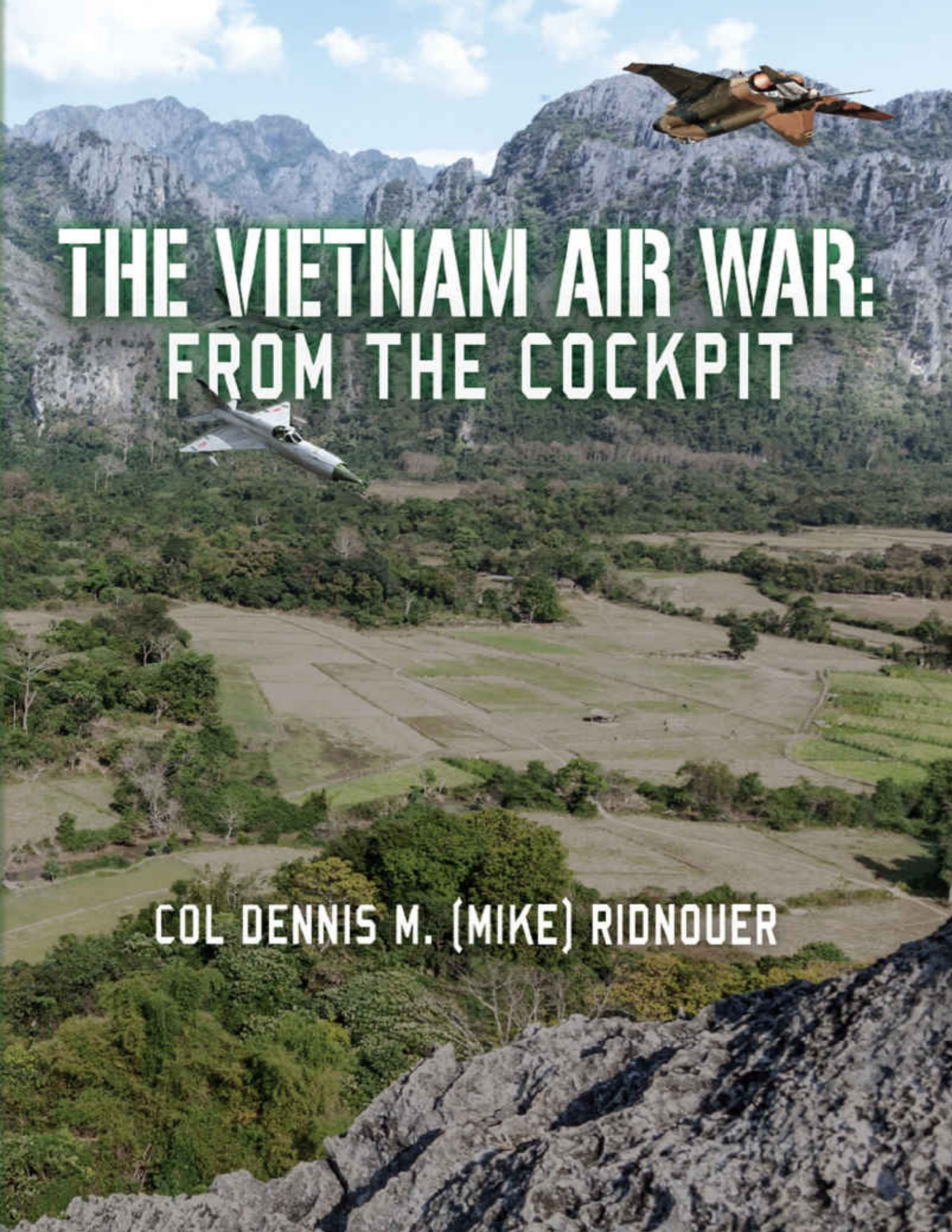

THE VIETNAM AIR WAR:
FROM THE COCKPIT
COL DENNIS M. (MIKE) RIDNOUER

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COLONEL DENNIS M. (MIKE) RIDNOUER (USAF RETIRED)



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Lieutenant General Ev Pratt (USAF Retired)
November 25, 1943, to March 15, 2017

This collection of Southeast Asia (SEA) air-combat experiences is dedicated to Ev Pratt, an outstanding fighter pilot, instructor, leader, commander, and friend. Ev had three F-4 SEA combat tours and deeply loved his country. The award of the Silver Star was evidence of his valor. Ev's love for and pride in his family was evidence of his dedication. He flew West sooner than we would have liked, but many of us are better aviators and better Americans having known him.

