This is an interview with Lieutenant William Driscoll, United States Navy, Naval Flight Officer and Radar Intercept Officer, R.I.O., in the Vietnam War. He shares the honor with Lieutenant Randall Cunningham, who was his pilot, of being the first all-missile ace with a total of five MIG kills to their credit.

Lieutenant Driscoll was born in Boston and attended Stonehill College where he earned a Bachelor's Degree in Economics. In college he was captain of the baseball team, sports editor of the school newspaper and yearbook, and a member of the Dean's List. He joined the United States Navy in April 1969, was commissioned an Ensign on 15 August 1969, and earned his Wings of Gold on 10 May 1970.

On 1 October 1971 he sailed on his first combat cruise to Vietnam as a member of Fighter Squadron 96 on board U.S.S. Constellation. He was selected to be Lieutenant Cunningham's radar intercept officer (R.I.O.) and as such on 19 January 1972, he shared in one MIG-21 kill and on 8 May 1972 in one MIG-17 kill. On 10 May 1972, Lieutenant Driscoll and Lieutenant Cunningham shot down three MIGs, including North Vietnam's
Bowling: leading ace, Colonel Toon who had thirteen [seven] American kills to his credit. For this action, Lieutenant Driscoll and Lieutenant Cunningham were nominated for the Medal of Honor.

This interview is being conducted at the Naval Air Station, Miramar, San Diego, California on 14 March 1974. The interviewer is Captain R. A. Bowling, United States Navy, Retired, graduate student at San Diego State University.

All right, Lieutenant Driscoll, if you would please, would you start off with a little of your personal background?

Driscoll: Certainly. I'm from back East, the Boston area. I went to college at (a place called) Stonehill College in North Easton Massachusetts where I majored in Economics. I participated in Varsity baseball where I was captain of the baseball team, sports editor of the school newspaper and school yearbook, and member of the Dean's List.

After graduation, I furthered my education by driving a Budwieser beer truck for eight months in the Boston area. I became interested in Naval Aviation when I first found [learned] that the Navy did things besides drive ships around [in] the water. And I was told that only the elite and most highly competent of people are able to consistently land on a carrier deck, particularly at night and come back and do it the next night. The expertise involved there was of the highest calibre. I was told that it was nearly impossible to get into that

* official confirmation of 7 as opposed to reputed 13.
Driscoll: program, at which time I immediately became interested.

And, after taking my qualifying tests---

Bowling: Excuse me, did you say you found out that it was impossible to get in?

Driscoll: Nearly impossible. In other words, as they put it, only the cream of the crop of those eligible were selected.

Bowling: This sharpened your desire to get in, rather than turning you off, is what you say? (Nods, Yes).

Driscoll: So, what I did was buy a book on aerodynamics and on flying airplanes just to familiarize myself with some of the basic terminology. [I] Took the qualifying tests, passed by one grade point, and then went to the (personal) two-day physical, the interviews, et cetera, submitted the application and found out five months later that I was accepted for the flight program.

At that time, of course, the Navy is very strict with their requirements for aviators, and they required perfect twenty-twenty vision—which mine was. However, my depth perception was not exactly within limits. Therefore, I was told that I could enter Naval Flight Officer Program but not the pilot program.

Bowling: You were what they called "N. F. O." was that it?

Driscoll: N. F. O. is the correct terminology, Naval Flight Officer.

Therefore, I went to NAS Pensacola, Florida to start flight training, 9 April 1969. I completed what they call Aviation Officer Candidate School, an eighteen week school
with emphasis on physical education, [and] survival swimming, where you had to swim a mile in flight gear and stay afloat for fifteen minutes in your flight gear (with nothing), just treading water. We had to swim side-stroke, back-stroke, breast-stroke—fifty yards of each simultaneously. Then they put you in an airplane cockpit, strapped you in and you went down [this chute into the water]. They called it a Dilbert Dunder. You went upside down and you had to unstrap yourself ["calmly" and get out of the cockpit]. I say "calmly" in quotes.

