

“Lost at Wheelus”

Double Bailouts in the Dark at Wheelus

By John Anderson

Back in January, Contributing Editor Wally Mason sent the draft of a story he'd been working on for quite a while. He called it “Lost at Wheelus,” and his first two sentences were, “How could a pilot not find Africa? How can you miss the World's largest continent?” That's an intriguing story lead, and the tale of just exactly how that happened to two intrepid Hun pilots who (indeed) missed Wheelus and Africa, ran out of gas over the Mediterranean and bailed out has become legend. However, the oft-repeated telling of the tale may have overlooked some salient facts.

In researching Wally's draft, we discovered that SSS'r John Anderson had actually been in this infamous flight from Soesterberg. Well, sort of. In any case, armed with a copy of the actual accident investigation report, John accepted the challenge to set the record straight on this 52-year-old saga. Herewith, then, is John's account of Wally's tale. Ed.

First, a little geo-historical background: In 1954, USAFE's 512th Fighter Day Squadron (FDS, flying F-86s) was redeployed from RAF Manston in the UK, to Soesterberg, Holland, and was renamed the 32nd FDS. The original 32nd was a WWII fighter squadron based at Curacao in the Dutch Antilles/West Indies and Aruba, another former Dutch colony in the Lesser Antilles. Thus, reactivation at Soesterberg renewed the historical ties the 32nd had with Holland. The original purpose for the 32nd being in the Caribbean was to provide the Netherlands with air defense for its two offshore countries.

In 1956, the 32nd's F-86s were replaced with F-100s. The pilots were strictly day fliers, and at sundown every day, the Dutch called to inform them that the night fighters were taking over the alert. I can't think of a finer setup for young fighter pilots. Every day that they flew, all they did was light the fire, get airborne and look for someone to pounce upon. Normally, it was dissimilar air-to-air stuff, but if they couldn't find anyone else, they fought each other. Usually, there was plenty of business!

Now, let me start this story by saying that two outstanding things happened to the Anderson family in 1957. The first was that my little (sic) brother made All-American as a sophomore running back at West Point. The second was me getting my first operational assignment to—you guessed it—the 32nd FDS at Soesterberg. The 32nd was flying the F-100 C-model, sharing the Dutch base with a couple of Hawker Hunter squadrons of the Royal Dutch Air Force. Our side of the base was named Camp New Amsterdam, in honor of the first Dutch settlement in America, Nieuw Amsterdam.



32nd Ops, home of the “Slobbering Wolves.”

On 3 December 1958, I drove to work in the morning darkness, as usual. The days were mighty short in winter time. We had not flown a great deal lately, and in addition to lousy WX, we got some snow. The Dutch were not too interested in clearing runways and taxiways, so we usually stood down and waited for it to melt (God's work). At the morning briefing that day, volunteers were requested to fly down to Wheelus to build up the squadron's low total flying time. Four of us volunteered, went back home, packed overnight gear and drove back to the base. We got ready to go, and then, of course, entered into that phase of “go, no don't go” for several hours. Finally, the decision was made to go.

Given conditions at the field, it was decided to tow our Huns to the run-up pad, depart and fly the 1,231 NM to Wheelus in two, two-ship flights. Don Brandy and Hank Higgins would take off, followed by me and my wingman, another young pilot named Dick Denay. Unfortunately, by the time we took off, it was late afternoon. Don and Hank departed at 1507 Zulu. Dick and I followed a few minutes later. For those days, everything was pretty much normal-normal all the way to Wheelus. That is, till we neared the end of the flight.

Keep in mind the state of flying in those days: UHF was *our* only voice radio. Once we took off, we checked in with “Stovepipe” (Dutch Military Radar), but back then, the rest of Europe was mostly VHF with very few facilities capable of both UHF and VHF. Our next radio transmission was to Chaumont (France) Tower to whom we gave our FIR penetration times and upcoming reporting estimates. We flew over Nice, where we started out across the Mediterranean. We transmitted our FIR info



After checkout at Nellis, John's Hun career included 32nd TFS at Soesterberg '57-'60 and 523rd TFS at Cannon AFB '60-'64 (with LOTSA TDY all over the world). After that, it was off to carrier flying (A-4s) on a Navy Exchange tour, then lots of ANG flying.

“in the blind,” since there was nobody within earshot on UHF. Then it turned dark, very dark!

I have to pause here to mention that in the dark, we were not very proficient Hun drivers. When I got to Soesterberg (32nd Fighter DAY Squadron), we were required to get *only* 15 hours of night a year. If you logged 15:01, people looked at you like you were crazy. We cheated: five minutes here, five there, and so it went. Suffice it to say, we were not too night proficient.

Meanwhile, back to the ill-fated flight. From Nice, we flew over Ajaccio in Corsica and then took a jog to miss the Tunisian FIR, heading for Pantelleria, a small island north of Wheelus, where the fun started.

