

Goodbye "My Girl"

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The December 1990 morning was cold and the sky was starting to overcast. The weather was good enough to leave Andrews AFB, Maryland for the next couple of hours, after which all bets were off, a severe weather front was on the way. The grey weather was appropriate for my mood, my last departure from Andrews in my F-4D (she was mine because my name was stenciled on her canopy) and the last flights for aircraft "My Girl," tail number 66-509. Today was the day My Girl was to leave her home of the last eight years serving the DC Air National Guard and make her way en route to the military aircraft "boneyard" in Tucson, Arizona.

It was a day of farewells for the three individuals with their names painted on My Girl, "Frog" Byers her crew chief, Bobby Lake ("Last of the Great Lakes") the "front seater" (Pilot, "nose gunner," Aircraft Commander, "bus driver,") my good friend and the fellow that is legally allowed to take off and land the jet and a good guy to have around in a bogie rich environment. And myself, Stephen "Laser" Long, the "back seater" (Weapons Systems Officer or WSO or "Whisso"), the GIB - Guy in Back - that wears navigator wings; runs the radar, analog computers, and laser weapons guidance systems in the backseat of a fighter.

We all gathered around My Girl and did things you would expect of a last day; we shook hands, took pictures, gave a plaque to "Frog" and eventually got around to pre-flighting, packing the travel pod, and strapping in. I was full of sad thoughts; that this would be the last time I got to take off out of Andrews; that my eight years in the D.C. Air National Guard would be over when the wheels left the runway, if not on paper then at least in my heart. But My Girl had other plans. She didn't seem to want to leave "Frog" so she decided to make life interesting for Bobby and me.

Our two ship (we were Brave 71 and Brave 72 – we were the wingman, called "Two") did a normal formation takeoff but right at rotation My Girl had a complete airspeed (CAS and True), altimeter, and VVI (Vertical Velocity Indicator) failure. We stayed in formation and called up Washington Departure Control and got permission to root around below the 3000 feet weather ceiling. Departure gave us vectors out towards Patuxent River NAS where we called our SOF (Supervisor of Flying), and told him what we were doing - we would dump and burn down fuel and make a formation approach and landing. We needed our flight lead to be our airspeed gauge, otherwise our only speed guide would be the AOA (Angle of Attack) reading. Our only real concern was that the emergency checklist page had a Warning about possible cycling of the flaps during final approach - a flap failure on short final is not a good way to end a mission.

As would be expected on a day like today, My Girl fixed herself after we had dumped and burned down enough fuel so that we could not go anywhere but back to Andrews. It turned out that the failure was caused by an ice block deep in the pitot boom plumbing. After 20 minutes of pitot heat the ice melted and all was right with the world. So we landed uneventfully after all and taxied back to the line where "Frog" marshalled us into our parking spot. As we climbed down the ladder we joked with Frog that My Girl wasn't happy with leaving; she wanted to have Frog kiss and launch her just one more time.

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Maintenance concurred with our diagnosis of the pitot system, and after a checkout with their test gear just to make sure, they cleared My Girl to fly again. She got another 17,000 pounds of JP-4 and we cranked and taxied. This time all went well and we took off, headed south for Florida, where our destination was Eglin AFB, a fuel stop en route towards our RON (Remain over Night) destination of Berkstrom AFB, Texas.

The flight to Florida was uneventful. The weather system over Washington had spread down most of the central east coast and it was southern North Carolina before we could begin to see the Great Smokey Mountains far below us. For this leg, as well as the other legs, I flew most of the time. My Girl was smooth and easy to handle - flying loose route on the wing is a nice way to get from point A to B. Lead worries about the navigation and radio calls to Center, all you have to do is keep up on the wing line and periodically answer "Two" on the radio. Florida got closer and we did an en route decent to Initial at Eglin. Bobby did a smooth pitch out to land and planted My Girl on the ground in Florida.