At any rate, I was commissioned an Ensign in the United States Naval Reserve 15 August 1969. (At which time) I now commended (with) basic flight training, in Training Squadron 10 at [Naval Air Station] Pensacola for the next fourteen weeks with heavy emphasis on navigation, radar, electronics, weather, computer analysis, things of this nature—general background information.

I was always interested in being accepted for jet aircraft and most particularly in (for) the F-4 Phantom Fighter. [I] Always wanted to go to fighters. However, who went where was determined only by grades and class standing and, as you can imagine, only the top students would be chosen for the fighter or the jet aircraft. As for instance, in my class of thirty-six, there were five men chosen for jets. Of the five men, three were chosen for fighters. And of the three chosen there was only one chosen for fighters on the West Coast, which was myself; two were chosen for fighters, or more specifically, for F-4 Phantoms on the East Coast.
After completing Training Squadron 10 at Pensacola, I went to RIO school, at NAS, Glencoe, Georgia, where for the next four months I learned the basics of what it would require of me to be a competent fleet RIO, flying in the back seat of an F-4 Phantom. At the completion of this program, I was awarded my Wings of Gold and given orders to a training squadron out in California, VF 121, where I would learn how to fly and fight the F-4 Phantom.

I checked aboard NAS, Miramar in June of 1970, completing the prescribed F-4 training in August of 1971. The long backlog at that time was due to the fact that action in southeast Asia was quiet and there were numerous pools of students at that time, which explains my delay.


I received orders to VF 96 which was deploying aboard U.S.S. Constellation, and leaving NAS, North Island, San Diego 1 October 1971 on a combat cruise to western Pacific. At that time, there was numerous people in the area protesting the departure of Constellation into the war zone. As a matter of fact, Jane Fonda and Joan Baez were in town and they had been conducting rallies with their emphasis on "Keep the 'Connie' Home." And, of course, they were pointing out the nature of the war machine,
the cost of the machine in terms of stopping the war. This, for me personally, had no effect. I believed in exactly what I was doing and it had no personal effect on any of my beliefs or exactly what I was doing. I was fully trained and ready to go.

What impact did this movement, this anti-war movement have say, overall on first, just the pilots?

It had no effect, on any of the members of my peer-group. We didn't, to use a cliché, bat an eyelash. The only effect that it had was that security was more intensive and to preclude violence, so we had more trouble getting on the base to get on the carrier. That was the only effect.

What impact did it have, on the non-flying elements in the squadron?

It's difficult for me to comment on their feelings. The maintenance people in my squadron, whom I came into contact with on a daily basis, displayed to me no noticeable effect of these events transpiring in the area.

What about the enlisted men?

Yes, that's who I'm referring to. From what I was able to observe, [I saw] no known affect. (and nonetheless) Whenever there would be one person in the group that would display a reaction to a situation like that, he would be dramatized as indicative of the group's reaction, which in my experience, was not the case.

What do you mean, if one took an anti-war---
Driscoll: Yes, a dissenting, or anti-war position. (it would be)
In some cases, the media would display (the tendency to display)
this as indicative of the group's feeling when, in point of
fact, it was a very small minority feeling.

Bowling: Now, when you say very small minority, roughly, how many
men were in the squadron?

Driscoll: In my squadron, there were thirty-five officers and
approximately eighty to a hundred enlisted types.

Bowling: And to your knowledge, how many of them actually, actively
participated in an anti-war---

Driscoll: I have no knowledge of anyone participating. Nor have I
even heard of anyone even talking about participating.

Bowling: Well, what about this small minority?

Driscoll: I'm talking about, in terms of the five thousand men on
board the ship. And when I say small minority, I heard a story
once of one or two men [about several who]* that were holed up in
a church that weren't going to go on board the Constellation.
That's one or two men out of five thousand, therefore a small
minority.

