

“She was big, beautiful, and built for speed!”

My Brief Affair With The Thud

By Ron Standerfer

When I first learned that my Guard squadron would be getting the F-105, I was skeptical. The F-100 had been part of my life for over 10 years and had patiently endured my journey from a hesitant, sometimes erratic student at Luke to a seasoned, confident combat pilot in Vietnam. The Hun was my first love and she had been good to me. Why should I leave her now? Besides, who wants to fly an aircraft whose nickname is the “Thud?”

On the other hand, the F-105’s arrival at Atlantic City couldn’t have been timelier. A few months before, I lost my job at Pan Am. It was nothing personal. They were going broke and had too many pilots. Jobs were hard to come by in 1970, so when my ops officer offered to send me to the F-105 long course at McConnell, I jumped at the chance. I figured six months of active duty would keep the wolf away from the door long enough for me to figure out what to do next with my life.

My plan didn’t get very far. On the first day of academics, I was pulled out of the classroom and told to report to the training squadron commander. When I arrived, he was sitting at his desk scowling at my flying records. “What kind of crap are you trying to pull?” he said without preamble. “Sir?” I honestly didn’t know what he meant. He leaned back in his chair, tossed my records on his desk, and made a little church steeple with his hands, a sure sign that he was about to get in my face big time.

Let me see if I have this straight,” he began pleasantly. “You have fifteen hundred hours of F-100 time which includes a one-year combat tour in Vietnam, and you were a Misty FAC. Is that correct?” I nodded. “And now,” he continued, his voice rising and taking on a steely edge of sarcasm, “you plan to diddle around McConnell for six months learning to fly the Thud, side by side with your jolly band of classmates who are all baby rabbits fresh out of pilot training. Right?”

“Well I...Um...If you put it that way....”
“Wrong!” he thundered. “There ain’t no way.” I opened my mouth to say something but he brushed me away like an annoying fly. “Give him fifteen sorties and a check ride,” he said to the ops officer who was standing at the door, “and then send him the hell back to Atlantic City.”

“Guard pukes,” I heard him mutter as I walked out the door, “they always need haircuts and are always breaking the rules.”

The next day I reported for an abbreviated academics class, followed by three simulator rides. Meanwhile, my IP took me out to the bird for a detailed walk-around. When I first saw her up close, I was awe struck. All I could manage to say was, “WOW!” She was every man’s dream; big, beautiful and built for speed. “Nobody can

catch the Thud when you candle the burner and head for the deck,” my IP said. “She’ll coast along at treetop level at six hundred knots or more, quiet and solid as a rock. It’s like driving a Cadillac down an interstate in Texas at a hundred miles an hour with the air conditioner full on and the windows rolled up.”

Most of the two seat models at McConnell were Wild Weasel birds whose back seat visibility was too poor for training. So, my first ride in the Thud was solo with the IP flying chase. This was a first for me and the idea appealed to me greatly. When the big day came, I taxied out on the runway with the IP in the chase position, ran the engine up, lit the burner and away we went. Fifteen minutes later, I felt like we had known each other forever. She was a dream to fly. The flight controls were smooth and responsive, and it seemed like all I had to do was think about what I wanted to do and she did it. I was flying a D-model so both airspeed and altitude were displayed on vertical tapes, which took a little getting used to, but other than that, I had no complaints. In fact, by the time I turned initial for a full stop landing, I found myself singing over and over, “Wild thing...You make my heart sing...Wild thing...I think I love you!” This was definitely the start of something big!

My third flight was a formation ride. I figured this would be a piece of cake. After the obligatory trip to the training area to see if the IP could fling me off his wing during formation acrobatics and in-trail over the top maneuvers (he couldn’t), we returned to the base to make some formation GCA approaches.

On the first approach, I was on my instructor’s wing like glue. I was looking good and feeling good! The second approach was much the same—until the IP started his go-around. At that point, something unthinkable happened. I fell out of formation. I don’t mean “fell out” as in moving slightly out of position; I mean fell out as in dropping back three ship lengths in a heartbeat. “What the...?”

