INTERVIEW WITH JOHN C. ENSCH

Dated: 19 March 1974

Interviewer: R.A. Bowling

Transcriber: Sarah Salvante

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(Beginning Tape 1, Side 1)

Bowling: This is an interview with Lieutenant Commander John C. Ensch, United States Navy, Navy Flight Officer, and Radar Intercept Officer (R.I.O.) in the Vietnam War. Lieutenant Commander Ensch was born in 1937, in Springfield, Illinois, and graduated from Illinois State University in 1964. During college, he was a member of a Varsity Wrestling and Cross-country Teams for three years. He entered the Naval Aviation Officer Candidate training at Naval Air Station, Pensacola, Florida in January 1965 and received his wings of gold in January 1966. In July 1966 he was assigned to Fighter Squadron 21 at Miramar Naval Air Station, San Diego, California and from there made two combat deployments to Southeast Asia, where he flew 150 combat missions. After a tour of shore duty, Lieutenant Commander Ensch returned to sea duty in January 1971 as a member of the Chargers of Fighter Squadron 361, and made two more combat deployments to Vietnam for a total of four combat deployments and a total of over 300 combat missions.

On 23 May 1972 he and his pilot were credited with two confirmed MiG kills. On 25 August 1972, Lieutenant Commander Ensch's plane was shot down over North Vietnam by a SAM surface to air missile. He and his pilot bailed out, but the pilot was never heard from again. Lieutenant Commander Ensch spent eight months as a prisoner of war in Hanoi. He returned with the last group of repatriated prisoners
Bowling: on 29 March 1973 and spent the next nine months in the Naval Hospital, San Diego recuperating from wounds sustained during his shoot-down and captivity. In January 1974, Lieutenant Commander Ensch was assigned as Executive Officer of the Naval Fighter Weapons School at Naval Air Station, Miramar. This interview is being conducted at Naval Air Station, Miramar, San Diego, California, on 19 March 1974. The interview is being conducted by Captain R. A. Bowling, United States Navy, Retired, graduate student at San Diego State University.

Okay, Commander Ensch, will you start from the beginning, please?

Ensch: Yes, my name is Lieutenant Commander John C. Ensch, known to my friends as "Jack". I was born and raised in Springfield, Illinois. Born in 1937. I attended Cathedral Boys High School, which is now known as Griffin High School. Attended college at Illinois State University and I entered the Navy through the Aviation Officers Candidate Program and got my commission in 1965, at Pensacola, Florida. I guess I'll point out that the discrepancy in the dates there is that I spent three years as an enlisted man in the United States Army right after High School, prior to college, so I been both enlisted and commissioned service in my military career, so far.

Bowling: What position did you reach in that three years in the army?

Ensch: I came out as a Sergeant E-5, I was, ironically, a guided missile instructor at Ft. Worth, Texas, teaching the Nike Ejects Propulsion, Hydraulics and War-head systems in the old Nike Ejects Anti-aircraft system. I was commissioned in 1965, after completing pre-flight training in Pensacola. I then went into the Naval Flight Officer
Ensch: Training Program, complete that at Pensacola, Florida, and then Advanced Training for Radar Intercept Officers at N. A. S., Georgia. From there I received orders out to Miramar, California where I went through the Training Squadron for F-4's, and in July of 1966, I joined my first F-4 Fleet Squadron the VF-21, and deployed, that month, aboard the U.S.S. Coral Sea for my first Vietnam combat cruise.

I spent two tours in VF 21, deploying to Vietnam twice during the two-year period that I was in VF 21. From there, I made about 150 combat cruises or combat missions while in VF 21. I then received orders as Admiral's Aide to the Commander of Naval Alert Test Center, Maryland, where I was aide for Rear Admiral Miller. After two years of duty there, I then volunteered to come to the West Coast where I was given a refresh training in the F-4 Aircraft. And, I joined my second fleet F-4 Squadron, VF 161, which we deployed aboard the U.S.S. Midway in 1971 for one combat cruise where we flew most of our missions down south in to the Laos area. In April 1972, the U.S.S. Midway and VF 161 in Air Wing 5 were called to duty early --we had six weeks left to go on our turn-around training cycle when the North Vietnamese invaded the South in the offensive which is well known now. U.S.S. Midway, Air Wing 5 --