Bowling: Now, they flew those people back to the 'Connie' as you
probably remember. What was the reception, or what was the
impact when these men, essentially AWOLS, they'd missed move-
ment intentionally. What was the impact on the crew?

Driscoll: I don't know, I was sleeping when they got back. No, more
seriously, I don't feel that there was any significant impact,
or significant reaction. I know, my fellow aviators said "Gee,
it's too bad those guys aren't in jail now." And we said it
rather snidely, but there was no personal, deep feelings one way

* correction by narrator during editing
Driscoll: or the other. We were going to sea. We were getting ready for a combat cruise, and that's what our feelings and our thinking was directed towards. In my personal experience, this had no effect.

Bowling: It's what you call "Professionalism."

Driscoll: Well, probably professionalism/unemotional reaction to, in our opinion, a rather trite and isolated incidence.

Bowling: Now, can we go on to the non-political, if you will. But, if at any time, these pressures, this situation changed, please, throw it in. Okay, go ahead.

Driscoll: Certainly.

Therefore we disembarked for [departed from] NAS North Island on our combat cruise. We reached the Phillipine Islands, at which time we were loaded up with our combat ordnance leads and prepared for detachment to the Gulf of Tonkin to commence with special operations on 'Yankee Station.'

For the first several months of the war, of [of] our participation in the war in southeast Asia--[we] were involved with us working in the Laotian area, working against interdiction points in the Ho Chi Minh Trail. At that time, it was the dry season, and the enemy was attempting to relocate supplies, open up roads, areas of communication, areas of transportation and bringing his supplies southward from North Vietnam.

Bowling: Time frame?

Driscoll: Time frame, November-December 1971. The dry season. And this work occurred exclusively in Laos. The work was with the Air Force (in terms of [with] their small propeller-driven planes which would
Driscoll: be our forward air controllers. We would check in with them, we would talk on two-way frequency. The Air Force forward air controller, or FAC, as we called them, would roll in, drop a smoke bomb and mark the area where they wanted us to put our bombs. And then we, in turn, would roll in with our bombs into that area.

And you may ask what type of area was it? I was never in anything, or any area other than what appeared to me to be totally unpopulated, large and tangled jungle. Nothing more than, military targets and—–you asked me to be more specific, and I never saw anything more specific than an area of smoke below where I was directed to put the bombs. That's as specific as I think I can be.

Bowling: What type of aircraft were you flying at this time?
Driscoll: I was flying the F-4J Phantom.
Bowling: And it was being used primarily in this case as a bomber.
Driscoll: As a bomber, yes as a bomber in this case.
Bowling: But its official designation is "fighter-bomber".
Driscoll: Fighter.
Bowling: Not fighter-bomber?
Driscoll: Well, it received the word "bomber" because it was used more as a bomber in some cases than it was as a fighter. It is the Navy's —–well the F-14 is replacing that, but it was the Navy's primary fighter aircraft.
Bowling: How much of a load could you carry?
Driscoll: We carried six five-hundred pound bombs and six air-to-air missiles.
Bowling: Can you say what kind they were?
Driscoll: Yes, we carried four of the heat-seeker missiles [SIDEWINDER] and two of the radar-guided missiles [SPARROW].

Now, in the course of our operation, the fire from the ground that the enemy would put up on his resistance against us was almost negligible. And I personally, did not see any significant fire from the ground or resistance from the enemy until I had my opportunity to go into North Vietnam for the first time.

On this occasion I saw my first encounter with Soviet built surface-to-air missiles [SAM's]. And, as a matter of fact, one of the airplanes in my section was shot down by one.

Bowling: On your first incursion into the North you lost one of your aircraft?

Driscoll: Yes. This operation occurred late December 1971. For several days we flew---

Bowling: Excuse me. Lieutenant. Would you mind going back to that first, your first personal encountered with a missile, anti-aircraft type of SAM?

