

Flights & Fancy: The Last Laugh

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In 1949 the U.S. Navy and Air Force were in a dogfight over the role of carrier aviation versus that of the Strategic Air Command as represented by the Consolidated B-36. The Navy said the B-36 was extremely vulnerable to fighters. The Air Force said that carriers were easily found and disposed of by air power. (A few years later, I discovered that carriers were not all that easy to find, even with functioning navigation aids and a perfectly clear sky. One unforgettable day I finally found the carrier and landed with what I estimated was about 10 minutes of fuel left.)

I remember seeing—but mostly hearing—great lumbering Convair B-36s fly over my home in Clarksville, Tennessee, before I joined the Navy. The pulsing sound of their six piston engines and four jets sounded like a monster electric fan. You could tell that a B-36 was flying overhead even if you weren't able to see it through the overcast.

After earning my wings at Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida in early 1953, I was assigned to VC-3, an all-weather night squadron that furnished night fighter teams to carriers in the Pacific fleet. At the time, VC-3 was deploying teams in either Vought F4U-5N Corsairs or McDonnell F2H-3 Banshees.

After flying the F4U and the SNB-5 Twin Beech, I checked out in the F2H-3. It was a nice-flying single-seat airplane, but its 25,000-pound gross takeoff weight was vastly underpowered by two Westinghouse J-34 WE 34 engines of (gasp!) 3,250 pounds of thrust each. To me, its performance was considerably less sterling than that of the T-33 jets I'd trained in. It flew like a Cadillac with a Volkswagen engine. The radar and other avionics were probably worth much more than the airframe.

I was in the San Francisco area a few flights into my checkout, operating out of Moffett Field, when a B-36 hove into view about five miles away. It was at 25,000 feet, and in those days, just about the only aircraft that flew at those altitudes were military and hence fair game for a bounce. That, of course, is exactly what I decided to do—if a pass in a Banshee could be called a bounce. My loyalty to the Navy and naval aviation knew no bounds: I would demonstrate that the B-36 was indeed a loser as a cold war weapon.

The first pass was what I considered a classic. I swept by the giant, which responded like a water buffalo being approached by a mouse: not at all.

Okay, this called for a little formation work. I would fly up alongside and with a certain hand signal I would register my disdain for such a BUFF—Big Ugly Fat Fellow.

As I pulled up from behind and to its left, I slowed the F2H but sailed rapidly past the huge bomber. I turned back and set up an approach with flaps and landing gear down to lower my speed. I slowed to near stall speed, but again sailed right by it.

The third time would surely be the charm. I slowed up to—and below—stall speed. Simultaneously I realized that when I started the passes the Air Force pilots had gradually slowed their bomber. Later I heard that a lightly loaded B-36 could fly perfectly well on just its piston engines at an indicated airspeed of only 100 mph.

I can tell you without fear of contradiction that the spin recovery procedure for a Banshee works precisely as detailed in Navy document CO-01245FBC-1A.

I never saw the B-36 again, since making up the 15,000 feet I lost would have required more time and fuel than I had available.

Somewhere in this great nation, many years after the fact, I'll bet there are two B-36 pilots still laughing themselves silly.