The Pantelleria Beacon had been NOTAM'd to be off the air at sundown, a key factor bearing on the imminent loss of two birds. However, for whatever reason, we were unaware of that vital fact. We just never got that info. We DID know that the Wheelus Beacon was INOP, but we figured that with the help of “Farnsworth” (a Brit GCI facility), we should have no problem. Wishful thinking!

When none of us could pick up the Pantelleria Beacon, both flights went over to Farnsworth for help. I should mention that we had 100 Kt winds from the west, so that made it even more difficult to estimate overhead Pantelleria.

When I checked in with Farnsworth, Don Brandy (leading the first two-ship) asked me to wait until he could get an accurate steer. While I waited, I tuned in the Wheelus AFN (Armed Forces Network) AM station, to get an ADF steer. When Farnsworth finally got around to me, I told them I had Wheelus on the nose and to continue working with Don. Dick and I then switched over to approach, penetrated and flew a GCA approach to Wheelus. Before we left Farnsworth, they gave Don a heading to Wheelus that coincided with what my ADF was showing. I guess it is important to stress here the fact that for modern aircraft of the day, not only was the ADF a questionable piece of equipment, but the ADF stations were weak and the whole navigation package was pretty primitive, to say the least.

Don and Hank had switched to Farnsworth several minutes ahead of me, and Farnsworth had them turn to 110 degrees for a positive ID. (Remember that 100 Kt crosswind?) When I got on freq, Don was requesting to go back on course since they were low on fuel. The heading Farnsworth gave them pretty much coincided with what I was seeing for my flight to get to Wheelus, so I figured Don and Hank were ahead of us and fairly close. Not so!

The accident investigation report's *Finding 5b* said Farnsworth's GCI operators were a contributing cause because they “Had no radar track identified as 54-1915 (me), yet this flight was estimating the Wheelus Range at the same time as 54-1865 (Don), and in a geographical position that coincides [coincided] with the track identified as that of 54-1865.” In other words folks, *Don and Hank were being given radar vectors meant for ME!*

The accident report also says that at 1729Z, Farnsworth instructed 865 to go to Tripoli Approach Control, and that their position was approximately 37 miles north of the station. The accident investigation further said that in respect to 865, “The flight leader states that he tuned and crosschecked frequency 1585, a commercial station, and the Wheelus Beacon, frequency 359 Kc, call letters WL. The wingman also crosschecked these frequencies.” [This is an incongruent statement because the Wheelus Beacon was OUT. I (and Dick) tried to crosscheck between the two stations, but could not raise the Wheelus Beacon at all, only the AFN station.] The accident report continues, “At 1734Z, the flight reported over the beacon and ‘Mayday’ [for very low fuel].” I suspect the report is inaccurate regarding that supposed statement of Don's about he and Hank crosschecking the two stations. Dick and I may have reported that we had tried to do that, but without success. The mistaken ID, my flight for Don and Hank by ground controllers, continues to haunt....

I guess the pucker factor was getting pretty high by this time, because Don made some serious mistakes of his own. I personally think that somehow they got and homed on a signal from a station far to the east of Wheelus, which could have been the 2,000 watt commercial station at Misratah, Libya, near the coast. Then when they got a weak swing on the needle, they decided to do a teardrop penetration WITHOUT A POSITIVE ID! They flew outbound at 145 degrees, made a left-hand penetration turn at 13,000' and rolled out on a WNW heading. When they got down lower, they lost the unknown signal...and NOBODY had them!

They wandered around at 2,500', and according to what they told me later, finally realized the campfires they thought they were flying over were, in fact, fishing boats! They pickled their tanks and climbed, turning from a NW heading to south [looking for the continent of Africa?]. At 1800Z, Farnsworth GCI said they had re-established radio contact with Don's flight on 317.5. Upon learning that, Wheelus Tower tuned their DF and backup equipment to Farnsworth's freq, and gave about seven DF steers of an inbound heading of 240 degrees. Soon, Farnsworth reported two radar contacts squawking emergency approximately 150 miles to the northeast and continued to track and vector the flight toward Wheelus.

It was way too late! Hank reached an altitude of 29,000' before flaming out. Don continued climbing until flaming out at 32,000'. Hank glided as far as he could and bailed out at 10,000' about 65 miles out from the field.

Don continued his glide on a heading of 240 degrees until he saw the coastline and turned to 220 degrees, bailing out at 4,000'. Don came down, barely on land, some 40 yards from the coastal highway and about 38 miles from the field. He then hitched a ride to the base.

Meanwhile, Hank had literally gone “feet wet” far at sea and was picked up some 44 hours later!

While Dick and I were taxiing in, we observed two F-86Ds scrambling, and when we could get a word in edgewise, we were informed that Haircut Blue 1 and 2 had bailed out. That was the first word we had that they were not safely on the ground.

