Cunningham: I told Bryan to pitch up high, that I was pulling to the low and to the inside of his turn, and my intention was to fly down below Bryan, pull the MIGs, or drag them in front of him, and then he could roll in and take the MIGs off my tail.

I rolled left, and I got tracers coming over the canopy. Well, I said, I can't go that way, they're pulling lead, so I rolled right. And when I rolled right, I got tracers over the right canopy, because the MIGs had stationed themselves on either side of me. And no matter which way I rolled, that one shot. Okay, if I'd go up in that position—I only had about four-hundred and twenty knots on the airplane, trying to get in for Bryan's MIG—if I'd go up, the MIG would rendezvous on me, and [would have] closed to inside a thousand feet, and I would have probably been killed.

So the only thing I had left, is, I took the nose, snapped full rudder, snapped full back, put twelve G's on the airplane—When the airplane came back, it had rivets pulled out of the wing panels, it had broke both flap hinges, greyed* us out in the pull—and the MIG-17 with his superior turn radius, rendezvoused on us.

And here I am sitting, looking—about the height away from the ceiling [about eight feet]—looking at two Atoll missiles, and I could read his Bureau number on the side of his airplane, at the belly. So I pushed over and went into the clouds. I hadn't used afterburner at that time, because if you use burner, that missile that they shoot has got a bigger heat source [to guide on].

* Partial unconciousness caused by high G forces.
Cunningham: The clouds disperse an IR source. So, if you've got an afterburner lit and you're in clouds, the missile can't see that heatsource. So, for the first time, I could go into burner. I lit burner, told Bryan that I was just going to accelerate out to about six hundred knots, which a MIG-17 can't go that fast, at that low altitude, because he's got control problems in it [MIG]. And this is part of knowing what your enemy's airplane can do.

Well, Bryan said that he was losing sight, and I said that that's great, because so were they. I asked Bryan, I said, "Bryan, do you see where the sun is." and he said yes, so I said, "I'm going right for the sun."

And when I go for the sun, if they shoot an Atoll at me, I'd go, idle, bores, break down into them, and the missiles would go for the sun. The heat source of the sun. This is another tactic you can use.

And as soon as I came up, heading for the sun, the MIGs came up after me, Bryan rolled in on them, and they broke off. A few minutes later, two Air Force birds killed two MIG-17s heading back up to Yen Bai. We don't know if is was the same two or not. Again, we went back aboard the ship. At this time, it made Willy and I the leading MIG killers in Southeast Asia.
Cunningham: At that time, we had a word from Saigon ---

Bowling: Did you get any that day? You didn't get any that day, did you?

Cunningham: Yes, that was my second kill [total - one for that day, 8 May 1972]. The MIG that was on my wingman's tail, I fired and shot a SIDEWINDER at him and killed him.

Bowling: Oh, okay.

Cunningham: And then right after he blew up is when I started to turn for the other MIGS. Yeah. No, I had to get the MIG off his tail, he was going to die.

Bowling: Shot him off. Shot one at him, that caused him to break, the first time.

Cunningham: Then I fired the second missile, which hit him and blew him up. And then I tried to disengage from the two that were chasing me.

Bowling: I believe that Lieutenant Driscoll said something about that this might have been a trap. He indicated that on that day you first spotted two 19s coming and they went by, and when you turned on them, then up came these other four. Did you see two 19s on this day?

Cunningham: No, I didn't.

Bowling: That was a different incident. You remember that incident, though?

Cunningham: Not with us, the commanding officer, Ron McKeown here at the school had that particular incident.

Bowling: My mistake, that's when I was talking to Lieutenant Commander Ensch. That was that. That was their incident, Thank you for correcting the record. Please go ahead.
Cunningham: Again, we went back to the ship and found out that the North Vietnamese had been trying to set traps for Willy and myself. This made us the leading MIG killers, and like any country has a Red Baron—granted two kills aren’t very much—but they had tried to set traps, they monitored our radio transmissions, they knew what my call sign was—it’s the one that’s across my flight suit right now, Duke—and whenever Duke flight would check in, they'd vector MIGs, and try and knock us down with SAMs.

They could use that politically, against us in Saigon. Just as we came back as Aces and the Navy used us, exploited us for public relations, they could also do the same thing. Just like they did the dikes, the mining of the harbors and the rest of it. Well, I figured myself, well, I’m out there, my job is to kill MIGs. And if I use my call sign and they send more MIGs about me—guys just die trying to get a chance to see one of them—So I figured if I use my call sign, maybe I'll get a chance to see them.

