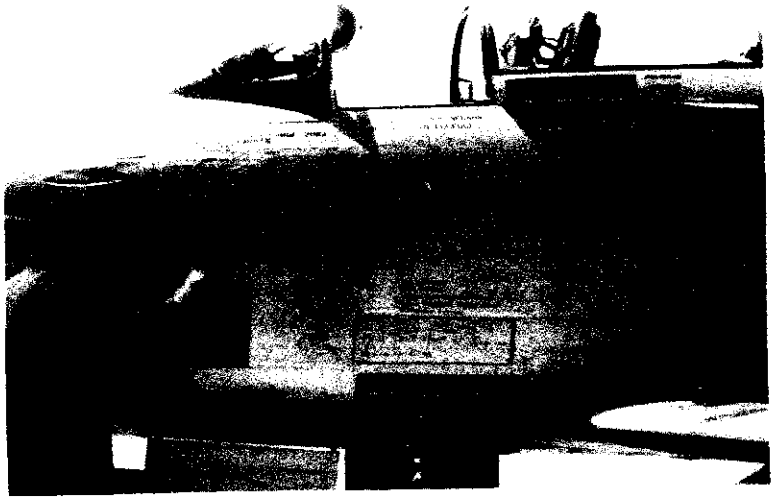
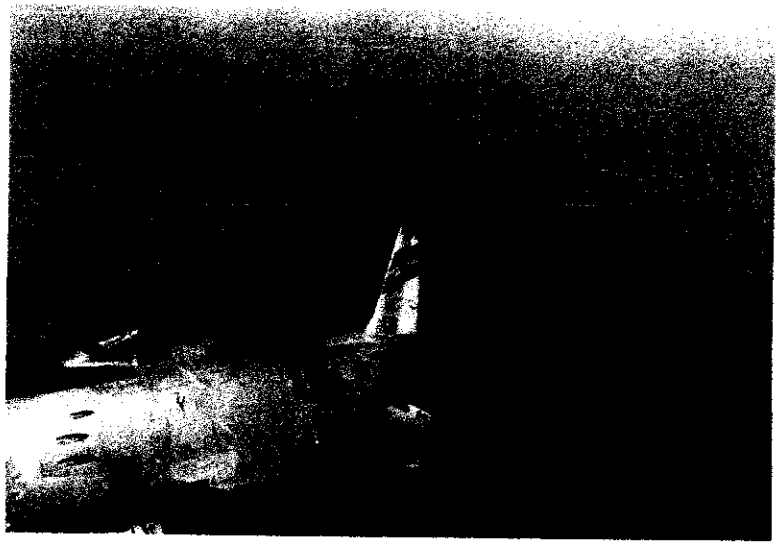
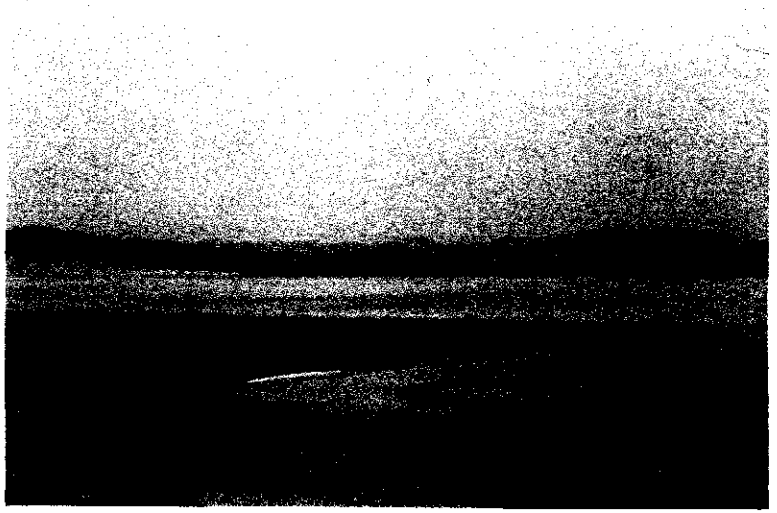
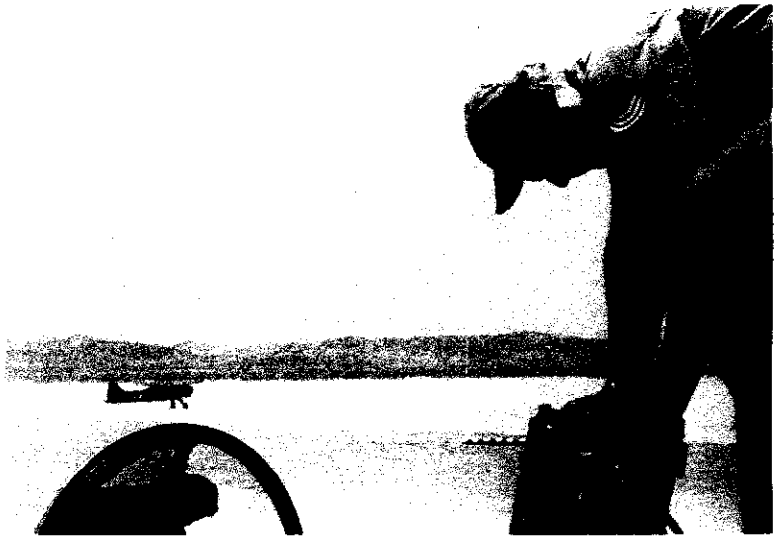
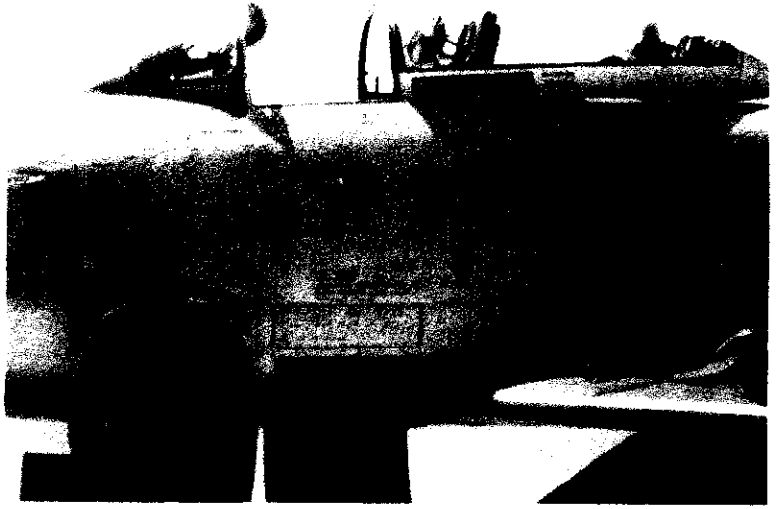
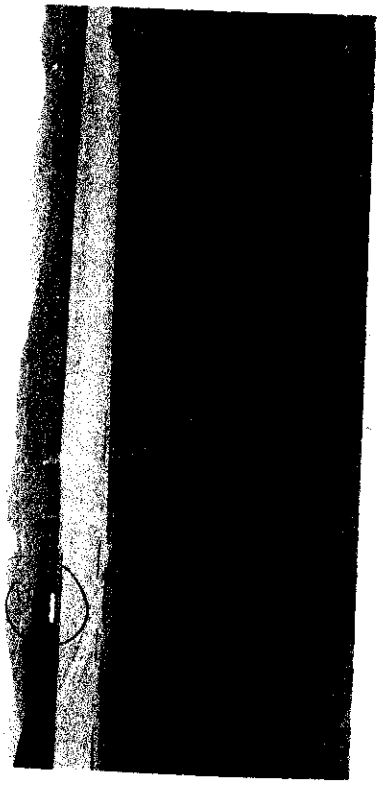
The Day We Shot Down Our Own Plane

