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Retired Col. Larry Bustle stands on the front porch of his Palmetto home. He was shot down over North Vietnam.

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LOCAL

He was shot down on his 68th mission over North Vietnam. He lived to have a career in Manatee County politics

BY JAMES A. JONES JR.

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PALMETTO —

Editor's note: This is the seventh in a series of Vietnam War stories shared by Manatee County residents in conjunction with the PBS documentary "The Vietnam War" by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick.

Maj. Larry Bustle had just fired a white phosphorus rocket from his F-4 Phantom jet to mark a target in North Vietnam when his aircraft was hit by anti-aircraft fire.





The date was Sept. 11, 1968, and it was his 68th combat mission over North Vietnam – and 130th combat mission overall.

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Almost immediately, Bustle’s “backseater,” the second pilot in the tandem cockpit, found himself surrounded by fire and bailed out.

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Bustle decided to nurse the fighter away from North Vietnam while trying to reach the Gulf of Tonkin.

“The aircraft kept on running,” Bustle said. “The cockpit was full of smoke, and I couldn’t see the instruments. But I could see out of the side of the cockpit and kept looking for the water.”

Once he reckoned that he was over open water and far enough away from North Vietnam to make falling captive less likely, he ejected.

“I dinged up my shoulder and knees,” said Bustle, who grew up in Samoset and graduated from Manatee County High School in 1953.

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Initially, there was little sensation of pain because of the rush of adrenalin, but he knew he was hurt because he didn't have the strength to get into his rescue equipment as he waited to be plunked out of the Gulf of Tonkin.

Forty-five minutes later, a Jolly Green Giant Air Force helicopter arrived to pull him out of the water.



Edie and Larry Bustle were married 60 years ago after he graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy. He was commissioned as an Air Force officer.

Provided photo

Looking up, he recognized a familiar face. Don Olson, his roommate at the Air Force base in Da Nang, was the helicopter pilot.

“I love you,’ I told Don,” Bustle recalled.

Bustle had broken both knees and dislocated both shoulders in the ejection.

The next morning, he was evacuated to a military hospital in Japan. He completed his recovery at military hospitals in Montgomery, Ala., and at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa to be closer to home.

His wife Edie picks up the story.

“While he was in Vietnam, I was working at Manatee Memorial Hospital in labor and delivery with Dr. Newhall. I would come home at midnight or 12:30 a.m. and sit down and write Larry a letter,” she said.

The day her husband was shot down, she had gone to the post office to mail her daily letter so that it would be picked up at the 2 a.m. delivery.

The Bustles’ oldest son, then about 11 years old, took the phone call while Edie was out of the house that his father had been shot down – and rescued.



Major Larry Bustle stands with his F4 Phantom fighter with combat damage in Da Nang, Vietnam, in 1968.

provided photo

“He was pretty shaken up by that,” Larry Bustle said.

After Bustle was moved to MacDill, Edie was able to visit and bring the children. Although they weren’t allowed into his room, they were able to wave at their father through a window.

“My arms were in a butterfly cast, and I had to have someone do everything for me,” he remembers.

Edie noticed something seemed to be unusual about his shoulder injury and brought it to the attention of doctors. What she had spotted turned out to be staph infection. Doctors moved him into isolation and administered antibiotics, which saved his arm.

Bustle later learned that his backseater who had ejected over North Vietnam had been captured

alive – but badly injured – by the North Vietnamese. He died in captivity.



Larry Bustle, then a captain is shown prior to his Vietnam service with an F-100 fighter at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada.

Provided photo

“They recovered his remains after the war, and he is buried at Arlington National Cemetery. His name is on the Vietnam Memorial Wall,” Bustle said.

After he recovered from his injuries, Bustle was able to return to active duty, flew as a test pilot at Edwards Air Force Base and served as base commander at Izmir, Turkey, which gave him experience that he would later use in civilian life when he retired from the Air Force as a full colonel in 1984 after 27 years service.

Being a base commander was like being a mayor of a city, Bustle said. In 2001, he was elected mayor of Palmetto and served seven years before being elected to the Manatee County Commission, where he served until 2016.

Now 82, Bustle reflects on his service in Vietnam. There was one big lesson learned in the war.

“You need to let the military do the fighting and not direct it from Washington,” he said.

“There are a lot of ways that we could have won that war rather than just leaving. We had the wrong people making the decisions. And like Forrest Gump says, ‘That’s all I am going to say about that.’ ”

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Retired Air Force Col. Larry Bustle looks over the Manatee River from his Palmetto home. He is a Vietnam War veteran. **James A. Jones Jr.** - jajones1@bradenton.com

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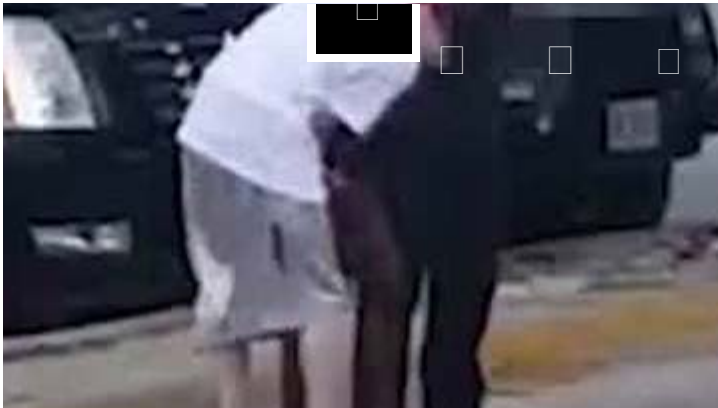
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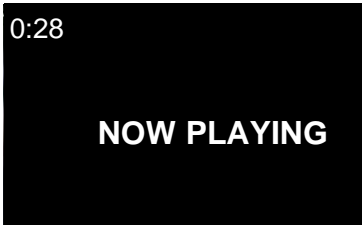


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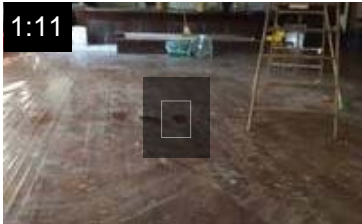
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