So I told them no, and I kept my same call sign—Duke.

We went along, and two days later, the schedule came out, and they were having a large strike, the deepest into the north that the Navy had ever gone. Up around Hanoi. At least in this time period of 1972. And it was a strike on Hai Drong Railroad Yard, a railroad yard that led into one of these passes directly from Hanoi, where the supplies were going down. Well, my name wasn’t on the schedule at first and I was upset because I thought there would be a good chance for MIGs to be around.
Cunningham: And understand, people are afraid of going on strikes and they really don't like to get shot at. But, we're highly trained pilots and when there's a chance that a MIG's flying, a fighter pilot will jump at the chance to go on that mission, even though he knows he's going to get shot at probably.

I was disappointed because I wasn't going on that mission, and all of a sudden they said, "Well, we need two F-4s to carry rock-eye bombs and as flak suppressors." What a flak suppressor does—a Phantom is faster than the A-7 or the A-6s—if a gun is shooting at the A-6s, we roll in, at a lot faster speeds, and knock out the gun. And then, when we pitch off target, we've got SPARROW and SIDEWINDER and we can also become a fighter, after that. But our primary mission is to stop any guns which are shooting at the attack airplanes while they're hitting the target.

Well, we launched out toward Hai Phong and I learned later that we expected to lose three or four airplanes, that was expendable, but it's lucky that it didn't turn out quite that much. But, the A-6s flew by one railroad yard that happened to be the target, and they started rolling in. Well, they made a mistake. I looked down, and the A-6s rolled in from north to south, the A-7s rolled in from north to south, some more A-7s rolled in from north to south; and they looked like a column of ants going down in a stream. And you don't do that, even in Laos, where there aren't guns—And here they were shooting
Cunningham: eighty-five and a hundred millimeter guns at us, SAMs were whizzing through the air—and what it does for a gunner, it gives him a direct plot. And somebody in that line is going to get bagged. Well, sure enough, Commander Blackburn flew around, who is in our sister squadron VF-92, and he had Steve Rudloff in his back seat. His wingman was pretty tight on his wing, and just as they got to the point where the other planes had started to roll in they were hit by an eighty-five millimeter gun. Commander Blackburn's plane exploded like a pumpkin hit by a magnum shell. I didn't think that anybody could live out of it. It was just a fireball, and all of a sudden two 'chutes appeared. Commander Blackburn never came back when the POWs did, Steve Rudloff did come back. He was held as a POW until his release in 1973. His wingman went out, single-engine, with a damaged F-4, and two MIG-21s rolled in on him and then disengaged for some reason. And he was going out single-engine on fire—which he was pretty worried about that. He had a pretty good chance of going down himself.

We rolled in, and hit our target. As we pitched off, Bryan Grant, again with me, who had been along with me on two other MIG kills [and] hadn't got a chance to shoot a MIG yet. Well, Bryan rolled in on, right behind me, and as we pitched off target, he called out,"Duke, you got two MIG-17s at seven o'clock".

Well, I had made a mistake. I was looking at the target that I'd just bombed, in a starboard turn. I shouldn't have been doing that. I wasn't thinking about MIGs, I was looking at a target, and it was wrong, it is a mistake. I reversed back port,
Cunningham: saw two MIG-17s flashing in, with their guns already going, closing in, inside of gun range. I don't know why they didn't hit me. I could see tracers flying by the canopy, you can see the twenty-three millimeter winking out of the wings and a big thirty-seven millimeter that looks like a blowtorch coming out of there every time it shoots. It's a slow-fire canon, and he was sitting right where you have to be to kill somebody.

My first thought was to break into it. Well, I didn't break into him. I thought, I did this two days ago, and a MIG-17 rendezvoused on me. But I looked again, and he really had a lot of closure. He was just hauling. So I broke down into him, he overshot my flight path. As I reverse, his wingman split up over the top of us. As I reversed, his wingman split up over the top of us. As he shot past me I reversed my course, put my nose on his tailpipe, he was about a thousand feet ahead of me, opening by about fifty knots. I squeezed the trigger, the 'WINDER went off, hit him, blew him up, and just as I pitched back up, the second MIG rolled in on me.