It happened in 1958. The 115th was flying the F-86F-20s then. It was probably a drill weekend, and aerial gunnery operations were being conducted in the gunnery range airspace near Fort Irwin, CA (NE of Barstow). Captain Walter Morrison was towing the target "dart" with F-86F s/n 51-13081N.

All was going well until the gun sight RADAR on one of the aircraft accidentally locked onto the tow ship instead of the "dart." The ensuing burst of .50 caliber machine gun fire from the Sabre making the gunner pass put two rounds through the fuselage of the tow ship. One might call them "silver bullets" because they each hit critical components. One round destroyed the throttle linkage and the other cut the fuel feed line to the engine. With his typical coolness, Walt guided the aircraft to a smooth "dead stick" landing on the nearby dry lake bed of Bicycle Lake.

Luckily, the Army maintained a small operation at Bicycle Lake and several of the troops drove out to where Morrison's ship had rolled to a stop and asked if they could be of assistance. He politely declined stating, "Someone would be out from Van Nuys to take care of things." When word of the incident reached Van Nuys, the 146th maintenance troops set in motion an operation that would essentially keep a lid on the whole matter. A team was dispatched to Bicycle Lake to inspect and assess the damage. That done, a crew of mechanics with a replacement J-47 engine and some spare parts showed up at the lake, where they conned the Army troops into using one of their towing vehicles to assist with the heavy work. Right there on the lake bed, the damaged engine was removed, the throttle linkage was repaired, and the new engine was installed. Run-up tests were conducted to demonstrate that the repair was properly made, and then Captain Henry "Jack" Williams, the Squadron Safety Officer, took the airplane off from the lake bed and flew it back to its home base at Van Nuys.

The repair crew was headed up by M/Sgt. Michael Jacobbauski & M/Sgt. James Elledge.