

By the time he died at 38 in the very first B-52 crash, Fleming had served impressive careers in both the Air Force and Navy.



The High Intensity Life of Patrick Fleming

By Walter J. Boyne

Photos courtesy of Rhode Island Aviation Hall of Fame/Fleming family



Patrick Dawson Fleming was a 19-victory ace flying Navy Grumman Hellcats in the Pacific Theater during World War II. He then went on to become an outstanding Air Force test pilot and commander until his life was cut short on Feb. 16, 1956, in the first crash of a B-52. Few men ever packed so much into such a short military career.

In less than nine years in the Air Force, Fleming flew as a test pilot at Wright Field in Ohio and Edwards Air Force



Left: A B-47 makes a jet-assisted takeoff from Eglin AFB, Fla., in 1953. Fleming helped transition the B-47 from test program to operational asset. Below left: Patrick Fleming in the cockpit of a B-52, the aircraft type he eventually died in.

Base in California, led a bomb group in Strategic Air Command, played a key role in the adaptation of the B-47 into service, became an authority on nuclear weapons, conducted deep-black overflights of the Soviet Union, and led the introduction of the Boeing B-52 into service at Castle AFB, Calif., as deputy wing commander.

An Army “brat,” Fleming was born on Jan. 17, 1918, son of Maj. Percy Fleming. He first attended school at Fort Stotsenburg, about 45 miles from Manila in the

Philippines, and later went to Lanier High School in Montgomery, Ala.

Already in love with flying, he worked nights in a filling station to earn money for flying lessons. In 1935 he enlisted in the Navy, serving first aboard *Hull*, a destroyer, then transferring to the carrier *Saratoga* (CV-3). There his love of flight was reinforced as a second-class seaman whose job was to reposition the arresting hooks of aircraft after they had landed.

Fleming had an engaging personality and obtained the support of Capt. William F. Halsey Jr., later a five-star fleet admiral, to go to Annapolis. After attending the Naval Academy Prep School in Norfolk, Va., he entered the academy on July 8, 1937. With war a real prospect, the need for naval officers accelerated the academy program, and he graduated on Feb. 7, 1941.

Aviation, Not the Sea

At the academy, Fleming became friends with a younger midshipman, the future Vice Adm. Gerald E. Miller. They served in the same battalion, and Miller recalled the lean and muscular Fleming as an impressive individual, calm and mature. The two men worked out together, specializing in the rope climb, then an Olympic sport.

Fleming was also serious about his academics, particularly those relating to flight, spending long hours practicing Morse code and instrument flying in the single Link flight simulator available at Annapolis.

It was clear he was already dedicated to aviation, rather than the sea. At the time, however, sea duty was mandatory for new academy graduates, and Fleming worked for the next two years as a torpedo and catapult officer on the light cruiser *Cincinnati*, performing convoy duty in the south Atlantic.

Always talking and dreaming of flying, Fleming finally got his wish, but not until World War II was in full swing. He was sent to flight training at Naval Air Station New Orleans and then Pensacola, Fla., earning his wings in 1943. He received operational training at NAS Jacksonville, Fla., before carrier training on the Great Lakes.

A talented pilot, he gained his first test experience on assignment to develop and test night fighting equipment and tactics in Project Affirm (originally Argus) at NAS Quonset Point, R.I.

The experience he gained was invaluable when, in March 1944, he joined VF-80 (“Vorse’s Vipers”), aboard the 27,100-ton-carrier *Ticonderoga* (CV-14).

Once in combat, Fleming initiated a Frank Luke-style string of victories. He started his combat career on Nov. 5, 1944, by shooting down a Japanese Zero near the Fort Stotsenburg school he had attended in the Philippines.

He subsequently scored multiple victories, the first on Dec. 14. The F6F-5 Hellcats from *Ticonderoga* began fighter sweeps in support of the Allied landings on Mindoro in the Philippines. His VF-



Fleming climbs into his airplane before a 1945 mission. On Dec. 14, 1944, his squadron shot down 19 enemy aircraft, with Fleming accounting for four.

80 squadron shot down 19 aircraft from a mixed flight of 28 Zeros and Oscars, with Fleming credited with four kills. His shipmate, Lt. Richard Cormier, also got four.