Bowing: This might be the Easter 72 Offensive --

Ensch: Easter 72 campaign, right. We deployed on short notice, within a week, the Air Group was aboard ship and we were sailing under the Golden Gate for our, or what ended up to be my last, combat cruise, so far. We arrived in the combat zone at the end of April 1972.
Enschi: and started flying in support of the siege in South Vietnam. After operating down there for several weeks we moved up to the Northern waters and started flying combat missions into North Vietnam in support of Linebacker and the other offensives. Counter-offensives.

Bowling: What was Linebacker, Commander Ensch?

Enschi: Linebacker was the name given to the offensive --counter-offensive-- by the U.S. forces into North Vietnam. I was fortunate at that time to be flying with Lieutenant Commander Ron McKeown. We'd flown together for over a year in VF 161 and had become quite familiar with one another in the aircraft as far as working together as a combat air crew, which was a distinct advantage on May 23, when we were called upon for a mission, which was designed to place fighter aircraft between a known threat where enemy aircraft might attack a strike group going in to the target area. We were to place ourselves between the airfield at and strike going into the harbor town of Hai Phong. We entered North Vietnam up North about the area of and started toward the our station across the Ridges there to protect ourselves from SAM's and antiaircraft. It was a fairly unpopulated area there and a favorite exit and entrance point for that particular part of the country because of the relatively low threat area that time. As we were entering, starting toward our station to set up an , we received a call from the Northern control ship indicating that there were MIG's airborne, and
Enoch: we were given a vector to go intercept those MIG's. We immediately took that vector and received a clearance to fire, clearance to engage with these MIG's from our controlling agency. As we proceeded on the vector, it carried us in and right over the airfield at which time the R.I.O.'s, myself and the other plane's R.I.O. or wingman, we were searching on radar trying to contact, trying to get a radar contact on these as we call them, in an effort to lock up so that we could get our system to fire a forward firing Sparrow missile. Unfortunately, the area over ground, the ground-clutter was such that our radars were unable to pick them up at long range. As we crossed the airfield at my pilot, Lieutenant Commander (McKown) called out that he had a visual sight of two MIGs on the nose at about ten miles, seven to ten miles, at which time I also got indications on my radar some contacts but was not able to lock up due to the rapid closure rate that we were going head-on with these MIGs. We were unable to lock on. It turned out to be two MIG-17s that came down between our two aircraft, between the section, so we cross- turned into them, which is a turn in which aircraft fly in a combat spread of about a mile and a half apart turned toward one another, and hence the name cross-turn. We form a cross in the sky as you pass. We found out, upon completing our maneuver, that we had not engaged two MIGs, but in actuality, engaged six MIGs, to the two of us. So there we were, with seven to two odds. It turned out to be two MIG-17s, four MIG-17s that had been in trail which we had not picked up, either on radar or visually. So there we were with--
You were on the tail of the two and the four were on your tail.

As it turned out, they were following the MIG-19s and as we cross turned into the MIGs, the MIGs, of course, turned into us, never wanting to. The idea being to never let the other airplane get the advantage on you. We ended up in the sky with airplanes just all over the place, six of them being MIGs, two of them being us, in the F-4s. And we immediately looked out and said "Oh, my God, lookit there's MIG-17s all around us!".

And our wingman, who had turned in the nose-low position, whereas we had turned high, immediately had a MIG-17 tracking him and that's Lieutenant Mike Rabb and Lieutenant j.g. Kenn Crandall were the wingmen that day. And they were streaking across the North Vietnam with a MIG-17 tracking them, shooting 37 millimeter across their canopy, trying to shoot them down, as Ron and I were trying to disengage from the MIG-17 who had come in at about eight o'clock position and was also trying to do the same to us.