Meet you in *Quick Check*, Ev.



FOREWORD

The air war in Vietnam was more than fighters and bombers, SAMs, AAA, and MiGs. It was transport, logistics, chaplains, maintainers, weapons loaders, rescue, cooks, Docs, and all the support, training, and equipment required to keep a war machine functioning. It was the Air Force, Army, Marines, Navy, and a few allies working, sometimes together, toward an elusive goal. This collection of wartime experiences attempts to capture a small slice of life in the 1960s and ‘70s Southeast Asia air war, when thousands deployed and fought for what they were convinced was right. Every mission, every day, and every experience was different. Some were high drama, some tragedy and some humor. Many were intense displays of courage and loyalty where it might be expected—and many where and when least expected.

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RAZZING MAGGIE'S DRAWERS
DON COMBS

My assignment from pilot training was C-123 training at Pope Air Force Base, Fayetteville, North Carolina. The base is adjacent to Fort Bragg, home of the 82nd Airborne, Delta forces, the JFK Special Operations School, and various other US Army training specialties. It is a truly magnificent and historic military area.

I completed C-123 transition training, graduating as a copilot. Two months later I found myself in Vietnam, assigned to the 309th Troop Carrier Squadron at Tan San Nhut Air Base, Project Mule Train. I was assigned to the crew of First Lieutenant Marty Lofton, who had two years experience in the C-123 at Pope and had upgraded to first pilot. Under Marty's excellent guidance and airmanship, we quickly became one of the top crews in the squadron. Marty was extremely generous with flying time and landings that were often denied other copilots. I absorbed his instructions like a sponge, and the advice he gave me proved invaluable in later years. I was lucky to be crewed with Marty.

Duty in Saigon in 1963 was extremely interesting. The extra "temporary duty" pay covered room and board. Carefully managed, I had money to do a lot of things: I had a room of my own on the economy, I ate the local food, and I still had a lot left over to party on the town. Saigon was wide open. There was a lot to do, and the US dollar went far. Those were the days before military script and dollars were easily converted to the local currency. The

flight surgeon advised us to stay away from the local food, but I quickly found that the Vietnamese and French cuisine had more to offer than the bland US diet at officers' clubs.

We spent a lot of time away from Saigon at Nha Trang and DaNang supporting Special Forces. Some of the pilots became pretty casual with their dress and appearance. It was against regulations to have a large mustache or a beard, but everyone who could grew one. It was not unheard of to have a bandoleer of ammunition and carry a Swedish K submachine gun. We became the ultimate *Terry and the Pirates* crewmembers. Of course, we had to shave when we returned to Saigon.

We flew and landed all around the country. A Shau, Hue, Pleiku, Quang Tri, Qui Nhon, Long Binh, Can Thi, Phu Quoc, Con Dao, and Con Song Island are some of the places I recall. In 1963 at Khe Sanh, there was one Army captain, the only US advisor there. He walked with a cane and looked very sick, so I gave him my flight lunch and a couple of cigars, and we offered to take him to Saigon, but he refused. Every time I went back, I took cigars, newspapers, and snacks. Men like these were really out on a limb, performing well beyond the call of duty. Con Song Island was noted for its "tiger" prisoner cages below ground for political prisoners. On one mission to the island, crewed with a colonel from air-division staff, the winds were extreme, and on his approach, the turbulence so severe he had to abort the landing. I looked at the island and its mountains and thought a downwind landing might not be as turbulent. I suggested this, and his landing with the wind was smooth. The suggestion helped my reputation.

There was little of Vietnam that I didn't see. Nha Trang was a beautiful seacoast village with French seafood restaurants serving lobster tail that could feed four men. It was served with french fries and cut like a piece of roast beef. A friend, Leon Scarborough, was stationed there to teach Vietnamese pilots how to fly the O-1 Bird Dog. Nha Trang had a radio-range system for approaches, and he hadn't learned to fly that kind of approach during pilot training. I was proficient in that approach in the C-123 and taught him the procedures.

