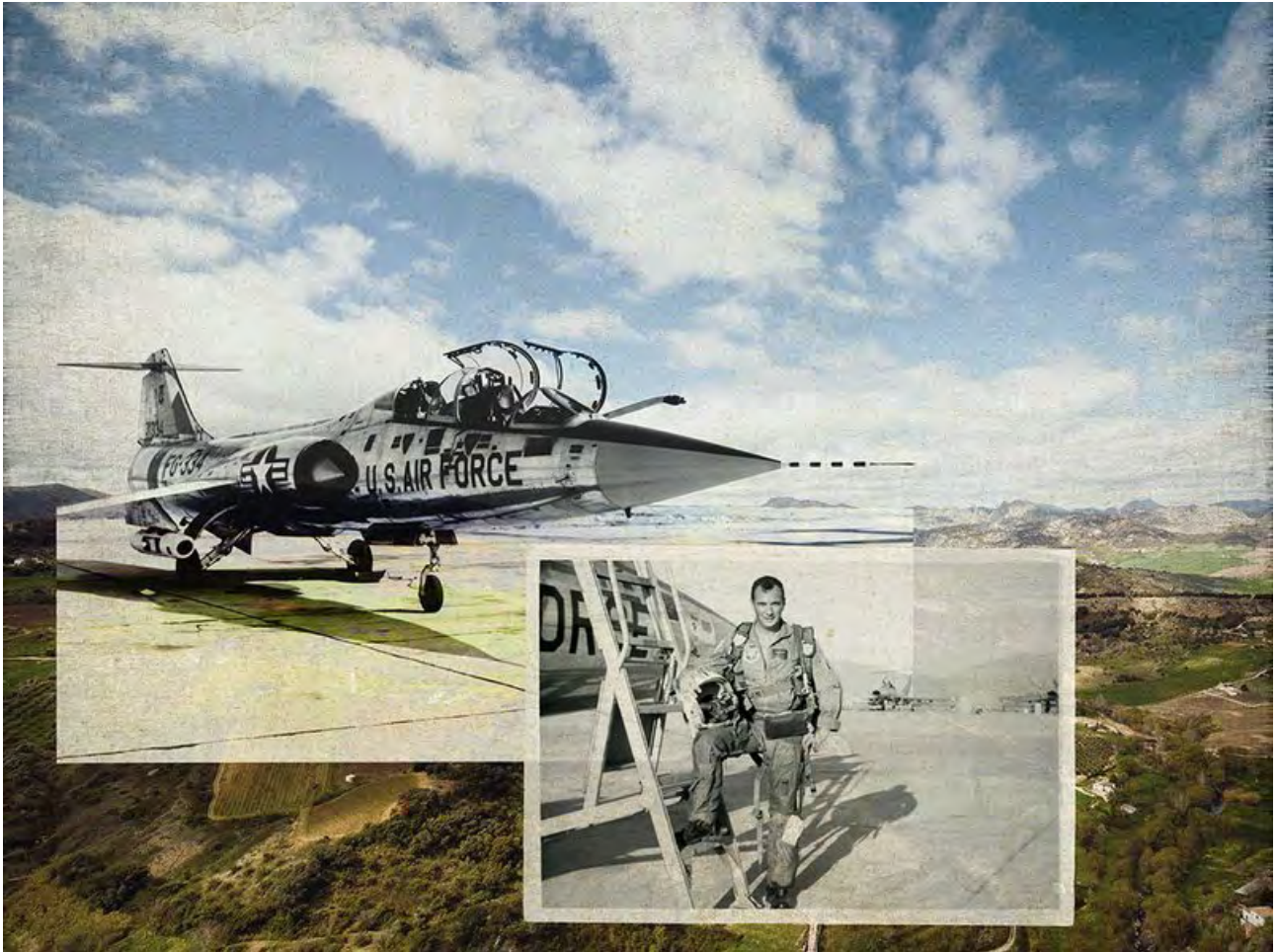


“Free Beer for the Americanos”

George Wells

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An F-104D from the 479th Wing, and the author in Vietnam, with a backdrop of Southern Spain. (Background: Artur Bogacki; Inset photos: NMUSAF and Courtesy George C. Wells)

In 1964, strategic air command had B-52 bombers on round-the-clock alert over the Mediterranean Sea. According to information that filtered down to us at the 479th Wing at George Air Force Base near Victorville, California, some B-52s had been harassed by MiGs out of North Africa. However, no one ever told us who was operating them.

Because of this situation, Lockheed F-104s were on alert at Morón Air Base in Spain. In January, our squadron was ordered to relieve the F-104 squadron on duty at Morón. We were being sent to do the job F-104s had been made for: intercepting hostile aircraft. What we encountered was pretty much the exact opposite.

We were informed that we were to fly the trip nonstop—someone, either in our wing, or at Air Force headquarters, wished to demonstrate that the F-104 was capable of flying a global

mission. As the squadron navigation officer, I was responsible for preparing the flight plan for 18 aircrews and supporting entities, plus coordinating KC-135 tankers for refueling.