On Jan. 3, 1945, VF-80 attacked Formosa, and Fleming shot down three more aircraft, the enemy growing more ferocious as the war neared its conclusion. Attacking Formosa on Jan. 21, 1945, *Ticonderoga* underwent a 40-minute assault by kamikaze aircraft. A Zero scored the first hit, killing some of the anti-aircraft crews, and Fleming joined other pilots to man the guns.

When a second kamikaze airplane crashed into the bridge, Fleming was knocked overboard by the debris from the explosion. Picked up by a destroyer, he was transferred, with the rest of his group, to *Hancock* (CV-19). *Ticonderoga* was extensively damaged, with 143 killed, 202 wounded, and 36 airplanes destroyed.

The aerial power of the United States was dominant in the Pacific, but the Japanese had responded desperately with kamikaze attacks. To defend against them, the Navy raised the number of fighter aircraft located on carriers from 36 to 54 and later, to 73.

Some units reorganized, and a fighter-bomber unit, VBF-80, split off from VF-80. The 29-year-old Fleming became its executive officer.

On Feb. 16, Fleming led nine VBF-80 Hellcats in an attack on Japan itself. As his flight strafed Mobarairfield, Fleming engaged opposing Zeros, shooting down five. On the very next day, he concluded his scoring rampage with four more vic-

tories. By Feb. 17, 1945, he had flown six combat missions and shot down 19 enemy aircraft. Records show Fleming scored 10 victories with VF-80 and nine more with VBF-80.

Test Pilot

Fleming returned to the United States in March as the fourth ranking naval ace. After 30 days of leave, during which he saw his daughter Erin for the first time, he was sent to Naval Auxiliary Air Station Ream Field near San Diego as a squadron commander. He was soon promoted to lieutenant commander, serving on board the carrier *Boxer* (CV-21). Selected to be a test pilot, he was assigned to the air proving grounds at NAS Patuxent River, Md.

For Fleming it was time for a decision, and he elected to transfer to the US Army

Air Forces. In one four-hour period, he resigned from the Navy, joined the USAAF Reserve, and was immediately transferred to active duty as a lieutenant colonel.

His Navy test pilot experience led to his assignment to the Wright Field Test Pilot School, Class 47.

Fleming later became chief of the Fighter Test Section. Among his first assignments was testing the Republic P-84 Thunderjet and giving demonstration flights at operational units receiving the aircraft.

The jet fighters of the era were extremely short ranged, and one concept had them towed behind bombers until reaching a combat zone. There the fighters would be cast free to protect the bombers, hopefully hooking up again after the battle to be towed home.

Fleming tested the idea in an early Lockheed P-80A fitted with an attachment bar to link to a towline. On Sept. 23, 1947, Fleming took off in the P-80 to link up with an airborne B-29. After several frustrating attempts, he succeeded in latching on to the towline and was towed through the air for 10 minutes.

However, when he tried to release the tow bar, nothing happened. After struggling with it, he flew forward, beneath the B-29, where the tow bar suddenly snapped backward, blocking his forward view. He landed safely, and mercifully the program was canceled.

He was also involved with Air Force representation at the 1948 Cleveland Air Races, flying demonstrations. Fleming stayed at Dayton through 1949.

Already identified as a "comer," Fleming was given a broad experience in test flying including a familiarization flight on Oct. 6, 1949, in the same Bell



Fleming in a Hellcat. By the time he left Navy service for the Air Force, Fleming had 19 kills in just six combat missions.

X-1 Chuck Yeager had used to break the sound barrier, *Glamorous Glennis*.

Fleming's career now followed a path placing him in the forefront of Air Force planning. In 1950 he worked at the Boeing plant in Wichita, Kan., on the B-47 service test program. He next served with the 4925th Test Group at Kirtland AFB, N.M., supervising the association of new types of nuclear weapons with specific types of aircraft.

The B-47 was the star aircraft of the SAC fleet, and in 1951, Fleming went to the 306th Bombardment Wing at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida, the first operational B-47 wing. On Aug. 9, 1951, he flew a B-47 nonstop from Alaska to Kansas, setting a distance record—2,800 miles—for airplanes of this type.

Of Fleming's many secret missions, the most hazardous and the least reported occurred in October 1952, a part of Project 52 AFR-18.

The program used two modified B-47Bs from MacDill to deeply penetrate Siberia via widely different routes. Two top crews were selected for the mission and briefed by Gen. Curtis E. LeMay personally. The primary crew was led by Col. Donald E. Hillman, deputy commander of the 306th, with Maj. Lester E. Gunter as copilot and Maj. Edward A. Timmins as navigator. Fleming, then a colonel, led the backup crew. It consisted of Maj. Lloyd F. Fields as copilot and William J. Reilly as navigator.