A mission with a load of bananas from a French plantation in the central highlands to Saigon was memorable because of the commotion and the unrest

of the Vietnamese soldiers on board. After landing, I found that there were several huge spiders, about the size of a baseball, running around the cargo compartment. No one would go near the aircraft for days. On a mission transporting animals to a Special Forces A-Team site, a pig got loose from its cage. There was a struggle in the cargo compartment. A Vietnamese soldier grabbed the pig by its rear foot, and it defecated all over his hand. He was quite upset and took out his bayonet and rammed it up the pig's rectum. Now he was covered with blood and excrement; all his buddies were howling with laughter.

We would airdrop or land at Special Forces locations, delivering all types of animals, pigs, cows, buffalo, chickens, and ducks. Disney produced a movie with a C-123 airdropping an elephant. I dropped no elephants but did drop a lot of animals by parachute. One of my squadron members had to make several passes over a field prior to landing. Several water buffalo were grazing on the airstrip, and he hit one, bending the landing gear ninety degrees. He declared an emergency and returned to DaNang, and the command post told him to jettison the cargo over the South China Sea before landing. It was an overcast day, and flying above the clouds, the crew jettisoned several cows, pigs, and chickens without the benefit of chutes. Imagine a fisherman out at sea, casting his nets, hearing an outrageous noise, and looking up to see pigs and cows falling from the clouds. There were stories to be told to his family and friends that night.

One mission we carried a load of thatched-straw shingles to be airdropped at a Vietnamese Special Forces camp. The entire load could not have been more than fifty pounds of straw. The weather was nasty, and we navigated our way below the clouds down the valley. As we prepared to drop, the weather closed in, and we were suddenly in a valley, on instruments with mountains on all sides. We put the aircraft in a twenty-degree banked climbing turn, expecting at any moment to crash into the side of a mountain. We nearly bought the farm for less than five dollars' worth of straw. A short prayer of thanksgiving was said when we broke out on top.

We all loved to fly low level. The threat was very low, limited to small arms, and it was fairly safe. Often we would buzz sampans, farmers plowing in the fields, elephants, and water buffalo herds. Some of my squadron mates would even use empty cases of beer bottles to bomb sampans, and I'm sure

we didn't create any friends with the people we buzzed. I remember being counseled by the squadron commander for returning from a mission with a Montagnard crossbow arrow stuck in the top of my wing.

One great duty was a month TDY to Bangkok. We were based at Don Muong Royal Thai Air Force Base and flew missions in support of US forces stationed in Thailand. Every Thursday we took supplies, food, and booze to a US Navy Seabee camp where Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, also known as NKP or Naked Fanny, was being constructed. We were very popular with them because we brought in their booze. We would spend the night at NKP, drinking and playing drinking games at their clubs, and the next day, we would return to Bangkok. On one of these missions, a friend of mine, drunk and playing dice with the Base Commander, made an outrageous bet. My friend bet his airplane against the Seabee base and lost. It was just a big joke to us, but the Seabees took it quite seriously and stayed up all night painting our C-123 red, white, and blue. I could imagine the look on the crew's face at dawn when they found a C-123 painted with "Property of the United States Seabees" on the ramp. My friend, not to be outdone, buzzed their tent city on takeoff and flattened just about every tent. The Seabees had their own unique flag. It was an enormous pair of women's underpants called "Maggie's Drawers." Tradition from then on was to buzz Maggie's Drawers departing NKP. One of my compatriots took it to the ultimate extreme. His idea was not only to buzz Maggie's Drawers but to capture them. He lowered the ramp and stationed his loadmaster and flight engineer in the back with a chain and hook, planning to fly over the flagpole and snag the drawers and capture the prize. There were quite a number of people on the ground watching. On the first pass, he missed. On the second pass, he was too low, and his wing tip hit a building and sheared off. This didn't deter the young man as he made another pass. This time he hit the building with the main wing spar, causing the aircraft to cartwheel, crash, and burn. The entire crew was killed along with nine nationals in the town. The USAF *Flying Safety* magazine article, titled "Razzing Maggie's Drawers," made the rounds of the US Air Force, eventually costing the Pope Wing Commander a star. He made a trip overseas to talk to us, and rather than conduct a memorial service for the crew, he expounded on the loss of his star and our unprofessional flying.