My wingman says, "Duke, you got one coming in at you again."
I said; "Fine." I used a disengagement maneuver, got away from that MIG-17, looked back at Bryan, and said, "Bryan, I'll drag this one for you." And that morning, I said, "Bryan, if we see a MIG, I'll drag one for you."

Bowling: What do you mean by "dragging one"?

Cunningham: Well, with a MIG behind you, you've got more acceleration than he does. You can hold him angles off where he can't shoot you
Cunningham: with his missile, and you can hold him pretty stable in one position, if he stays there, while your wingman comes around and shoots him. Well—I looked for Bryan and Bryan says, "Duke, I can't." I looked back and he had two 17s on him and a MIG-21's passing overhead. We accelerated out. Bryan disengaged from the two MIGs that were on him and he came up beside me. I hadn't seen him at the time, and I looked over at my nine o'clock and there was Bryan, sitting on the wing, and he says, 'Hi, Duke (chuckle). Let's go.'

We're back there and there's more MIGs than we'd ever dreamed of, back there. So we pitched up in the vertical, went above twenty-thousand feet and looked down below us, and there were eight MIG-17s in a defensive wheel. Looked just like a wagon wheel, flying in a circle. And what they do is they fly in a circle, and if somebody gets behind them, the guy behind him shoots the guy [enemy] in front of him.

Well, being the flight leader, I said, "Bryan, cover me, I'm in." [I] Went down with the intention of catching one on the belly side, and getting off a missile; when, all of a sudden an F-4 passed in front, almost hit it, missed it by—didn't even see it coming, flew right in front of me. His jet wash almost tore our airplane apart. Went—passed through, and I said to Willy, "Willy, who's in one-one-two." Which is aircraft number one-one-two. We passed that close to him, and he said, "the X.O." [Executive Officer of parent squadron]
And I said, "Great God." Because he had a MIG-17— he was in a port turn with a MIG-17 at about three thousand feet behind him, shooting, he had a MIG-21 at about thirty-five hundred feet tracking the inside, and what he didn't see was another MIG-17 about three hundred feet, flying wing on him to his belly side that he couldn't see.

We rolled in and tried to get a tone on the MIG. Well, he [X.O.] was in afterburner, the MIG was so close to him, that when I put my gunsight on the MIG, I didn't get any tone differential, which means that if I'd shoot a SIDEWINDER, it would probably hit the Phantom instead of the MIG, being a bigger heatsource. So the Phantom [X.O.] accelerated out. I tried to get him to reverse starboard, and he thought I was talking about the other MIG. One problem he had, with that many airplanes you don't know really who's in the other airplane—except in this case I did.

Out of the defensive wheel, by him turning port, or left, out of this wheel, we had four 17s behind tracking us. And all of a sudden I noticed tracers coming over my canopy again. And here I'm trying to knock down the MIG ahead of us. And here's a game again. I'm sitting looking ahead at the MIG ahead of me, and I've trained the R.I.O. in my back seat. I know that he knows when a MIG is in a lethal range. Just because a MIG has his nose on you doesn't mean he's got an advantage. Or, he's got an advantage, but it doesn't mean he can kill you. He has to put his nose, say like for guns,
Cunningham: he's got to pull lead on you, if you've got G. And unless he's got that lead he can't kill you. So I told Willy, "Willy, tell me when he's got lead."

So I accelerated after the MIG ahead of me. The X. O. was in a port turn, which was a mistake — allowed those MIGs to stay in position for me. Just started to squeeze off a missile, when I looked up, and at two o'clock I saw flashes above me. And I thought, God, there can't be any more MIGs in the air. They've brought a hundred of the damn little things.

And what happened, I thought, there's two more 17s — I said, "Willy, there's two 17s making a run on us." And they pulled up above us, and they weren't 17s, they were MIG-19s. They pulled up above us, rolled over the top to the outside of our circle. So I unloaded to try and get a little bit farther away from the MIGs chasing us. But yet, I still had to keep the MIG ahead of us in sight on the X. O.'s tail, because he was shooting, now.

Okay. They came back around, buried their nose into us, made about a hundred degree deflection shot again, and this time, I broke up into them and I was doing about six hundred 8X knots now. Broke up into them. Rolled over the top, and back onto the 17 behind the X. O. I said, "X. O., reverse your airplane, or you're going to die." He reversed starboard, the MIG reversed, I got tone, no tone, a tone on the MIG-17, squeezed and the missile hit the MIG-17.
Cunningham: Oh, before this, just before the MIG-19s made their second run, I looked up and there were four MIG-21s about three thousand feet above us.