As we taxied in I thought a lot about the last time I was at Eglin, to participate in an Air-to-Ground "WSEP" (Weapon System Evaluation Program). That particular WSEP was both a training environment and an evaluation program on the "Pave Spike" laser guided munitions delivery capability of our squadron. I remember that WSEP as both the lowest and highest points in my "bombing" career in the F-4D. During a critical evaluation mission my nose gunner and I went out, fought our way through bandits, flew a tough low level, popped up in the target area and could not find the \$%^& thing. We re-attacked and still could not find the target in the laser scope. Our ROE (rules of engagement) were explicit – if we did not have 100% positive ID of the target, we could not drop. We came home with our bombs on the rails and our tail between our legs, and I was as miserable as I had ever been. The maintenance troops didn't know the daggers they sent in my heart as they clustered around the plane as I climbed down the ladder, asking what went wrong, why did we bring the bombs home? But the next day – our next sortie - was the highest point in my bombing career when we killed (no question, we ate their lunch) the F-16 barons sent to harass us as we flew low over the Florida countryside. The Smokey SAMs (surface to air missile simulators) that launched at us as we broke left and right at the IP (Initial Point) just cranked up our blood pressure and drew out our fangs as we regrouped with our wingman just moments out from the target. As the pilot brought the nose over in our harsh pull-down out of the pop-up I saw the image of the bunker on my scope we were fragged against and knew as certain as is possible to know that I had the target. I lazed the SOB with all of the skill I had – entering a Zen like state - and watched the 500 lb. bomb actually impact the precise point I was aiming at. It was almost like an orgasm. Later I learned we had set a new record – my bomb hit within six inches of what I was aiming at. Not bad for a part time Citizen Soldier in a 20 year old airplane.

Getting back to this last trip to Eglin, the Transient Alert team had a lot of trouble getting a fuel truck and we debated whether we should RON in Eglin or push ahead to make it to Texas. Our planned Texas landing base had been changed just an hour or so before our second

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launch out of Andrews. We were given a spare part to deliver for a sister F-4 that had broken down at Carswell AFB, TX, a day or so before on its last trip out to the boneyard. If we got to Carswell today they could work on the broken F-4 overnight and launch in the morning. But our concern was to not land after dark - the "extra" sortie back home had made us late and would make the Texas leg our third sortie of the day. Tactical Air Command regulations do not allow a third sortie of the day to land after dark. It would all depend on the speed of the turnaround at Eglin. As would be expected, just as Bobby got off the phone making room reservations for the night in Florida, the fuel truck arrived and we were ready to go within the hour. Think of all of the dollar bills we saved that night.

As we climbed out of Florida airspace heading west we could see almost forever, the air was so blue as to - well, it just made us do those aileron rolls, it just made us do it (honestly - we had no choice in the matter). As we climbed up into positive controlled airspace, about 15 minutes out from Eglin, we began to notice that the fuel readings were not quite what that should have been - they were slightly out of sync with the fuel readings of our flight lead. The readings were still within acceptable limits but worth paying closer attention to. About ten minutes later we were pretty certain that we had a problem: the left external fuel tank was not feeding properly. Some gas was evidently trapped in the tank. I had been flying most of the way so far and I must have been using a lot of muscle, counteracting the heavy wing, because when Bobby took the stick he complained about the amount of aileron trim that he had to add. Once we were trimmed up the verdict was in - there was more than an inch of left aileron trim - sure proof of trapped fuel in the wing tank. Landing with a heavy wing was something to be concerned with but not a true emergency. But not having the 2000 Lbs. of fuel that the wing tank held was something we did really have to think about. Bobby flew his ever smoothest to save fuel, as I dug out my "Whiz Wheel" (yes, some of us Air Force types still know how to use the ubiquitous mechanical circular slide rule - I carry one in my helmet bag on cross country flights just for such a contingency).