Driscoll: Well, the weather was bad, and by that I mean that below us there was a heavy cloud cover. The missile was white and the smoke trail of the missile was white and the whole key of flying against one and beating it is first of all being able to see it. Now, we have equipment in the airplane to warn us that the enemy is about to shoot a missile and that he has just fired a missile; radar equipment to ward us of these things. However, you cannot beat or defeat something that you cannot see. You must, and in all cases, the pilots
Driscoll: must visually acquire these missiles when they are airborne
guiding on our airplanes if they are to beat them. If they
do not visually acquire them, they cannot beat them. And if
this missile goes off, it does not have to hit the airplane,
if it goes off within a certain proximity from where I am,
from where I am, it will knock my airplane down.

This was the case in the instance of the man I referred
to recently, who had been shot down by the missile.

Now, in my particular case, the anti-aircraft fire was
so heavy that we had to drop our bombs prior to reaching the
target to get that excess weight off the airplane so that we
could just turn and literally fly through the sky for our
lives. [Through] The anti-aircraft fire: the missiles and
anti-aircraft guns as I have---

Bowling: How many missile did you see?
Driscoll: Did I personally see through the whole event? I saw
personally, in excess of fifty.

Bowling: Fifty?
Driscoll: Yes, fifty. Not on this particular day in the course of
my experience. [He observed a total of 50 during his entire tour.]

Bowling: On this particular day?
Driscoll: On this particular day I saw, perhaps, six to eight.

Bowling: And what was on the debrief, if you can, what was the
evaluated total number that was fired at that flight that day?

Driscoll: Well, at my flight, I believe they estimated eight to ten
were fired. However, as special operations work, or did work,
on 'Yankee Station', one flight would go in followed by another
flight five minutes later, in other words, the next flight
Driscoll: would see eight to ten. By the end of the day, some of those guys wouldn't see too many [SAM's] because there weren't many left in the [enemy's] stockpile.

Bowling: Very good.

Driscoll: Now, after this occurred, we did not go back to North Vietnam during the first two weeks of January. Again, I was out there not, again, deciding what tactically should be done, but doing what was decided to be tactically done in the person of our Admirals and Captains. These people in my opinion, had a much better grasp of the intelligence situation and the impact of what we would do from political/intelligence standpoint; and, the most important thing, from a tactical standpoint.

And I certainly was most content, number one, to fly my missions, and complete them to the best of my ability; and, of course, number two, [I] realized that they had much more information at their disposal than I did. Therefore, realizing that, I never once questioned or even had the remotest doubt as to where I was going and why I was doing what I was doing.

Bowling: Did any doubt ever creep in? id you detect it in, say, the squadron as a whole?

Driscoll: Well, we at times, felt that perhaps we were flying into an area where we did not belong. And by that [I mean] the weather was below our minimum. You should not fly into areas where it was reasonably bad weather or at night when the weather was bad, these hostile, SAM environment areas. That's our opinion, because we cannot be as successful, number one, hitting out targets; number two, fighting against the SAM missiles; and, as you pointed out, number three, seeing the missile ahead of time.
Driscoll: I must see the missile a minimum of five to six seconds before it gets to me, in order to beat it. If not, if I see it three seconds or two seconds [prior to impact] it's probably too late.

Bowling: Can you say how you beat it after you see it?

Driscoll: Yes. I have to turn hard into the missile. I call it a hard, high-G turn into the missile - "G" is relative gravitational force - hard into the missile to cause the overshoot to make the missile overshoot.

Bowling: Can these things re-attack? Or is it a one-shot deal?

Driscoll: No, it's a one time only, a one time only. My feeling, and I say this after having fought against ten to twelve [that] personally guided on me and having seen fifty, they're easy to beat. However, you must see the missile before you can beat it. They are easy to beat once you see the missile. It gets rather unpleasant when there are four, five, six coming at the same time - in different areas. [from several different directions simultaneously]

Activity, again, was reasonably quiet during the first two weeks of January and then we went back into North Vietnam, an area in the vicinity of Quan Laing Airfield, on 19 January 1972. [We were] To escort a photo airplane who was on a fact-finding intelligence mission. Now, in other words, we knew that the enemy had been building up supplies; we wanted to find out exactly what he had done and where it was located. At this time, we encountered sixteen to eighteen surface-to-air missiles, at varying positions from where we were; and heavy anti-aircraft fire from the ground. Coming out of one of these SAM breaks,
Driscoll: surface-to-air missile breaks, myself and my pilot noticed a flight of two MJG-2ls on our nose, two miles in front of us down about ahundred feet off the ground.