Bowling: Now you've got -17s, -19s, and 21s.

Cunningham: --19s and 21s--there's twenty-two MIGs in our airspace. They weren't rolling--I just guess they didn't want to get down in all those bee-bees that were whizzing by--it's the only reason I figure. Well, when this guy blew up, Jim Fox was in the X.O.'s back seat and they didn't know the MIG was there yet. He reversed starboard, took a look, and here he was--MIG-17 flying wing on him, right beside him out here, about three hundred feet away from him. Just as he reversed, he saw the little gnomer, as we call them, little North Vietnamese looking out at him, and then, the next thing he saw was a missile--traveled the entire length of the airplane and just blew him up. And the next thing was the North Vietnamese ejected, right beside him. He said that picture will flash in his mind for the rest of his life.

At that time, the MIG-21s rolled in on us, I broke up into the MIG-21s, they overshot my flight path--reversed port to keep an eye on them. And then, just said, "Willy, we're getting the hell out of here." The only other F-4 I saw was the X.O.'s at that time. Bryan was taking care of his own MIGs at that time. Steve Shoemaker, who was in VF-96, our squadron, got a MIG that day. Matt Connoly and Tom Blonsky, his backseater, they got two MIGs the same day. So our squadron, we got six MIGs that day.

Bowling: And you got one.

Cunningham: I got three, this day. That was the second kill, right there
I just took off the X.O.'s tail. The first one is the MIG overshot, the second one is off the X.O.'s tail, and now I'm trying to get out and just get feet wet, which means out over the Gulf of Tonkin—where nobody can shoot at us, there's no MIGs, it's like King's X, you're safe.

So, we're on our way out, and I see a little pin-head out there, of an airplane, some relative motion. I said, "Willy, we've got another plane on the nose." I don't see anybody else right now. And, all of a sudden, I look up and it's a MIG-17. Well, you fight like you train, and back against the fighter weapons school, I always tried to meet the A-4s close as I could to take out all lateral separation, so he couldn't gain any turn advantage on me. Well, an A-4 doesn't shoot back out here, in Whiskey 291, in training. I tried to meet this guy head-on and all of a sudden he shot with travers. And I thought, "Jesus, this guy's got guns in his nose."

So, I pulled up in front of him, which put me at a tactical disadvantage, straight up in the vertical. We were at about, ten thousand feet, and I had my nose going up through fifteen thousand feet, looking, pulling back, pulling about six Gs over the top, and what I expected to see was him going straight through and running. Well, normally, even if somebody pulls up, you look back and the guy's about a mile to a mile and a half away from you going up in the vertical with you. Well, as I looked back, we were canopy to canopy, maybe four to five hundred feet apart. By pulling up early, he went up right with me, and I looked back and I saw a set of old gnomer eyes, little knomer goggles, little gnomer scarf, little gnomer mike that he had on here [throat].
Cunningham: And he's just sitting there looking at me, going up in the vertical.

Well, we climbed straight up, like this, and being in the Phantom, I out-zoomed him. As I went over the top, I started pulling toward him and he shot some bee-bees, twenty-three and thirty-seven millimeter, just a squirt at them, to force me to turn. And, when I turned he rolled in at my six o'clock. Like this. Well, I thought—the first though, I thought he's lucky, because nobody had given me much trouble until then, it was pretty easy. Well, what I didn't realize, was this was Colonel Toon, the leading MIG-killer that they had. He had thirteen kills to his credit, and he had been vectored after me, after Willy and myself.

Well, I didn't know it at the time, and I thought, well, I'll get this guy, so I pulled in to him, and as his nose dropped, I rolled in—he pulled into me going nose low, which means he accelerates, I pitched my nose up, over the top, rolled in behind his six o'clock. Okay, when he had his nose down, now, I could look, I could just see him looking at me, out the back of his airplane, looking out the side panel, watching. And, soon as I dropped my nose down, he pulled straight up in the vertical again, I overshot his flight path, he rolled up over the top going right straight through to my six o'clock and rolled in behind me. Well, it was a series of those, it's what we call a rolling scissors in tactics. And a MIG-17, once you get slow, has got a big turn advantage on you. And, as we got slow, he started eating me up.

