg was more than an Honorary Thunderbird. He was everything one could hope for in a friend . . . and much more. He loved the armed forces, especially the Marines and our Air Force. He and his family sponsored the Kolligian Trophy, one of aviation's most prestigious awards given to the Air Force pilot who best handled an in-flight emergency. Typical of Greg, the trophy was not to raise his own importance, rather a posthumous gift to his brother. It is officially named the Koren Kolligian Jr. Trophy. Koren died in a crash while trying to bring his crippled airplane home. Those of you on the Internet can search for "Kolligian Trophy" and see for yourself the impact Greg's selflessness had on our Air Force. Like everything else in his life, the Kolligian Trophy was a selfless act.

Greg's hands were always outstretched, not with an open palm, but to hold a gift. To receive embarrassed him. One of his favorite lines was, "I have a little something I want to give you." Whatever it was that he gave you spoke to your heart because it reflected Greg's thought about who you were. Greg's gifts were soul to soul.

Thank you, Greg. One of my proudest memories will always be that the last time I wore my Air Force uniform was when I spoke at your memorial service.

– Fig Newton



The Thunderbird Delta Formation flying a practice show in the Nevada desert.

Our 50th anniversary book is taking shape, and the publisher tells us he's excited because what we are doing is unique for a publication of this type. It will be a celebration, not so much about what we've done, but about who we are. It is a story in our own words told by many who have contributed to this work. The Thunderbirds may have first flown in 1953, but our legacy was born in the skies over the Argonne, Berlin, MiG Alley, Hanoi, Baghdad . . . and the Mediterranean. In the next TR we will send you more information on the 50th book, plus how to order Christmas gift certificates for a special advance edition.

Here is a draft of the first chapter.

– Ed

The Thunderbird Legacy Begins

The one thing you never did with a P-38 was turn into your dead engine. When you did, the drag caused by the bad engine combined with the thrust from the good one turned

the airplane into a lead boomerang.

But Lt. Dick Catledge didn't have many options. He was skimming the waves for the safety of Africa with battle damage, only one turnin', and Italy behind. His leg ached from standing on the rudder pedal to overcome his airplane's death wish to spiral into the water. It was going to be



a long flight. He worried if his leg could make it. That worry didn't last long.

Tracers flashed past his airplane, a river of fire from behind and above. He heard the firing as loud as if it were his own.

He strained to see over his shoulder.

A nightmare lunged for him.

It was an ME 109.

Bullets cut the air, a scythe of fire.

He turned the only way he could . . . into his dead engine.

The '38 snap rolled.

He threw aileron against the roll.

Whitecaps filled his view.

The fighter skidded.

The 109's shells shaved past, its pilot miscalculated his aim lead because of the 38's skid.

The whitecaps disappeared in a world of blue . . . then black.

The world spun as he opened his eyes.

Water rushed over the canopy rail. He was sinking, fast.

He unbuckled his harness and threw himself overboard, parachute and all, just before his fighter disappeared beneath the waves.

His fingers groped for the CO2 lanyard that inflated his

Mae West life preserver.

"Where is it?"

The parachute, still strapped to him, soaked up the water.

"Where is it!?"

He kicked with feet clad in combat boots.

He thrashed the water with one hand while he searched for the lanyard with the other.

One by one he ran out of choices. When he groped for the lanyard, he sunk. Staying on the surface was a losing battle.

Narrowed to a single choice, he grappled for the lanyard and the parachute releases with both hands.

The waves closed over him.

As he felt for his releases, he looked up. His world and his life grew farther and farther away as the dappled sunlight on the surface of the Mediterranean turned into ever-smaller sparkles on ever-black felt.

It's cooler down here. And quiet.

So, this is death? Not so bad.

He smiled as he thought about the world of sunlight, the world of P-38s and ME-109s chasing each other; of B-26s being blown apart, their crewmembers thrown into space, descending on parachutes like dozens of dandelion seeds; of flak so thick it looked like vast groves of black trees; of his own fatally damaged P-38 as it skid into the waves.



Here, in the deep, he found the serenity of the near heaven. But what is that?

He saw a large room filled with clear water. Another fighter pilot in combat gear was suspended in the liquid. He cocked his head to get a closer look at the man whose face was partially obscured by his helmet. The face he saw was his own.

And then he realized. The world above was more than mayhem. It was a world of loved ones and friends, people who would wonder how and when he died. People who would feel pain in his passing and who depended on him.

"Give up, hell!"

Adrenalin fired through him.

Catledge fought for the surface.

His parachute slipped away.

Up he went.

His lungs ached, but the sparkles grew bright and the black became blue . . . then green.

He broke into sunlight.

He sucked in air and spewed out water in lunging coughs.

He kicked to stay on the surface while he grappled for that little ring.

Swoosh!

His Mae West inflated.

His breath came in heaves and dulled senses came to life. He felt joy at the throb of waves slapping his cheeks and troughs rocking his body.

Postcards From the Past

1996 European Tour

When we stopped in Romania, the reception was awesome. On the 16th of June 1996, we followed our High Show with a trip to a local hospital. During one of our visits in individual rooms, an older gentleman, a WWII Vet, impacted me in a way I will never forget. Through an interpreter, he clasped my hands and said through tears "I've been waiting 50 years for you to come here." He was obviously speaking about Americans and I will never forget that day.

The very next day, the 17th of June, we went to visit a Romanian School. All the children were excited and wonderful, and one little boy couldn't contain himself, he stood up and declared . . . "Welcome to Romania, I want to go to America and stay there. I will remember you coming to see me for a long, long time!" He gave me a lump in my throat!

Just a couple of stories from the 1996 trip to Europe!
God Bless.

– Matthew W. Modleski,
(Solo 96-97)

Taps

Kenneth C. "KC" Schow, Jr. (Opposing Solo 87-88, TBAA Board Member 00-02). Paul Morell, an Academy classmate of KC's wrote: "KC Schow was a true example of what we are probably all trying to be, both as professionals and ultimately as human beings, on life's journey." Deceased: 28 July 2002. Wife – Mary Schow, 3369 East Windsong Drive, Phoenix, AZ 85044, (602) 759-4802.

Kenneth P. "Ken" McGlothlin (Aircraft Maintenance 76-79). Deceased: 27 February 2002. Wife – Christine McGlothlin, 1651 Alexander Lane, Grants Pass, OR 97527, (541) 476-5413.

Ron Zimmerman (Avionics 70-73). Deceased: 14 May 2002. Wife – Virginia Zimmerman, W. 5811 Shawnee, Spokane, WA 99208, (509) 467-1882.

The Thunderbird Legacy Begins

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Calm now, he turned. No land . . . no land anywhere.
"Which way? Which way?"

He had seen another P-38 in a vertical dive over the Italian coast. He looked for the smoke from its crash as he stroked in a circle.

There.

He swam toward the smudge that rose at the horizon's edge.
"Give up, hell!"



Crew chiefs monitor engines during maintenance checks.

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THUNDERBIRDS

THE USAF THUNDERBIRDS ALUMNI ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



Once a
Thunderbird,
Always a
Thunderbird.