Now to the story Hank related to me: He landed okay, pulled his dingy upright, climbed in and began to try to figure out what he was pulling out of the survival kit in the dark. Did I mention it was pitch-assed black? He said he found his signal mirror and put its lanyard around his neck. Next, he found two cans of water, also on a lanyard, and put them around his neck, too. Soon after, he saw and heard the two F-86s overhead, and in his haste to light his flare, pulled the smoke end—that didn't help a hell-of-a-lot. Now he didn't know what to do with the damned thing, and the next thing you know, a wave capsized his dingy, and he lost everything but the mirror and water.

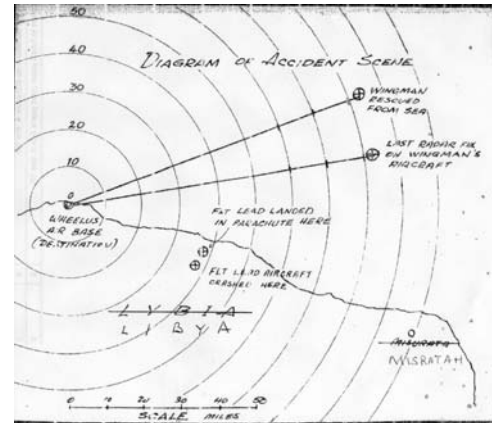
For the next two days, Dick Denay (my wingman) and I rode all over on C-47s helping to search for Hank, but with “no joy.” After that, in base ops, the “powers-that-be” started considering calling off the search. Meanwhile, as luck would have it, a RAF Shackleton (big, ugly thing) was returning from Wheelus to Malta and flew right over Hank. Hank saw it and signaled them with his mirror, but they overflowed, apparently without seeing him. Finally, they turned around, and on the next pass, they spotted Hank and dropped him a 20-man life raft. The Shackleton remained on station until an SA-16 Air Sea Rescue aircraft picked him up at about 0945Z, 5 December 1958, some 85 miles from Wheelus.

Later, at the Club, after a lemonade or two, one of the Shackleton's RAF crewmembers (they came back to Wheelus rather than going on to Malta, probably to help us celebrate) said to me, “I say, old boy, you Yanks have done it again.” “Done what?” says I. “The second coming of Christ,” says he. “When we dropped that 20-man raft, your chap jumped up out of his dingy and ran across the water and into our raft!”

The whole affair was a comedy of errors, and I am here to tell you I was glad it turned out as well as it did. I believe that if Farnsworth had been an American radar facility, more of the blame would have been dumped on their shoulders. It was a simple case of Farnsworth losing Don and Hank when they “found” my two-ship.

I don't know *exactly* how Don and Hank got so far off course to begin with, but in truth, making it from Ajaccio to Wheelus without any further operable nav-aids was a hike, especially with a 100 Kt crosswind. I really think

that the ID turn to 110 degrees that was ordered up by Farnsworth is the event that caused Don and Hank to fly out of ADF range of the AFN station. I was lucky that Dick and I tried to tune in AFN while we were still in-range. Those 25-watt stations that we had to deal with in those days were so weak that you couldn't pick them up very far away. Had Don and Hank been closer when they first tried AFN, I'm sure that they would have been okay as well. [Get your magnifier out for the diagram below.]



Hand-drawn map of the accident area shows Misratah, probable actual site of the ADF teardrop penetration.

There has been a lot of heated debate about this classic SNAFU resulting in the loss of two Huns, but now you can say you heard the truth from someone who was there. In any case, it wasn't a fun time for anyone. At least we didn't lose two Hun drivers as well.

Epilogue: My association with Soesterberg lasted until the base closed in 1994. As luck would have it, the 101st FIS at Otis ANG Base, Cape Cod, Massachusetts, inherited the 32nd's F-15s. Because I had once been the CO of the 101st Squadron and later the Commander of the Massachusetts ANG, and the fact I had many Dutch friends and a Dutch godson, I was invited to the closing of the Soesterberg Base. (A sad day for all, after 40 years of friendship between us.) I was treated royally by both the Dutch and the 32nd folks, even getting reacquainted with Dutch Prince Bernhard, who was an avid aviator who used to spend time with us. Mostly, he liked to race us down the runway in his sports car when we drove our cars back to the base, after the Dutch night fighters took over alert. He had the best car and usually won. Cheers, —*John Anderson.*

PS: Hank Higgins died a few years ago of a heart attack. Dick Denay, Don Brandy and I are still alive and kicking. ■

Postscript About the time John Anderson completed his final draft, we learned that Don Brandy had just joined the SSS and had sent in some written recollections about this storied flight. These recollections, having been written several years ago, and without benefit of a copy of the accident investigation report, are somewhat different in certain details from John's story. But Don has welcomed the “refresher course” he's received in a series of recent emails, and we've come to a reasonable compromise that allows us to get this story out on time. We're “go” with John's story for this issue, and we'll block some space in the fall issue for selected excerpts from Don's recollections that are sure to be enjoyable to avid readers of Hun history first-person accounts. Many thanks to John and to Don. Ed.