Well, I had been through the school, the fighter weapons school, and learned how to disengage. And this is where training is important. I had been in that situation in training before.
Cunningham: And, I knew exactly how to get out of it. At least, I thought I had an idea (chuckle) of how to get out of it. I tried what I'd done in training, and it worked. When he got his nose just a little bit too high, he was sitting at my seven o'clock, I pulled sharply down into him, met him head-on, lit the burners accelerated straight away, so I could watch him come around--so he could come around the corner, and by the time he got his nose to me, I was a mile and a half out ahead of him--Out of his range, opening. [I] Got there, pitched back into the vertical, we went into another vertical, canopy to canopy going up, the same type thing. We got into a rolling scissors, he gained advantage on me again. I said, "Jesus Christ, who is this buy?"

None of the other drivers had been that aggressive. Well, disengaged from him in the same way, started to go up and met him a third time, head-on. Okay--each time I'd gone up with this guy in the vertical, I had out-zoomed him or gone higher than he had and he'd--everytime I went out in fron of him he tried to shoot. I figured one time he's going to get lucky. So this time, we're going up, pretty much co-altitude [same altitude] canopy to canopy. And I went to idle, and selected my speed brakes. And I think it caught him by surprise, because he shot way out in fron of me, now. But, a Phantom, sitting there on full afterburner, sitting at a hundred and fifty knots standing on your tail, using thrust--

(End Tape 1, Side 2)
Bowling: Okay, would you please continue.

Cunningham: Okay, we'd just forced the MIG-17 to overshoot us, we were going up in the vertical, we'd slapped the throttle to idle and put out the speed brakes. He flew out in front of us. And, we're standing now on the Phantom with the nose straight up in the air, just standing on pure—we're not really flying, we're just standing on pure thrust out of the engines, about thirty-six thousand pounds of thrust. And, with the MIG-17 out in front of us. We're really not—we're really behind him, but we're really not at an advantage because a MIG-17 at those speeds has got about two and a half to three more Gs available to him. And, when you have that, it means that he can out-turn you about three to one.

Well, I stood on the rudders—if you touch your ailerons now you'll depart the airplane and stall it and probably spin it—so you stand on your rudders just pushed. He was kind of like in
Cunningham: a port turn, looking down at us, [I] stood on the rudder, got the airplane to move to his belly side. His blind side where he couldn't see us.

Well, he rolled, reversed over the top, started with his right wing down, now, looking down at us, and when he did that he lost the lift off of his own wings. His nose fell through. He made his first mistake. His nose fell through, he tried to get it out, he didn't. He started running. We pushed over, pushed negative G, followed him, put the pipper on him, squeezed the trigger and the SIDEWINDER hit his tailpipe. And he blew up.

Although he didn't blow up like the other airplanes—it just knocked a few pieces off his airplane. I started to shoot my last SIDEWINDER, because I didn't think that I'd really damaged him. He was still in a right wing down, just like in a long glide, and he wasn't decelerating, he was still accelerating—a little bit.

And-then, all of a sudden, I noticed a flame coming out from under the tail of his airplane. So I didn't shoot the second one. Well, I watched him and watched him and just kept watching him go down. What we found out later, I can't divulge the source, but we found out later that his controllers had told him to knock it off and that he should be low on fuel, this much time had—he says, "Negative. I'm going to kill this guy." He was talking about Willy and myself. Well, he was running low on fuel, he had to run and that's what—he made another mistake—he'd pushed his airplane beyond it's limits and since the time of Richthofen and Oswald Boca. Oswald Boca, in 1916 wrote his dictas [sic] on how to survive and how to kill in the air. Well, he violated one of those dictas. He pushed his airplane just beyond
Cunningham: its limits and that limit was its fuel state, or fuel limit. It cost him his life. Because, he flew it right—it went in to about a thirty degree, wing down position, and he flew it right in the ground. So, an experienced pilot, had just let—I don't know if it was pride or what—be his demise. And, it's a mistake, I think, all of us can learn from. You don't push beyond what are the limits of your aircraft or the limits of the guy you're fighting against.

Well, we pitched off, and I made a mistake, myself, by following him down to the ground. I read in Korea that a lot of the MIG-15s used to fake that they were hit and then pull off, and then go in the weeds. Well, I wanted to follow him on down, and finish him off if he didn't crash. So, when he crashed, I was only about two thousand feet above the ground which opened myself, then, to small grounds fire, like a coolie down there with a thirty-aught six could reach up and shoot us with a rifle and which they did a lot of our airplanes. Life that, when you fly too low. So, I pitched back up, and I looked, and what I hadn't seen was four MIG-17s coming in on me. And if they'd have got there just a few seconds earlier, when I was sitting there slow and they'd of come whizzing by with their guns, I would have been just a sitting grape for them. So, that's another reason that I'm lucky, just standing here talking to you right now. Just very lucky.