Bowling: What altitude were you at?

Driscoll: We were passing through two thousand feet, just starting to pull the nose up level with the horizon. We continued our descent, leveled at approximately three hundred feet behind the aircrafts, chased them up a valley. [We] got down some times to fifty feet, going almost MACH-1, chasing the enemy aircraft.

Bowling: What air speed would that be, Lieutenant?

Driscoll: Mach-1 would be somewhere in excess of 600 miles per hour.

I, as the RIO was able to lock one of the enemy aircraft up on my radar [fire control solution]. We attempted to fire a radar-guided missile [SPARROW], but there was a missile systems failure and we could not fire the radar-guided missile. We, therefore, fired one of the heat seeker missiles [SIDEWINDER]. However, the enemy aircraft saw the missile coming off my airplane and broke hard, defeating the missile's tracking solution. However, he reversed back in front of me.

We fired a second heat seeking missile. It went up the enemy's tailpipe and caused his airplane to explode into a large ball of fire; he rolled over and crashed into the side of a mountain with the flames rolling down into the edge of a small village.
We pursued the second airplane, however, our fuel situation was almost critical and we had to, at this time, turn away, and head back out into Laos where our tanker was waiting for us. We were, of course, very concerned with having to fight more SAMs on the way out. We did not have the fuel to come back out and have to do and execute high-G turns, fight the SAMs and get back into Laos. Fortunately, the enemy did not shoot at us on the way out. And we were able, with minimum fuel to get to a tanker and get safely back to the carrier.

After this occurred, we were awarded the Silver Star by Admiral E. R. Zumwalt, USN, Chief of Naval Operations, who personally came out to the Constellation to give us this award. This, of course, was the first MiG kill that the Navy had achieved in almost twenty-two months [actually first in 22 months by any U.S. forces]. After that time, we flew in support of South Vietnamese forces who were receiving tremendous pressure from the enemy during the early April invasion of the An Loc area. I'm sure you remember at that time, when the North Vietnamese flagrantly and brutally attempted to invade the country of South Vietnam below the Demilitarized Zone, overran Quang Tri City, threatened to overrun Danang, and again threatened even Saigon, well to the south, by that three hundred and fifty miles south of the demilitarized zone. At this time—-

This is the Easter, 1972 invasion?
Driscoll: Easter '72 invasion, yes.

My carrier was in Japan, on liberty scheduled to return to the United States at the time. We were called back to the Southern Station of "Dixie Station". We were called back out to sea and back into combat and flew in support of the South Vietnamese.

Bowling: What was the overall reaction to that recall? For one, did you know that a big invasion or a push had started?

Driscoll: Yes, we'd heard it on the news and then we sat there with fingers crossed, wondering if, perhaps, we could become re-involved in the conflict.

Not because we were for or against the conflict, but more specifically because we felt we'd done our fair share for the last eight months flying combat.

Bowling: You'd been out there eight months at that time?

Driscoll: Six to eight. Eight months total, six months flying combat.

We felt, at that time, as you can well imagine, that and certainly we were all anxious to return home to our families, friends and the good life in the United States. Nonetheless, we were called back; we flew in support of the South Vietnamese, and it was at a time, I believe, in late April that the decision was made, that because the North Vietnamese were pursuing such a aggressive program, and such a flagrantly obvious attempt to invade the country of South Vietnam, the decision was made that we were going to counter attack the enemy from the air.

