

Getting Too Old

by Frederick Wickert

Lt. Col. William E. "Earl" Brown, (who later became Lt. General), served in Korean War combat. Later, he served a combat tour in Vietnam. In July 1969, he returned to the Vietnam War for still another combat tour. He was assigned to the 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Udorn RTAFB, Thailand.

In 1970, his tour not yet over, "Earl" Brown was flying an F-4D Phantom II fighter plane. It was a two seat aircraft with the pilot in the front and the weapons control officer in the rear. Occupying the rear seat was Lt. Col. Len Melton. They were flying escort for RF-4C reconnaissance aircraft.

At the time there was a bombing halt. Pilots were not permitted to bomb North Vietnamese gun positions unless they were fired upon by those positions. The RF-4C's trolled for anti-aircraft fire, and when they were fired upon, the F-4D Phantoms attacked the AA batteries.

On March 30, 1970, Brown and Melton were hit by AA fire. If you got shot down during the Vietnam War, you could be killed, become a prisoner of war, or if you were lucky, you could nurse the crippled aircraft back to friendly territory and then bail out. Brown chose to attempt the latter.

Brown turned the aircraft toward Thailand. They had lost one engine and the plane was on fire. Nearby, providing support there was another F-4D Phantom flown by Lt. Col. Richard B. "Dick" Myers, later to become General Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The point came when Brown and Melton knew they had to bail out. There was a problem with the ejection sequence. When the rear canopy went, the air stream held down the front canopy. They managed to get rid of both before ejecting. The noise was so loud they couldn't hear each other.

Brown yelled, "Go, go, go." They ejected three miles from Nakhon Phanom in Thailand. A base known to Air Force personnel in Thailand as NKP. Len Melton's chute narrowly missed a burning part of the airplane. "Earl" Brown's chute opened when he was so low that he could not get rid of his survival kit, which was supposed to be jettisoned. The two men landed close to each other, removed their parachutes and waited for someone to come and pick them up.

Melton looked at Brown and said, "Brownie?"

"Yes, Len?"

"We're getting too old for this s--t."