As Old Man River reflected the westerly heading sun before us I checked and rechecked our fuel burn and concluded we could safely make it to Carswell. Bobby and I talked through our options, determining suitable bases short of Dallas if we needed them. We came up with a go/no go point about 60 miles out from Berkstrom AFB. Counting on our internal fuel-only we would safely make it to Carswell with about 1900 lbs. If a just a little fuel came out of the stuck tank we would be fat on gas. The weather cooperated, with less headwinds than forecast and we got vectors to a straight-in landing to Carswell, with just over 2000 lbs. remaining at the final approach fix. Landing with the heavy wing was a little sporty to say the least. D model F-4s don't like a lot of aileron at high Angles of Attack - you have to keep the stick fairly neutral as you steer primarily with the rudder. But Bobby did his usual good job, planting My Girl down with a satisfying F-4 plunk (a good hard landing).

As we taxied to the Carswell AF Reserve unit F-4 apron we discussed our options. If we could not get My Girl fixed quickly (i.e. overnight) then we would have the tank drained and would have the jet filled with internal fuel only, planning to two hop across the remaining distance to

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Arizona: Carswell to Holloman AFB, NM; then Holloman to Tucson, Davis Monthan. A fuel system maintenance guy came out to meet us and offered to drop our bad tank and give us a replacement out of the many spares he had. He promised that My Girl would be ready by 8AM. As you might guess, when we got to the base the next morning not a thing had been done. After some verbal coaxing, the maintenance crew did a pressure check on the errant tank and said it would feed, albeit a little slowly. At this point we made a command decision to take her as she was - maintenance said they could not drop My Girl's tanks until tomorrow. The fuel truck guys had a great time trying to get the errant tank to accept gas but eventually all was made ready and we put Carswell in our rear view mirror by 1130 local time.

This last leg, the last flight of My Girl 66-509 was supremely enjoyable. The air was smooth at 31,000 feet, visibility was somewhere near forever. I flew for most of the at-altitude trip, content with being one with My Girl, feeling good about the history I had had with her. We obviously watched our fuel closely and with a smile noted that the errant tank had fixed itself and was feeding fuel just ever-so-fine. As Holloman went under our wings we knew Arizona was in the bag and we steered towards Tucson. 100 miles out we determined we had enough gas to do a little bit of low altitude flying - a chance to better appreciate what flying a fighter over the great American south west was all about. Sixty miles east of My Girl's final resting place we descended below FL180, cancelled our IFR flight plan, flew "Fighting Wing" position (stay behind Lead and just don't run into anything) and followed Lead through a designated low altitude training route, transiting multiple ridge crossings as we E and E'd (Escaped and Evaded) through the last mountain range prior to entering the Tucson area basin. This was the kind of flying I had become addicted to in the F-4, looking up (yes up) at the desert vegetation going by at 450 knots, feeling the raw power of two J79 engines in Mil Power, the feeling of agility and wonder of life as we did 120 degree angle of bank turns into and out of valleys and ridges.

The city of Tucson was now in sight, we still had 4000 lbs. of gas so Bobby did a last bit of VFR flight south of Tucson, just enjoying life. Lead eventually asked if we had had enough and we reluctantly agreed, so we headed towards the base. Tucson Approach vectored us smack dab over all of downtown Tucson, laid out like a map before us, the Golf courses the only thing green to be seen, as we entered the Davis Monthan, AFB traffic pattern.

Our pre-flight instructions were very specific that we should (could only) make a single approach to the field and land - no beating up the pattern with multiple low approaches and "burner closed" ear busters. We entered Initial like good boys, ready to turn Base to Final to land when two A-10s were given clearance to take-off. Well, we could not land so we had no choice but to light our burners, break out of the pattern and then reenter Initial. This second time around we had a chance to fly over the boneyard itself. I've never seen so many airplanes - just UFB. We made our Base turn with the radio call, "Brave 72, Base, Full Stop, Last Landing for this F-4, and I was very, very sad. After landing I took special care to precisely read off the steps of the After Landing Checklist - I would never read the steps again that I have spoken over 700 times in my F-4D flying career.

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We taxied to the AMARC section of the base (Aircraft Material and Recovery Center - the Boneyard), through the security gates, and up into the holding area for newly arrived birds. I turned off the INS, raised my seat for the last time, turned off the radios and set my oxygen regulator at 100% - pretty silly when you think about it - no one will breathe out of that regulator again. Bobby shut down the engines, I patted My Girl's canopy rail and told her she had been a good girl, thanking her for letting me know and fly her. Bobby and I spent some time taking pictures and looking My Girl over for the last time. "Frog" had written in grease pencil on the landing gear door - I had not seen it on pre-flight, "24 years of Service - thanks old girl." 24 years.