Well, I had a lot of fuel left. I had about nine thousand pounds of fuel left, after all this. This sounds like a long time period, but this whole evolution—the first two kills were within about four minutes, and this engagement here lasted about four to
Cunningham: five minutes. And so, I had a lot of gas left. Looked up, had four 17s back at my seven o'clock and--or two of them back at seven and another one coming in just about at ten o'clock. So I said, "Willy, here comes number six."

Pitched up into them like this, and it was my intention to engage them and knock one of the damn things down, when I hadn't seen the other F-4 that was watching us whole thing, it was Matt Connoly the guy that had just bagged two, and he says, "Duke, dammit, you already got three, look behind you."

And--let me backtrack. I hadn't seen the four behind me yet (chuckle). I was turning up into the one at my ten o'clock, and Matt Connoly said, "Duke, look behind you." And I looked and saw the four 17s rendezvousing on me. Well, Matt shot a SPARROW, and it looked like it was coming right for my damn airplane. And I said, "Matt, Jesus Christ, watch where you're shooting!" And I hadn't seen the MIGs yet. The missile went over my tail, and as I looked back I saw one MIG split up and one that split down, it looked like a fleur-de-lis. You know (chuckle), they just went every direction like a bunch of gnats. And, then I realized what he was doing. And I said, "Okay, it's time to get out of here."

Bowling: How come the missile did not attack you, if it went over your top? It hadn't acquired you--?

Cunningham: It was a SPARROW missile. Which works on a radar control. He had them locked up. Not me. Besides, he just shot it--he didn't actually have—he had a CW transmitter which illuminates them with the radar. [But] He didn't have a lock. He shot the missile bore sight, which means it's just like shooting a rocket.
Cunningham: A beam rider. But, what he did, he turned his nose away, and the missile—he forgot that without a lock the missile will work—he turned his nose away, which let off the radar illumination off the MIGs, and the missile went right on by them. But it served the purpose that he really wanted, and that was to just make the MIGs break off my tail. Well, they had seen too many of their buddies go down in flames from missiles and they didn’t like it. And (chuckle) they split every direction. So, I says, "Willy, we’re getting the hell out of here. I only see one other Phantom in the sky, and I see MIGs all around us."

Bowling: This is now where you’re going by those earlier dicta that you don’t push it.

Cunningham: Yeah. You don’t—well, I don’t know whether I was thinking about dictums or not, I was just trying to get my ass out of there safe. (Laughter) That’s what it amounted to.

So we started heading in—pushed over, unloaded, got rid of the MIG-17s was going out and I heard a SAM call. And it was. "This is Red Count on guard, SAM, SAM, SAM Nam Dinh."

And, Nam Dinh is a North Vietnamese town that had brought down a lot of our airplanes. It’s just like a Victor airway. We got Phantoms and airplanes flying back and forth across this area, and they [NVN] set out a SAM site there, and they knock off [a plane] once in a while. Well, I was in a port turn at the time, and I thought, "Nam Dinh is right at my one o’clock, I better take a look." And I just rolled over and picked up
Cunningham: the damn thing coming up at us. And just before that, we had good SAM indications, a warning system, when they had a SAM launched at us.

And, let me backtrack again, before this. We flew up behind two MIG-17s and a MIG-21 that never even knew that we were there. I filled the wind-screen with the MIG-21, and went right by it. And, I couldn't shoot because I was at minimum range, where our missiles won't arm. They do that so they won't blow up and knock us down as well. My point is that if I'd had a gun, if people would let us have a gun in the airplane, I'd probably have three more MIG kills today. But I couldn't shoot.

Anyway. As we were going out, I looked down, saw the SAM and it's just like an instinct, you see a SAM and you start to break out of the flight path of the missile, and it went off. Well, it went off quite a bit below the airplane. I'd actually had SAMs go off closer than that, and it just kind of shook the airplane, like somebody comes up to your car and gives it a big push. Well, I didn't think anything was the matter at the time and I said, "Okay, Willy,--" And I looked down, checked all my instruments, they were normal, and started to climb out.