On embassy runs to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, we would take personnel

and supplies to the ambassador and his staff. We flew in accordance with instrument flight rules, making in-flight reports as required. Deviation from the route of flight was not permitted, and Cambodian controllers would not speak to us. On final from the instrument approach, we were cleared to land and directed to turn at the second taxiway. We were not permitted past that point. Intelligence told us there were Russian MiGs parked near the end of the runway. We lunched at an airport restaurant, where I had a cup of the world's most exquisite coffee, supposedly made from the droppings of a wild cat that feeds on coffee beans.

After seven months my tour was finished, and I was awarded a couple of Air Medals, a regular commission, and promotion to first lieutenant. I returned to the States and Pope Air Force Base, still assigned to the C-123. Things looked rather bleak as the base had been notified that it would soon be upgrading to C-130s. C-123 crews would transition to the C-130, an aircraft I had tried to avoid. We went to Officer's Call that night. Officer's Calls can be a little bit on the rowdy side. The Pope Officers Club had a card room on the second story with access from a stairway located at a central point in the club. We were all seated in chairs in the main area when a feminine voice called down to the Wing Commander, "Clyde, keep the noise down; we can't hear the bidding up here."

Of course the young rowdies, myself included, howled over this lack of decorum exhibited by the Wing Commander's wife. He stood there, taking it all in with chagrin on his face, saying, "Yes, dear."

About two weeks later, I was called to his office. He welcomed me and asked me to sit down. He said, "I've been reviewing your records. You made regular over in Vietnam, and you have an excellent flying record. I am recommending that you be one of our lead crews transitioning to the C-130 ASAP. You'll probably end up in Standardization/Evaluation and be a future leader at our base."

I looked him in the eye, over the out-sized C-130 model on his desk, and said, "With all due respect, Sir, I do not want to go to the C-130."

His jaw dropped about ten feet. He looked at me, raised his voice, and said, "What do you want?"

I replied, “I want to be a fighter pilot.”

He stood up with a trembling voice, pointed to the door, and yelled, “Get out! You’ll be a C-123 pilot until you die!”

I walked out, looked at Jennine, his secretary, whom I’d known socially, rather sheepishly. As I walked away, I heard a crash from the colonel’s office. When I got back to the squadron and told my friends what had happened, they laughed and thought it hilarious.

I looked at the squadron bulletin. A new item was posted, a C-123 assignment with permanent change of assignment to Vietnam with choice of aircraft upon return. I immediately called the action officer at Langley, and he said that I fit all the criteria except I hadn’t been back in the States long enough. Six months were required. I asked if there was any way around this requirement. He said, “Yes, Wing Commander’s approval.”

I said, “I think I can get that.”

I called Jennine and asked if I could get the waiver, and she said, “Yes, and you can take it to the bank. I believe he wants you off the base ASAP. The crash we heard was his brand-new C-130 coffee cup thrown at the wall.” I got my waiver. After a short upgrade course, I was on my way back to Vietnam for a year. Goodbye Pope and the C-130—so l thought.

OLD BLOOD AND GUTS
DON COMBS

During my second tour in C-123s with the 309th TCS flying out of Tan San Nhut AB, I participated in a new program as a C-123 Forward Air Controller (FAC). Our mission was to stand alert at night, launching to support friendly outposts under Viet Cong attack. We orbited over the target area at four thousand feet and dropped illumination flares. Often, just the illumination would break off an enemy attack. If not, we controlled air strikes using AT-28s and A-1s flown by Vietnamese and US pilots. Our C-123 crew was augmented with a Vietnamese navigator who sat on a jump seat between the pilots and communicated with the Vietnamese ground forces. Our job was to communicate with the US advisors and strike crews. We took the navigator's information and passed it to the USAF strike pilots, not as easy as it sounds. In fact, it was challenging; often there was a mix of the two languages. We interpreted the broken English translation of the Vietnamese navigator while trying to control both our aircraft and the air strikes. Talk about the fog of war!

We had two or three Vietnamese crewmembers in the cargo compartment to unpack, arm, and throw the illumination flares out the open cargo ramp. Our crewmembers were not happy about this arrangement because the Vietnamese would often get sick. After the flight, they had to spend hours hosing out and cleaning the cargo compartment.