We signed the forms that committed My Girl to a final parking spot with her sisters then we got an unofficial tour by the AMARC team as they drove us out of the storage area. We spotted a DC Air Guard F-4 already mothballed, one of My Girl's squadron mates. As we turned a corner hundreds, if not thousands, of F-4s came into view: F-4Cs, F-4Ds, Navy F-4s, even an occasional F-4E. My thoughts were on all of the sorties these birds had flown. Some in war, most doing their part to deter war. I also thought of all of the men, myself included, who had spent some of the best years of their lives flying these majestic deadly creatures. As we turned down Monument Row, I got a last view of 100's of F-4s from their rear view, with their shining, drooping stabs. The sun glinted off of metal and canopy – then they were gone.

Monument Row was interesting: early B-52s, the first military 707, even the orphaned T-46 prototype was there. The biggest surprise was seeing a Monument Row example of an F-105 "Thud" with a big DC on her tail, a tail number that Bobby had said he had flown (the DC ANG flew F-105s prior to flying F-4s). I now knew that the torch had indeed passed and hoped that I would be able to return some day and find my old friend. My name on the canopy would be covered by the mothball white paint AMARC uses. No one else would ever connect WSO Stephen Long with tail 66-509 but I would know it was there and I hoped to show my children to be someday an old and faithful friend. She never killed or injured an aircrew or ground support member. She flew well to the end. Good-bye old friend, I will miss you. *Stephen Long, written in 1990.*

Epilog: In the strange ways of the world early in 1991 I was asked to continue to fly and I transitioned to F-4Es with the New Jersey Air National Guard. We were called Boat WSOs – refugees from retired F-4D squadrons across the country. I continued my fighter flying up through Desert Storm (another story for another day). The week after our Wing set the world record for most F-4 sorties in a single day, the USAF announced that our Fighter Wing would be transformed into a Tanker Wing (an even stranger story). Unlike the F-4Ds that went to the boneyard, the F-4Es were sold to allied nations, so our squadron had little of the loss trauma associated with last boneyard flights. Our Fighter Wing became a KC-135E Tanker Wing and after a strange and awful training stint at Castle AFB, CA as a senior Major in a land of 2nd Lieutenant newbies; I found myself flying sideways, doing celestial navigation and chart plotting as a Master Navigator (ten years and 3000 hours in Fighters qualified me to wear Master Wings – the wings with a star and the toilet seat around it). In the course of varied KC-

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135 trips around the world we had missions one week to support refueling operations out of Davis Monthan, and while on the ground we had an opportunity to visit AMARC. I Found Her! I found My Girl, her paint job and tail number 509 looking worse for ware, but she still existed with her boneyard white coverings over her canopies. I was thrilled to find her, but seeing her looking so careworn made me feel very old.

Several years later when I had finally hung up my wings and was a civilian executive at a national intelligence agency I had a visit with Boeing at the old McDonald Douglas plant in St. Louis to discuss their recent work with unmanned air vehicles. Since I knew their facility was where the F-4s were manufactured, I asked if they had records for every tail number. They did have records, and after lunch a kind woman brought me a print out of the history of 66-509. Not long after I last saw her in the boneyard, the USAF decided it no longer needed F-4Ds and she was sold for scrap aluminum to the American Beverage Company. My Girl became beer cans. It was enough to make me puke – it would have been nobler for her to spend her retirement years up on a stick in the middle of a traffic circle at the entrance a base somewhere. But life goes on, and my memories of My Girl are still a part of me and maybe through this story become part of you the reader. My Girl’s 24 years of service – ready for and deterring war - were a testament to the men and women that built her and to the men that flew her. It matters not what became of her aluminum and titanium, what matters is what she did for our Nation, for which I will ever be proud.

Stephen “Laser” Long, 2015