All of a sudden the wing went down, gave a hard pitch, and the airplane rolled inverted. And--Holy--you know, your heart goes right down to your stomach. Here you are, over bad guy country, it's like over downtown Los Angeles, it's wall to wall village in the Red River Valley, where we were coming down-right down the Red River. And so I righted the airplane. Looked down, and my hydraulics—I'd lost PC one, my primary hydraulic system
Cunningham: PC-two, which controls half of the hydraulic system was going down, and utility, which controls your ailerons, flaps, and the rest of it, was also going down. Well, when you lose hydraulics in the Phantom, when you lose both PC systems, the nose pitches straight up. The stabilator locks. Well, I'd heard in a bar that this guy, Duke Hernandez, had rolled his airplane using rudders alone. Well, I went up to about twenty-three thousand feet, and all of a sudden the airplane—I looked down, both hydraulics were zero and it didn't go right yet, but it started kicking the nose over. A little bit. And, all of a sudden, the nose just went straight up in the air and my first thought was, "Willy, don't eject." Because, if he would have ejected—I think the scaredest I've ever been in my life. Combat, you don't really have time to think about what's getting to you—you're very busy. You got too many things to think about. But at that time, I thought that I was going to become a POW. It's probably the most scared moment in my life. And, I said, "Willy, put the ejection handle in." Which meant that he's got a handle back there that selects. He can go out by himself, but if he pulls that handle out and he ejects I go with him automatically. If he ejected, I didn't want to go. I was going to try and get the airplane back. I looked back, my right wing-tip from the outer panel had been blown off. The aircraft was on fire from Willy back. And, we're going up through about twenty-seven thousand feet, I stood on the right rudder—the stick was like nothing—it didn't have any control on it, except that I could hold it full back and then hold the nose just slightly up, or just below the horizon.
Cunningham: Well, the nose was almost in the vertical, about seventy degrees, nose up. I stood on the right rudder, which caused the airplane to roll over. The nose started coming down. As the nose came down, it went to idle, and I put my speed brakes out. And I thought, "I'm going to waste too much utility pressure, using speed brakes, that's the only pressure I've got left, and it's fluctuating." So I left them where they were for a second. As the nose started coming down through the horizon, just before it came through the horizon, I stood on the left rudder, got the nose which controls yaw, the yaw axis--It yawed the nose left, yawed the nose up, stood on the left rudder, held the nose up. Soon as the nose came up to the horizon, I put the speed brakes in, went back into full burner, and got it into a rolling climb again. Now, the only control I have is rudder. I rolled it fifteen miles like that out over the water.

We had other Phantoms around us screaming at us to eject, that our airplane was on fire, big pieces of it were coming off. And, I'm not saying that I would have rode the airplane to the ground and died rather than become, no. But, I was going to wait to the last minute without the chance of becoming a POW. It was just like--I've been brought up and my family was very religious. But, I'd gotten away from religion. And, I said to myself, I said, "God, get me out of this one." And the airplane was rolling okay, and I says, "Well, he didn't have anything to do with it." And then, all of a sudden, the airplane started going berserk. And I said, "God, I didn't mean it. Just get me out of this situation." And what was fearful, was that they told us that there was one thing that would keep us if we were taken
Cunningham: prisoner of war, would probably keep us together, and that's having a value in a church, having faith. And, I didn't have that at the time. And, I found out later to be a very important step in my life, from which since I've become a Christian, as well.

But, we got about one mile out over the beach, and utility went, the airplane went into a spin. It was like somebody had taken the airplane in his hands, taken us one mile out over the beach where it was safe--We're talking five seconds difference and I would have been a POW--Taken us out to safety and said, "Here, you got it." The airplane went into a spin. I deployed the 'chute [A/C drag parachute used in some landings] to try--I said, "Willy, I want to get one more mile off." Because as we were rotating in this spin, I'd see the land, and I'd see the water, I'd see the land--I didn't know if I was over the water yet. So, I said, "Willy, eject, eject, eject." Only, I only got out, "Willy, e---" and Bang! I heard him and he was gone.

Bowling: That's what he said, that's all he heard was "Willy, e---"

Cunningham: Well, before this, Willy said, "Duke, the handle is out, the ejection handle is out, I'll stay with you until you tell me to go. I don't want to be a POW either."

So we got out of the airplane--and coming down--and first thought was you know the wind blows from the ocean side in, the 'chutes were going to go out. Well, it didn't work like that. We landed in the water, some Marine helicopters picked us up.