One night I heard my loadmaster yell, "Gross!" I turned around and saw

him and the flight engineer holding one of the Vietnamese above an empty flare container. The man had dropped his pants and was attempting to take a dump on the ramp. They held him above the container as he emptied his bowels.

The ground forces directed our drops with a device we called the Fire Arrow, nothing more than a big rotating wooden wheel. One spoke held containers of combustible material on fire. The ground force rotated the wheel, Fire Arrow, and pointed it in the direction of the enemy or where they wanted bombs delivered by the strike force.

Four thousand feet above the fray kept us away from the threat. Tracers from enemy gunners would reach up into the sky but fell short of our aircraft. We flew blacked out with night formation lights illuminated on the top of the wings. Strike aircraft would orbit above us, and when they rolled in on their bombing run, they had to spot the formation lights and call, “FAC in sight.” They passed through our altitude on their dive-bombing run, but this procedure made sure they didn’t have a midair collision with us.

Missions were often very long, six to eight hours, and in spite of the ground fire, very boring. On one mission, in about the sixth hour of the flight, we heard a crash, and I felt a strong “punch” on my left side. I screamed to the copilot, “Take control of the aircraft. I’ve been hit.” When I brought my hand to the light, it was covered with blood.

The copilot, an ex-SAC B-47 jock, said, “Shit, the SOB just got a Purple Heart.” I moved my hands and started slowly checking all over my body. The warm, wet area, which didn’t hurt, was localized on my left. I was too scared to use a flashlight for fear of what I’d see.

Finally, my crew chief used his flashlight to look in the area of my left side for injury and any other damage. There was nothing! Finally I shined the light very carefully on my left side, and sure enough, it was bloody, but there was a feather pattern around the blood. Apparently, we had a midair collision with a large bird. Again I took the flashlight and found the entry point, a small window about eighteen inches in diameter sealed by a rubber grommet. It sat about forty-five degrees to the slipstream of the aircraft, slightly below my waist level. The impact forced the window open, and a stream of bird

blood entered the cockpit and hit me on the left side with the force of a punch. The window then snapped closed, and the carcass of the bird was deposited back into the slipstream.

My wonderful copilot, who bemoaned me receiving a Purple Heart, a medal he so sorely wanted as a promotion tool, was now the base jokester. He couldn't spread the incident fast enough. Every time I would enter a mess hall or Officers Club, everyone would stand up, applaud me, and offer a toast to "Old Blood and Guts."

The C-123 FAC program was successful and became the Candlesticks. A squadron at NKP was formed, and I later worked with them.

A FEW THOUGHTS ABOUT WAR AND MUSIC
BUD HESTERMAN

A little bit about the Republic F-105. This big, beautiful airplane was developed during the 1950s at the height of the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union. The concept at that time was the age of limited warfare was over, and from now on we would only be engaged in a full-out nuclear war of total destruction. The F-105 was designed jointly with the MK43 variable-yield atomic bomb and even had a bomb bay specifically sized to fit that weapon.

I first saw the airplane at the World Congress of Flight at Nellis in 1958. My reaction was, “Holy smokes, or something like that, I’d sure like to fly that big, powerful, and fast machine.” Well, five years later, in 1963, my wish came true. I was back at Nellis, TDY from Itazuke, Japan, checking out in that awesome piece of flying art. I loved it from the very beginning but admit to suffering a little bit of acrophobia the first time I climbed the ladder to the cockpit and realized I was a good ten feet above the tarmac.

I returned to Itazuke, and the wing moved to Yokota. However, much of my time was spent on temporary duty either to Korea or Southeast Asia. My duty in Korea consisted in living with airplanes loaded with nuclear bombs. We had targets in communist countries, and we were able to go from a sound sleep to engine start and ready to taxi in fifteen minutes.

If they would have opened the gates, and if I received the proper authentication, I would have taxied out, taken off, gone to my assigned target, and dropped my very real weapon of mass destruction. I had no feelings of hatred or animosity toward the hundreds, or maybe thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of people who might be instantly killed, or who might die horrible deaths years later as a result of the radiation from my bomb drop. I would have dropped my bomb because it was what I had been trained to do and what my country asked me to do, and I would have done it to the best of my ability.