A quick check inside the cockpit revealed that the speed brake, flaps and landing gear were all in and up. That’s when I saw that all the engine instruments were unwinding. Flameout! Automatically, I went through the air start procedure. Thank God for the three simulator



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rides I had just received! I didn't even have to think about what I was doing. By then, I was at the far end of the runway at five hundred feet. I could clearly see the perimeter road and the rolling farm field just beyond it. If the engine didn't start in the next few seconds, I was out of there. I only hoped I hadn't waited too long.

Fortunately for me, the engine did start. After a few compressor stalls, the bird munched down to three hundred feet and then started a slow climb. It was pretty heavy so it took a while to get back to pattern altitude; but when it did, I was able to turn it around and fling it on the runway. Whew!

It seemed like half the maintenance squadron was waiting for me when I arrived in the chocks and nobody looked happy. The maintenance officer was the first guy up the ladder. When I told him my story, he didn't say much; but I could tell he wasn't buying any of it. Nor, for that matter, were any of the maintenance troops. In their eyes, I was just another student who had done something dumb—something they would have to work overtime to sort out. It was a deflating moment.

When the debriefings were finally over, I decided to escape to the officers' club and lick my wounds. It was a little too early for happy hour, so I had the bar all to myself. There, in the cool, dark silence with a couple of ice cold vodka martinis in front of me, I went through the whole thing again trying to figure out what I did wrong. One thing was for sure; "Wild Thing" had tried her best to bust my ass over "downtown McConnell" and, failing to accomplish that, managed to make me look like a bumbling idiot in front of my peers. So much for her being the start of something big!

As the happy hour crowd began to arrive, so did the free drinks—all for me. It seemed everyone wanted to hear my story, even those who were not prepared to believe it. After my third or fourth martini (I really don't remember which), someone clapped me hard on my back and boomed, "Hello there Lucky!" I turned around, and there was the maintenance officer with a big grin on his face. "You are one lucky S.O.B., do you know that? Bartender, give my friend a drink on me." I gave him a blank stare. Now what? "We took the bird out on the trim pad, cranked her up and when we pushed the power up, she flamed out. We shut her down and tried again. The same thing happened. We won't know for sure until the tear down, but we think the main fuel control failed internally, which means the only thing between you and the ejection seat was the emergency fuel control. How

about that?" How about that indeed! I was beginning to feel better already!

The next visitor was the squadron commander—the guy that didn't like Guard pilots very much. Showing once again his penchant for cutting to the chase, he shouted from the door, "I love you," and then proceeded to walk across the room and give me a big hug. This got the attention of the crowd at the bar, I can tell you! "I love you," he repeated, "you saved one of my aircraft. I love you and I love the Guard. As a matter of fact, you can stay here as long as you want." Then he left.

Suddenly, the world changed, and slowly, but surely, I began reverting to type; that is to say, reverting to the obnoxious, hotshot Hun driver and Guard puke that arrived two weeks before. It felt good to be back.



"Wild Thing"

It took me three months more to complete my checkout, and I probably could have stayed longer had I pressed it. When I returned to Atlantic City, I sat down with "Wild Thing" and told her that I was willing to overlook the little stunt she pulled on me at McConnell, and that I would work hard to build a lasting relationship. Six months later, I was offered the opportunity to return to active duty and work at the National Guard Bureau. It was an offer I could not refuse—a chance to start my life afresh. I never flew the Thud again.

Now, I am a proud founder and member of the Super Sabre Society and am quick to sing the praises of the Hun. She is, and always will be, my first love. But every once in a while, I think of those crazy days at McConnell and snatches of the song "Wild Thing" drift through my mind. What would my life have been like had I built a lasting relationship with the Thud? I'll never know, because it was not to be. ■

(Ron did manage a couple of Thud Atta Boys from TAC and USAF. Way to go, Ron! Ed.)