Bowling: About how far off the beach were you at this time?

Cunningham: Right in the mouth of the Red River. As we were coming down they sent out some PT boats out after us, and a freighter was heading toward us--Vietnamese, North Vietnamese--and some of our
Cunningham: own guy's in the Phantoms, stayed with us and some A-7s stayed with us at a risk of their own—they were still shooting SAMs at them, still shooting AAA—and they were low fuel state and they stayed right with us. To make sure that the PT boats—the A-7s rolled in and took care of the PT boats for us, they impeded their progress. And the carrier launched off some airplanes as RES CAP. And, that's one great thing. You know, once you're hit that they'll stop a whole ware for you, to try to get you out. This includes Air Force, Marine Corps, Navy, they'll call off strikes, important strikes, and they'll protect you. You know they'll do everything they can to get you out. And those guys risked their own lives to stay with us.

The choppers picked us up out of there and there's a funny little anecdote. On our trip back here in the States, our PAO trip that Willy and I had, there was a guy in Boston that asked Willy, he said, "Willy, there you were, hanging in a 'chute"—and the Boston Press is a little leftist oriented—and the guy was a little antagonistic—and he used these words, he said, "There you were, hanging in your chute, you'd just butchered three North Vietnamese pilots and the people had retaliated against you, shot you down in your F-4, they sent PT boats out after you, you thought you were going to be a prisoner of war, you were coming down fast, possibly over enemy territory. What thoughts were going through your mind?" And, Willy, being quick-witted came back and said, "Well, perhaps, I thought perhaps I'd made an incorrect decision leaving the Army Reserves back in Boston." (laughter) So it kind of put the guy down.

We were taken to a hospital ship, and I was hurt in ejection. We got on a hospital ship and first thing was we wanted our MIGs
Cunningham: confirmed and we wanted to get back to our own ship because they had more strikes going out the next day and we didn't want to miss out on them. And, so they took us back aboard the ship and my back was injured. And they had me in a stretcher. And I said, "I'm not going back aboard my own ship in a stretcher." So I walked. It was quite a bit of pain. And, they stopped all operations, they'd heard that we became the first aces in Southeast Asia, at that time.

And here comes little Willy White, again that little colored boy up there. And these guys had tears in their eyes, the troopers. And this little colored boy walked up to me and said, "Mr. Cunningham, we heard you made Ace today. That's really great. We heard you shot down three MIGs and that you're a hero and all that, but the other men asked me to say that that's not really important, we're just glad to have you back alive."

And to Willy and I, that's probably the most important thing that happened all day, not becoming Aces, but just getting back alive. Because I'd of had very little credibility in the Hanoi Hilton, especially with the special treatment that we would have received.

I came back and talked to some of the POWs and they had seen wanted posters on Willy and myself. That if we were ever shot down we'd be shipped directly to Hanoi for special treatment. They'd be used politically.

Bowling: What do you mean by "special treatment?"

Cunningham: Well, not to have been hurt. That part of it would have been probably good for us. But we did lose a lot--villagers would kill a lot of our pilots when they went down, instead of taking them
Cunningham: into Hanoi or so on like that, that we were not to be harmed, that we were to be shipped to Hanoi directly, without any time, so that they could exploit us politically.

This whole evolution—I know President Nixon has been criticized, like when he mined the harbors. He's gone under criticism for the dikes and the rest of it—protective reaction strikes. But I still stand behind the gent in this fact,—I don't agree with some of his other policies—but he kept a lot of us from becoming POWs. We used to fly over Russian and Chinese ships coming into Hai Phong harbor, just loaded with SAMs, tanks on their decks, MIG crates, and we couldn't touch them. Well, when he mined the harbor in May, those ships were held up out there. And when we bombed Hai Phong harbor we had over three hundred SAMs, surface-to-air missiles, fired at the flights. Now, to us, this meant a high-kill probability for them. After the harbor was mined, we struck the same harbors and we maybe got five or six SAMs, shot at us. So you could really see the difference in it. And, the man knew that he was right. And he saved a lot of us. Saved not only our lives, but spending some time in the Hanoi Hilton, eating pumpkin soup.

The protective reaction strikes, they're things that we had to do. It meant survival at the time.

Bowling: Thank you very much, Lieutenant Cunningham, for you story and the time you have taken to record it for history.

(End Tape 2, Side 1)