Ron, being an excellent pilot and experienced combat pilot, I called out to him that there was a MIG at eight o'clock and he was closing so he turned in to the aircraft, turned in to the MIG in an effort to break his tracking solution and in doing so we were at a very high angle with rudder and he actually departed the airplane. By that I mean that it departed from stable flight, tried to -- it just started unstable flight, started to stall. Which caused us to go in a very erratic flight pattern through the air. But Lieutenant Commander Me... "Mugs" as his nickname is known as, he realized what had happened and immediately recovered control of the
airplane, but that departure from normal flight was enough to throw
the MIGs tracking solution off and he overshot us. We then pulled
across the circle, and we saw that the MIG was trying to shoot Mike Rabb and Ken. So Mugs called for to keep pulling
it around the direction he was which came across the circle and
we fired a sidewinder missile, which is a heat-seeker at the MIG, the
first one of which did not guide for some reason or other, perhaps we
were not within the proper envelope of firing, or the MIG had pulled
a maneuver which caused the missile to miss.

Mugs immediately got in a better position, firing another missile,
and this one did the job, blew part of the tail of the aircraft off, and
got Mike and Ken out of the precarious position they were in at that time.
So that was our first kill of the day.

After that, this is kind of a point of interest, I noticed ejection
by that particular MIG pilot, and saw a shoot blossom from him so
I don't know whatever happened to him for sure, but he apparently did
get out of the airplane. But that was our first kill.

About that time, things kind of happened pretty fast in the
air combat maneuvering situation, but it takes a lot longer to tell it
than it actually happens. Again, my job as the R. I. O. in a case like
this is to stay out of the cockpit with my eyes and head and not worry
about the radar in a position like this because you probably wouldn't
have a chance to lock on to anybody, you know, when you're in such close
proximity to everyone. So my job, at that point, was to clear our six
as we call it, and make sure that nobody was coming up behind us to shoot
us down. And, I was doing this and I looked back and saw that at our
four o'clock position that another MIG was closing in on us and tracking and shooting 37 millimeter guns at us. So I called out to Mugs---

Excuse me, Commander, but didn't they have air-to-air missiles?

The particular ones that we engaged did not.

Did any of them?

Yes, some of the MIGs do carry them, but the particular MIGs that we engaged were guns only. The MIG-17, which is an older version of XHlllHaX MIGs we encountered in Vietnam. And the NXX MIG-17s we encountered had no missiles, they had guns only.

I might mention that the two MIG-19s, which is a twin engine MIG, after the initial turn, the initial encounter, they made maybe one or two turns with the fight and then departed the area and left the four MIG-17s to fight us. For what reason, we don't know, perhaps they were fuel-limited or maybe they thought the four MIGs could handle us, I don't know. There's conjecture by us and by the people on the ship after we got back that perhaps we were drawn into a trap. Idea being that we would engage the MIG-17s not seeing the camouflaged MIG-17s flying low on the ground.

Excuse me, you mean you would engage the MIG-19s.

The 19s and not see the 17s, the camouflaged ones following them, but luckily that ploy didn't work with us. As I said, I went back to our lookout dock and I was checking our six, looking back and about four o'clock position I saw this other MIG-17 coming in, start tracking and start shooting at us. I called for Mugs to four o'clock, tracking and shooting and he looked back, said "All right, I got him.".
And he pulled into him, pulled into the MIG in order to break the tracking solution which caused the MIG to have to pull his nose up and put his nose out in front of our predicted flight path, in order for his shells to intercept our aircraft.

When he did this, Mugs immediately recognized, that on that particular model of aircraft, that when a pilot flying that aircraft had his nose in such a position, there was a blind cone, in other words, he could not see past his nose, could not actually see our aircraft. He was just pointing at where he thought we were going to fly with the predicted turn that we had in. Mugs immediately recognized this, released the turn, forced the stick down, pulling negative G which made us, gave us, lateral separation between the two aircraft.

The MIG driver, he just kept pulling not knowing that we were building up separation between us, and I don't know what their particular little gouge is — maybe "one potato, two potato, three potato" but, he counted his potatoes and we weren't flying out where he thought we were supposed to, I guess, and he started rolling his aircraft and rocking his wings to find out where we were.