We were fitted with water survival gear and rubber waterproof suits, dubbed "poopy suits," which were cumbersome and uncomfortable. We would be flying over the North Atlantic in January, and were told that temperatures would be well below zero. If we had to bail out, we would have about 20 seconds to get into our dinghies before we froze to death, and even if we did get aboard, we would probably freeze to death shortly thereafter. We got the idea that we should probably not bail out unless there was absolutely no other option.

We departed George around 9 p.m. Sunday, January 5, joined up with a set of tankers over Clovis, New Mexico, and flew formation with them all the way to Loring Air Force Base in Maine. At that point we had sucked most of the gas out of the first tankers, so they broke off and we joined up with a fresh set, two fighters to a tanker. The sun rose as we approached the Atlantic.

We flew all day and landed at Morón in the evening. My logbook indicates I flew 10 hours and 30 minutes—certainly my longest flight, and, we were told, the longest flight for an F-104 at that time. To keep us alert, we were given a bottle of "go pills"—probably Benzedrine. If you started nodding off, you popped a pill, which would keep you wide-eyed and bushy-tailed for several hours. When we landed, I was exhausted but still wide awake. It took about three days to get back to normal functioning.

Our mission was to sit ready alert with two airplanes, 24 hours a day, and respond immediately if a B-52 was attacked. One night I was awakened by the alert siren around 2 a.m. I was airborne in less than two minutes and in a couple of minutes more, I was cruising at about one and a half times the speed of sound toward the Mediterranean. But by the time I reached the B-52, the threat was over. In fact, none of us ever engaged a hostile aircraft; they always disappeared before we arrived.

One evening, one of the flights in our squadron launched for a practice refueling. The four aircraft met up with some tankers, probably out of Torrejón Air Base, near Madrid. I had just gone to bed when our squadron operations officer, Major Walt Irwin, informed me that one of our airplanes had just crashed and that I was to be the accident investigation officer. I told him I had the next four days off, and my bag was packed to spend this time at the resort area of Málaga on the Costa del Sol in southern Spain. Nice try. Irwin told me that my plans had changed.

I learned that our flight surgeon, Doc Lenar, was in the back seat of a two-seat F-104D, with Major John Thomas in control. After receiving a full load of fuel, Thomas reduced power slightly to disconnect from the tanker. The disconnect mechanism failed and pulled the end of the F-104's refueling probe out, which was then swallowed by the J79 engine. The F-104 caught fire, and Thomas and Lenar opted to finish their trip via parachutes. The airplane nosed over and dove straight down, resembling, as was related to me, an Atlas rocket in reverse.

Thomas landed, uninjured. Lenar landed in an olive tree. He told me he did not even lose his glasses.

The next day, an Air Force bus took a dozen enlisted airmen and me to recover what was left of the airplane. The pieces were scattered over a fairly small area. The impact was so great that big pieces, like the engine, drove 25 feet into the ground.

The crash site was a half-mile outside a small Spanish village, Villanueva de Algaidas. There was only one automobile in the town, an old U.S. Army Jeep. The people were very friendly and seemed pleased that we had crashed literally in their back yard. The Spanish police, the Guardia Civil, showed up to monitor the proceedings, and even they seemed happy to see us. You would have thought we were filming a major Hollywood production—at times there must have been several hundred residents standing around watching.

The hole we were digging to recover the engine went so deep we had to attach five-gallon buckets on ropes to pull the dirt to the surface. Amid all this, a local set up a concession stand next to us and started selling beer. This was not a beer that any of us had ever seen. It came in very small bottles that sold for five pesetas—in our money, really cheap. About every 30 minutes or so, a loud voice resonated “free beer for the Americanos.” Every one of my airmen would come scrambling out of the hole for what they called nickel beer.

Around noon, I noticed a lack of progress. The hole was not getting much deeper. Quite a few of my men were lying around the hole, relaxing. I had to somewhat limit the nickel beer or we would have been there for months, probably to the airmen’s—and the concessionaire’s—great pleasure.

I bonded with the young Spaniard who owned the Jeep, even though he did not speak English and I didn’t know a word of Spanish. One evening I decided to stay in town rather than ride the bus back to Morón and return the next morning. I stayed in a boarding house for \$1.25, which included a breakfast of coffee, sausage, and eggs. That evening my new friend insisted that I visit the local tavern. The bartender was so honored to have us that all we drank was on the house. After imbibing a little more than we should have, my friend invited me to his home for dinner. We walked down a path, along which all the houses were connected. When we came to his door, my friend knocked.

We were greeted by my friend’s wife, a pretty young woman with a child. As my host attempted to step over the threshold, he tripped, fell flat on the floor, and passed out for a moment or two. There I stood in front of his wife, her husband on the floor between us. Neither one of us could communicate. She started laughing, which greatly eased the tension.

My friend soon regained consciousness, and I was treated to a unique meal in a native Spanish home, an engaging introduction to international life for a guy who grew up driving a John Deere tractor on a farm in southern Illinois.

The next day, my friend told me he really liked my Air Force flying jacket. Would I sell it to him? I told him Air Force regulations forbade that. He then offered to trade me his Andalusian riding jacket for it. He had done so much for me that I agreed to trade.

Our squadron took up a collection and returned to Villanueva de Algaidas with school supplies and candy for the children. The villagers declared our return a holiday.

The silk-lined jacket is a work of art. I still have it in my closet. It fits me perfectly.