



USAF Pilot Protects / Buzzes Air Force One

by Don Magnusson



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During the Nixon presidential era in the early 1970s, a situation occurred at Homestead Air Force Base south of Miami, Florida involving an Air Force fighter jet, an F-106, and the presidential plane, Air Force One.

In keeping with the security measures in place at the time to provide air cover for Air Force One during arrival or departure at Homestead AFB, the 5 minute alert birds, two F-106 Fighter Interceptors, were scrambled to go on CAP (combat air patrol) along the 24 degrees latitude line between Florida and Cuba, 30 minutes prior to the arrival or departure of Air Force One. This was deemed necessary by the Department of Defense because of the Cuban military threat which was receiving significant support from the USSR.

On this particular day, President Nixon was coming to his "Key Biscayne White House" and I was one of those 5 minute alert pilots. My alert partner, Capt. Les Spencer, and I had been pre-briefed on the arrival time of Air Force One so we leisurely got ready and took off from Homestead and preceded to our CAP station on the 24th parallel at 35,000 ft altitude. Flying straight and level for more than a few minutes can get extremely boring for a fighter pilot, so we took advantage of the wait time and practiced some of our dog fighting maneuvers against each other as well as formation acrobatics. We always had aspirations of being a Thunderbird pilot someday so we were constantly honing our formation flying skills. I was flying lead with Les in close trail. As I was coming over the top of the loop inverted, a call came over the radio, "Don, I flamed out!" This is one of those moments where the pucker factor instantly increases by an order of magnitude, as the F-106 is a single engine

aircraft. I immediately responded, "Where are you?" and his response was "about two miles back and going down". I lit the afterburner and did a hard 180 degree turn and spotted Les' aircraft a few thousand feet below me gliding to the water. Whifferdilling on around, I pulled into close formation on his wing and asked, "How's it going?" His head was down in the cockpit going through the emergency engine restart procedure and his response was, "still won't light". I then proceeded to look his aircraft over by going behind to look into the tail pipe, sure enough; no fire was visible, underneath and to the opposite wing, looking for anything unusual, fluid leaks, etc. After settling in on the wing again and talking to our Air Defense Radar Controller on the radio, also known as GCI (Ground Controlled Intercept), I instructed our Controller to mark our location as a bailout was eminent. We were gliding at 270 knots (best glide speed for the Six) and down to about 14000 feet when suddenly he started to accelerate and pull away from me. I knew immediately that he had fire in the hole and hopefully a good relight. He yelled over the radio, "I got it started!" I replied, "Shit Hot! Turn left 360, Homestead is 100 miles. Our GCI Controller then came up on the radio and said, "Sir, Homestead is closed, Air Force One is inbound, to which I responded, "I don't care, tell them to open it back up, we're coming in with an emergency!" His response, "Standby". So we proceeded back to Homestead "arguing" with the Controller, since he was trying to get us to divert to Navy Key West which was about the same distance to the west of our position. I didn't want to put a sick airplane into a Navy base due to the complicated logistics with maintenance and repair. So, we continued to head north back to Homestead and we were handed off to Miami Approach Control. I checked in with Miami and informed him we were a flight of two inbound with an emergency. He gave us a traffic report that Air Force One was on base to runway 05 at Homestead to which I responded, "Tally Ho the traffic". The Controller asked us to reduce our speed so that he could space us behind Air Force One. I replied, "We are already at minimum speed (200 knots) so tell Air Force

One to go around if you have to because we are landing on this approach". I could tell the Controller was very nervous as he informed the pilot of Air Force One that he might not be able to clear him to land on this approach because of the emergency situation with the fighters behind him. To ease the pressure on the Controller, Les and I made a few S-turns to increase the spacing between us and Air Force One who was now about a half mile out on final approach. We were about 4 miles back and closing rapidly. The Controller cleared Air Force One to land and we were still bearing down on the airport. The Controller cleared us to land just as we were coming over the overrun with Air Force One turning off the runway at the far end. We would have landed the emergency aircraft anyway, even if he had not cleared us as I knew we could sort out the procedural stuff later. As Les was rolling out on the runway, I advanced power and started my go-around. I decided not to make a wing landing so that he had the entire runway to himself to deal with any other condition that might arise. As I was getting the gear up and beginning to accelerate and climb, I looked straight ahead and there was this big shiny airplane, Air Force One, sitting on the taxiway at the far end of the runway with the president of the United States on-board. With the adrenalin rush that I was experiencing, I could not resist this once in a life time opportunity to salute my commander-in-chief like any dedicated fighter pilot should. I held the nose down and continued to accelerate. As I passed directly over my commander-in-chief's airplane at about 100 feet doing 400 knots, I pulled the stick back, lit the afterburner, and nearly went vertical as I climbed to traffic pattern altitude of 1500 feet. The F-106 had what is known as a hard light afterburner and it sounds like an explosion when it lights. This feature comes in handy sometimes when you want to get someone's attention on the ground, and I have another story on that. As I rolled out on downwind coming around to land, I was feeling very good about my heroics of saving a very expensive airplane,

avoiding a bailout into the ocean, and getting to salute the President. I landed and taxied to the chocks and noticed my Detachment Commander was standing there along with the crew chief to welcome me. I thought this was a bit unusual, but after all, I thought congratulations from the commander were in order. As I climbed down the ladder from the cockpit and turned and saluted Maj. Pinsky, instead of congratulating me, he said, "Captain, why in hell did you light your afterburner in the traffic pattern? All of the presidential security forces, Secret Service, CIA, FBI, Dade County Sherriff, Florida Highway Patrol, and you name it, on and around the base, are calling and asking where did that explosion come from? I'm on my way to the base commander's office now to explain to them what happened, and if they are not satisfied with my story, then you will get a chance to come and explain your actions." To which I replied, "Yes sir, I was only being extra cautious and felt that I needed the afterburner to keep from getting too slow in the pull up and also felt it appropriate to salute my Commander-in-Chief." I could see he was trying not to grin as he continued to chew my ass out.

So, I went to the hangar and met Les who was debriefing with the Maintenance crews on the details of the flameout. I shook his hand and said, "Congratulations and guess what, we may get to go talk to the Secret Service and maybe even our commander-in-chief and explain to them what a great job we did protecting him and why we are such heroes". But, that never happened, so after that day, we just continued to do our ordinary and routine job of pulling air defense alert on the Florida coast.

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