

Air America Rescue of F-4 Aviators shot down by MiG

In April 1972, then Major, and later Brigadier General Dan Cherry Launched his F-4 Phantom jet from Udorn, Thailand for a routine mission into Laos and ended up in North Vietnam in a dogfight against veteran North Vietnamese Mig-21 pilot Nguyen Hong My. Cherry won the fight and bagged the MIG. Hong My bailed out and survived, but he got his licks in also, and three months earlier shot down a recce F-4 flown by Bob Mock and John Stiles.

The bizarre twist to this story is chronicled in a book written by General Cherry called "*My Enemy My Friend.*" Thirty years later, Cherry's Phantom jet was restored and placed at Aviation Heritage Park in Bowling green, Kentucky. General Cherry wondered aloud, "What if I could find the pilot of the MIG I shot down?" A popular television show in Vietnam called "The Separation Never Seems to Have Existed" got wind of the request and Hong My surfaced. Cherry and Hong My in an emotional reunion revealed Hong My had shot down an American F-4 Phantom in January of that same year. Mock and Stiles always thought they had been downed by 37 MM ground fire. Mock and Stiles were rescued by two Air America helicopters, and Flight Mechanic Robert Noble was crewing one of the helicopters. He heard about the Cherry, Hong My, Mock, and Stiles reunion and putting the pieces together he realized Mock and Stiles were the pilots rescued. The names of the military aviators rescued by Air America were rarely revealed. There was usually never time to get acquainted and once rescued they were whisked away.

Here is an excerpt from General Cherry's book narrated by John Stiles who was pulled to safety in a harrowing rescue:

"The helo crewman manning the rescue hoist and machine gun was Bob "Nobs" Noble. I didn't realize it at the time, but 37 years later we would meet face-to-face again and become great friends.

Bob Mock was also picked up about the same time by another Air America helicopter and we were flown to one of the CIA's secret mountain top bases where we jumped aboard a C-123 twin-engine transport airplane and returned to our home base. Neither Bob nor I suffered serious injuries, or at least none we told the flight surgeon about, and we were both back flying combat missions in a couple of days. For me, this was the end of the story, or so I thought.

Many years passed and they were good years. I returned from my combat tour, attended pilot training and continued to fly the F-4 Phantom until retiring from the Air Force in 1993. Then I got a call out of the blue in April 2008, from Nobs, the Air America crewman who rescued me. He asked, "Are you the same John Stiles who was rescued by Air America in Northern Laos on January 20th, 1972?" One thing led to another and Bob Mock and I found we were honored guests at the May 2008 Air America reunion in Portland, Oregon. It was great fun reliving old times and getting reacquainted. I owed these two men a lot...my life."

Before Air America, Bob Noble was in the Army and a veteran of the Vietnam conflict assigned to SOG. Initially, SOG was an acronym for Special Operations Group. Their work was hazardous and highly classified. Later, to hide their identity, the group was identified as Studies and Observation Group. Out of the thirty-six or so members of Bob's section, only seven survived. Bob was decorated with the Bronze Star with Combat V, Purple Heart, fourteen Air Medals and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry. The only award he received for rescuing John Stiles was a pat on the back but reuniting with him several years later filled the gap.