

# There I Was(n't)

By Wayne Neet

Flew Darts at Griffiss 73-79 and RDT&E Flight Test Branch, Kelly AFB 79-83

Over the years nearly every fighter pilot story begins with the phrase, “*There I was . . .*”

Normally the story is told by the individual fighter pilot who was *actually there* when the alleged event occurred and the story is frequently embellished with the passage of time – it usually gets better and better with each telling.

I wasn't there when either of these events occurred, hence “*There I Wasn't*”, but I'm relatively certain what I'm about to relate is close to true.

Several of the more remarkable photos already incorporated in the “Pat's World” F-106 web site beg their stories be told, so here we go . . .

## Prologue

A grouping of three photos on the 49<sup>th</sup> FIS page entitled “Over-G Damage” depict F-106A S/N 59-0083 with substantial portions of the outer wing(s) ripped out. A somewhat similar set of photos on the 318<sup>th</sup> FIS page are titled “Mid-air with an A-7 over Dugway Proving Grounds, UT” – they show a different F-106A with the entire nose section forward of the windscreen totally *gone*.

Each of these incidents was plenty unusual by itself. But, what is most unusual is that both stories literally merged together. Here we go . . .

## **The 49<sup>th</sup> FIS “Over-G” Story**

The scene was Red Flag, probably about 1977 or so. The 49<sup>th</sup> FIS had deployed several Sixes to Nellis to play in the “war”. On the day of the mishap a two-ship of F-106A's was fragged on a CAP [Combat Air Patrol] mission.

The pilots were squadron mates of mine, but rather than identify them here I'll just call them “Sam” and “Phil”. Somewhere along the way, Sam and Phil encountered several F-15s whose mission was to make Sam and Phil go away. They commenced to turn and burn. Now generally speaking, even though the Six was quite capable in the turning category, the Eagle had a considerable advantage in the burning arena – i.e., it had a much greater thrust-to-weight ratio and could sustain high-G maneuvers longer than the Six could. In order for the F-106 to do well against F-15s, we had to rely on better tactics and “superior skill and cunning”.

Somewhere during the ensuing fight, Sam found himself going essentially straight down at a great rate of speed – somewhere around Mach 1.3, as I recall. Now, one characteristic of the F-106 is that at high supersonic speeds the airloads on the flight control surfaces become so great they literally overpower the 3,000 psi hydraulic system. In short, the control surfaces don't move very much in response to pilot inputs. When this happens, the pilot's ability to “point the nose” of the aircraft is substantially reduced. The same effect prevents the speed brakes from opening fully, thereby diminishing one's ability to slow down. So, here was Sam going straight down with a windscreen full of rapidly approaching desert, unable to pull the nose up, and going way too fast to survive an ejection. With no other options, he put the stick in his lap and hoped for the best.

Two other F-106 characteristics need to be described before we continue:

“Mach Tuck” refers to the nearly-instantaneous increase in g-loading experienced as the airplane decelerates from supersonic to subsonic flight. It's caused by the forward shifting of the center of lift on the wing and causes the turning airplane to “dig in”.

In flight, the external fuel tanks on the F-106 produce very substantial lift in the “up” direction.

Now, let's ride with Sam again. He and his trusty jet experienced such a violent jolt, Sam was convinced he had actually struck a glancing blow on the ground. But, strangely, as he looked around he found the airplane was still “flying”. He could see the extensive damage to both wings, with fuel and hydraulic fluid pouring out from both sides. Sam was seriously considering ejecting from the crippled jet.

About that time, Phil caught up with Sam and suggested he stay in the airplane as long as it seemed to fly reasonably well. He did and, *as the story was told*, they diverted to Michael Army Airfield up on Dugway Proving Grounds in Utah, where Sam made a successful emergency landing.

While Sam apparently came very close to smacking the Earth that day, it is pretty clear he really didn't. Otherwise we might have a "Sam Memorial Park" somewhere in the middle of the western desert. What most likely happened is that his airplane decelerated to subsonic airspeed just in the nick of time, and executed the Mother-of-All-Mach-Tucks resulting in structural failure of the external tank pylon attachment hardware. Then, given the upward-lifting characteristics of the tanks, they literally flew up and through the leading edge of the wings thereby causing the extensive structural damage visible in the photos.

### **The 318<sup>th</sup> FIS "Nose-Bob" Story**

The writer is much less familiar with this portion of the story, having not known any of the participants. Nonetheless, as the story goes, it was Red Flag again. This time it was a "dissimilar" four-ship – two A-7's and two Sixes in "tactical spread" formation en route to some sort of Strike / CAP mission. The mishap F-106 was said to have been the flight lead. Somewhere along the way, the tactical situation required a course reversal, which – in spread formation – called for an "in place, or 'cross' turn". It was said that "Lead" [the mishap F-106] somehow whacked into one of his own formation members [the A-7] during that turn. I don't recall the fate of the A-7, but the no-nose Six was miraculously still flyable and made an emergency recovery into Michael AAF [they say].

Part of the "story" I heard about this mishap was that the Center of Gravity (CG) of this noseless aircraft was so out of whack that – after it was parked – it was necessary to lash a 55 gallon drum of water to the front of the plane to keep the nosewheel on the ground. That seems to have been an incorrect bit of lore, as the photos on the 318<sup>th</sup> web page clearly show the aircraft firmly resting on all three wheels with no evidence of a 55 gallon drum.

The tail number of the mishap Six is not clear, but – from the one of the photos on the 318<sup>th</sup> FIS page – it might have been 59-0054.

New Math – or One + One = One

So now we had two badly broken birds – one without wings and one without a nose – both sitting on the same airfield (allegedly Michael AAF, Utah). Neither was capable of flight, and – individually – neither seemed readily repairable.

What I heard was that the wings were removed from the 318<sup>th</sup> aircraft and installed on the 49<sup>th</sup> aircraft (59-0083) resulting in a somewhat flyable machine. Actually, it was said there was other substantial over-G damage to 083 – damaged engine mounts, etc. – that required a "one-time" waiver to permit flight back to the depot at McClellan AFB. After many months of depot-level repair, F-106A S/N 59-0083 returned to service with the 49<sup>th</sup> FIS.

It is not clear what became of the "spare parts" that remained after these two aircraft became one.

### **Epilogue**

During the years I flew the F-106, I never had the privilege of participating in Red Flag. I really don't know how much airspace they use. But I have flown tactical exercises over the Utah Ranges and I know where Michael AAF and Dugway Proving Grounds are. Neither is very close to Nellis AFB. So, it always seemed *very odd* to me that two F-106's on two entirely different exercises – flying out of Nellis AFB – experienced airborne emergencies and both just happened to be way up in Utah and made emergency landings at Michael AAF.

A number of years after these incidents occurred, I had a conversation with another former squadron-mate of mine from the 49<sup>th</sup> FIS who had subsequently gone on the fly the "Electric Jet" [F-16] at Nellis. During that conversation I learned it was entirely possible [i.e., almost certain] that neither of these aircraft landed at Michael AAF. Most likely, they both made emergency landings at the infamous airfield that "does not exist" but, if it did exist would lie right below the Nellis Ranges.

I suppose the Michael AAF and Dugway Proving Grounds references were probably just cover stories. What the hey, I believed them . . . for awhile.