By this time we'd built up enough separation between us that Mugs was able to roll back in behind him and he realized immediately that he was in trouble. So he went nose-down and started for the deck in an effort to break our tracking solution for the missile. We fired another missile at him and he saw it coming, broke up into it and the missile went past his tail and didn't damage him.
Bowling: Was that a heat-seeker?
Ensch: Another heat-seeker, all we carried four heat-seekers and we expended two of them to get the first MIG off of Mike and Ken and again it took two to get the second one.

The missile's such that if an aircraft sees the missile coming if your certain angles off, that it can turn its IR source by a hard break turn, turn that IR source away from the missile, you can actually make it miss the aircraft. That's why you want to be in the best possible cone; that's dead behind them, dead six behind the aircraft in which the missile speed and various things are such that he can't outmaneuver the missile. But if you're at a certain angle off the tail they can increase the angles a little more that they can actually make the missile miss. And that's what he did.

Bowling: MXM Can you say roughly what the cone of attack is from the stern?
Ensch: No, I can't. That's classified material. But Mugs maneuvered in harder in behind him and the next shot was the one I described before, was the one that you really want. It was right dead six. And Mugs called out "Fox two" again. That was the code name, or that was the cry we called. Fox one is a sparrow, and fox two is a sidewinder. This means that you've fired one.

And he called it off, so I looked up forward again. There was no threat from behind us at this time. And I looked up forward to see the missile fly right up the tail pipe and just a big orange ball of flame. And that pilot, as we passed, I saw a streamer shoot, in other
words, a not fully deployed "chute, which it and the pilot were flying or sort of falling toward the ground. And that one, I don't think made it, I don't think his "chute worked. So that was one out of the two pilots. Two MIGs and one pilot we got, I guess you might say. But anyway, that was our second kill of the day.

Again, I started looking and checking our stern quarters, to see if there was anymore threats, and apparently the MIGs had had enough for the day for they disengaged and started flying West.

Did your wingman do any good that day?

No, unfortunately, Mike and Ken were defensive the whole time. As I said, the initial turn put them in a disadvantage and they were down there groveling for their life against that MIG. And by the time we got our second one, which as I said, it takes a lot longer to tell this then when it really happened. Our engagement lasted about four to five minutes and all of this happened. From the time before we first turned on the first MIG-19s it was about a four to five minute engagement. And after we shot down our second one which, like I said, this was doubly pleasurable for us in the fact that this happened right over Airfield, which is one of their airbases. You can just see their pilots on the ground looking up and seeing F-4s kicking the Hell out of four of their 17s which made us feel pretty good. They were both down within just a few miles of Airbase itself. But after we shot down our second one they'd decided that they'd had enough.

So they disengaged and went out of the fight. Our fuel state was such that we were what we call "bingo" fuel which is enough
Enscha fuel to get you back out of hostile territory and out back over the water into friendly territory to an airborne tanker to re-fuel for your trip back to the ship. We did disengage.

We went back out over the same route that we came in to stay away from the SAMs and triple A. On the inbound leg and the outbound leg we got some triple A and some SAM indications, but—

Bowling: Triple A, Commander?

Enscha: Antiaircraft artillery, Radar controlled. And we have instruments in our airplane that would indicate when we are being painted by radar and tracked by radar guns or surface to air missiles batteries.

We got some indications we were being tracked and being painted but we never got any SAM firings but we did get some antiaircraft artillery. We made one 360-degree turn half-way out just to make sure that the MIG-19s or other MIGs had not followed us out trying to get us while we were low fuel state and exiting, you know, so we made one 360-degree turn about halfway out and then exited around.

Our controlling agency, of course, had relayed the message that we were successful and had two kills and we had an airborne tanker, an A-6 airborne tanker waiting for us overhead the ship, the Northern control ship, and we took on fuel and went back to the ship, the Midway, and after that, of course, we requested the Victory Roll when we came in. The captain was happy to approve.

Bowling: What's the Victory Roll, Commander?

Enscha: Well, it's kind of traditional in aviation, that after you've had a successful kill, is to come back by the home base and before you