The approved route took the B-47s from Eielson AFB, Alaska, north to a refueling point near Point Barrow, then west past Wrangel Island to a point near Ambarchik, Russia. It then turned southeast, to parallel the length of the Chukotskiy peninsula to Provideniya, then east to return to Eielson. The two B-47s took off on Oct. 15, 1952, following the two KC-97 tankers assigned to them for support. After refueling, Fleming flew to an area over the Chukchi Sea, taking up a racetrack pattern.

The mission went off smoothly, despite Hillman's aircraft being tracked by MiGs. The flight lasted nearly eight hours and covered roughly 3,500 miles, 800 of them in Soviet territory. LeMay quietly decorated both men and their crews with the Distinguished Flying Cross. The citations read only that the awards were given for "extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight."

Fleming's next assignment was as deputy wing commander of the 93rd Bomb Wing at Castle AFB, Calif. The 93rd was the first operational unit to receive



Fleming as deputy commander of the 93rd Bomb Wing.

the new Boeing B-52, with the first one arriving on June 29, 1955.

The transition of the 93rd BW was unusual in that it phased in the B-52 while retaining its primary combat-ready mission with the B-47. Initially the 4017th Combat Crew Training Squadron was established for crew training, but this task was eventually taken over by the bomb squadrons, with the 4017th performing ground instruction.

The First B-52 Crash

As usual, Pat Fleming threw himself into his work, checking out in the B-52 and becoming a flight instructor in the new bomber. With more than 7,000 flying hours, he was one of the most experienced pilots in the wing, and was slated to move to SAC headquarters as director of requirements in the early spring of 1956.

Fleming was never one to spare himself, and despite having flown more than 130 hours in the last 90 days, he elected to fly as instructor pilot on what proved to be the first crash of a B-52.

The aircraft, 53-0384, took off at 10:34 for a routine training flight. Over Sacramento, Calif., at 38,000 feet, nearly seven hours into the flight, the B-52's right forward alternator failed. The other three alternators failed shortly thereafter and the crew compartment depressurized. Aircraft Commander Maj. Edward L. Stefanski lowered the landing gear and began descending.

The crew became aware of JP-4 fuel on the floor of the lower crew compartment. There was a report of fire and

the compartment filled with smoke. At 33,000 feet, one of the two observers in the lower crew compartment ejected. At 32,000 feet, copilot Maj. Michael Shay, unable to communicate with Stefanski, ejected. There was a violent explosion in the lower crew compartment, and the second observer there also ejected.

The tail gunner, MSgt. Willard M. Lucy, jettisoned the tail turret and attempted to bail out, but was pinned by G forces. The aircraft leveled out temporarily at about 10,000 feet, and Lucy was able to parachute from the airplane.

Witnesses on the ground near Tracy, Calif., saw a massive explosion completely destroy the aircraft at an estimated altitude of 8,000 feet. Of the eight crew members, four parachuted to safety, three receiving major injuries. Three men died in the explosion and crash. The eighth crew member was Fleming.

The accident report revealed the primary cause of the accident was the disintegration of the turbine wheel of the right forward alternator. Fragments penetrated the No. 1 cell of the forward body fuel tank. Multiple fuel leaks spilled onto the alternator deck, ignited by either electrical shorts or the high temperature of the turbine fragments. When the crew compartment depressurized, the fuel and fire entered the crew compartment.

The accident report revealed that Fleming, already badly burned, left the aircraft at about 22,000 feet, either through an ejection hatch or by being blown out of the aircraft. He pulled his rip cord, but his parachute failed because the heat had melted his shroud lines and the canopy detached. The accident report noted that the canopy, while damaged, would have allowed a safe descent if it had remained attached.

Fleming was initially reported missing, but his body was found eight miles from the crash site, a sad end to an extraordinary career. He was 38. Among his many decorations were the Navy Cross, three Silver Stars, a Bronze Star, five Distinguished Flying Crosses, and four Air Medals.

Berne Lay Jr., in a tribute to Fleming in the April 1956 issue of *Air Force Magazine*, wrote that Fleming was an airman who "sought and found complete mastery of his trade. He was a pro." ■

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