My carrier was then called up to the Northern portion of "Yankee Station". We commenced with special operations flying
Driscoll: on a daily basis, what we called Alpha strikes. And an Alpha strike is composed of anywhere from eighteen to twenty-five to thirty aircraft all loaded with a minimum of six five-hundred pound bombs. The bomber aircraft are loaded with anywhere from twelve to eighteen five-hundred pound bombs.

Bowling: What were the bomber aircraft?

Driscoll: That would be like an A-6 or an A-7 aircraft. We also flew, at this time, at night in support of the B-52s, who now, and for the first time since I'd been involved with operations in Southeast Asia, we were all going right into the heartland, into the nerve center of North Vietnam, into the area of Hanoi, Hai Phong, Bai Thong area, and the Vinh areas. Our specific mission, at that time, again, was related to incapacitating the military-related targets only. There was never, in all the bombing missions and support missions that I've ever participated in, there never was any attempt to bomb or fly into or damage anything other than a military-related target, and by that I mean an oil storage dump area, a driver-truck storage area, a surface-to-air missile site, things of this nature - Enemy airfields - Military related targets, only.

As a matter of fact, the Navy was so strict on where we could go and could not go, that we were forced to take a test, memorizing specifically the areas where we could and could not fly from a map of North Vietnam, so that we would be that well-versed on where we could and could not go. It was that strict.
Driscoll: During this time, as you can imagine, the threat from the surface-to-air environment was most intense. Now, there was much publication in the newspapers at that time concerning the bombing of the dikes. This is interesting because the surface-to-air missile sites were located on dikes. And they were shooting at us. And, we, trying to avoid the missiles with excess weight, now, on our airplanes in terms of bombs, would let out bombs go in an attempt to save our own lives. Again, if bombs hit dikes, in almost every case it was accidental— if, in point of fact, it ever did happen. [It might happen] In some cases, and the enemy knew this, and he knew the certainly advantageous propaganda he could derive from this. He, therefore, located deliberately his surface-to-air missile sites and his artillery sites on the dike areas themselves— to shoot at us. This was seldom, if ever, publicized. What was publicized was that American aviation was bombing the dikes.

In conjunction with this, the President ordered the mining of Hai Phong Harbor. Which certainly, in my opinion, after seeing on a daily basis ships from China and the Soviet Union sailing into Hai Phong Harbor loaded with surface-to-air missiles, loaded with MIG aircraft, loaded with trucks. Now with the mining—when it occurred, these trucks [were] stopped dead in the water, out anywhere from thirty to forty-five miles from the mouth of Hai Phong Harbor. What this meant to me as an aviator was that in time there would be fewer surface-to-air missiles fired because of the mining operation. There would be fewer MIG aircraft flying, trying to shoot me and my friends down, and hopefully there would be perhaps a quicker ending to
Driscoll: this conflict. Because of the mining of the harbor and the isolating of that country from his totally dependent war-effort from what was exported from the Soviet Union and from China. [They were] Totally dependent on exterior sources for its war-effort.

Bowling: In that, Lieutenant, did you ever fly any of the missions up along the Chinese border? Do you have any feel for how much was coming in from that direction?

Driscoll: Yes, we know that there were underground oil pipelines coming in directly from China. We knew that when the B-52s went into North Vietnam the MiG aircraft that belonged to the enemy airforces were flown into China as a protectionary measure, to protect them.

[End Tape 1, Side 1]
Okay, Willy could you go with your second MIG kill, now, please?

Driscoll: Certainly. The second MIG kill occurred on the date of 8 May 1972. On this particular day, I was flying in an F-4J and my mission was that as MIG CAP aircraft is assigned to protect the main strike or bombing force. In our strike force there are anywhere from eighteen to twenty-five aircraft, each carrying from six to fifteen five-hundred pound bombs apiece. My job is to take up a station ten to twelve miles north of the selected target area and maintain a race-track type pattern for several minutes, while the strike group completes their assigned mission at the target area.

Then, when we are sure that the strike group has completed their mission and is safely left the area on their way