Then, in 1964 and 1965, when I was not in Korea, I spent a total of about six months during three TDYs from Yokota, participating in a conflict commonly called the Vietnam War. In the early part of this war, the F-105 was the primary aircraft carrying the war to North Vietnam. A typical load was six 750-pound high-explosive “dumb” iron bombs hung on a centerline bomb rack. Two 450-gallon drop tanks full of fuel hung on the wings, making takeoff weight 52,000 pounds. Aircraft built by Republic Aviation have never been noted for their short takeoff and landing characteristics. As I recall, we would use about seventy-five hundred feet of runway for our takeoff and lift-off at about 215 knots, which left very little runway remaining. Takeoff was usually accompanied by a little bit of rear-end pucker factor and perhaps a little up pressure on the stick to help lift the aircraft off the runway. Well, I dropped my bombs and tried to destroy, or help destroy, the targets I was sent against. Very likely, some fellow human beings were killed or severely injured in the process. I did not then, nor do I have now, any significant feelings of remorse or guilt about my part in that war. I did what I was trained to do, what my country, and maybe most importantly, what my fellow pilots expected me to do, and I did it to the best of my ability.

My story has a happy paradox! Apparently, the insane concept implied by the acronym MAD (mutual assured destruction) worked. Conditions between the USSR and the United States never deteriorated so far that we actually reached the point of throwing nuclear weapons at each other. The two countries actually became friendly enough to allow visits back and forth, and I was able to visit St. Petersburg and Moscow with a singing group in 2004. St. Petersburg has to be one of the most beautiful cities in the world, and we sang with and to the Russian people in some of the most exquisite

venues I can possibly imagine. The people we sang with and to loved us, and we loved them. The singing experience was wonderful. The bombing experience would have been horrible.

Philosophers and songwriters and dreamers, for as long as society has existed, have thought and sung and dreamed about how wonderful the world would be without wars. Here's part of a poem philosopher/songwriter and singer Willie Nelson has to say about peace on earth: "There are so many things going on the world. Babies crying, mothers dying. How much oil is one human life worth? And whatever happened to peace on earth? We believe everything they tell us. They're going to kill us, so we gotta kill them first. But remember the commandment, thou shalt not kill? How much is that soldier's life worth? And whatever happened to peace on earth?"

I doubt that there ever was really peace on earth. Our species, *Homo sapiens,* began to evolve about two hundred thousand years ago. I suspect the guys started throwing rocks at each other for various reasons and started bonking their neighbors' heads in as soon as they discovered what a good heavy club could do. According to the biblical account, the first little war happened when there were only four people on the planet, Adam and Eve, and their two kids, Cain and Abel. Cain was jealous because God liked Abel's offering better than his, so Cain said, "God likes you better than me." Bonk! Could this be the first war fought for religious reasons? It's kind of fascinating to think that religion should be about peace and love, but differences in religious ideologies have certainly been the reasons for many wars, and that seems to be a really serious and scary problem for what's happening in the world today.

Well, whatever the reasons for war, I'm realistic and pessimistic enough to believe that a perfect world filled with only love for our fellow man rather than hatred will never happen. I don't believe that the beautiful sounds of music will ever replace the horrible sounds of war, and perhaps one day we will totally wipe ourselves off this beautiful planet. Maybe someday we'll just leave some cockroach-type critters, or maybe some nuclear-resistant bacteria, to restart the evolutionary process.

So where does that leave my feelings and me in this grand scheme of things? Well, maybe as a result of my hours spent on nuclear alert, I was one

tiny cog in the great machine that prevented a nuclear war. And possibly, as a result of my Air Force service, and my relatively small contribution to a conflict in Southeast Asia, I have helped maintain what is still the best system of government and the greatest standard of living anywhere in the entire world. I’m grateful that I had the opportunity to do what I did, and I hope I did it with honor.

JUST ANOTHER TRIP NORTH—ONE OF A HUNDRED
BEN BOWTHORPE

In October 1965 assigned to the 334th TFS at Takhli (tak-lee) Air Base, Thailand, on temporary duty from Seymour Johnson AFB, NC, I was scheduled to lead a flight of four F-105Ds fragged against a target about twenty miles west of Hanoi. My wingman was Don Totten. Number three, the element lead, was Ken Gardner, and number four was Bruce Rankin, all first-class fighter pilots. During the briefing, Intel showed us a picture of the target, and it looked to be a large barracks complex. That surprised me because it seemed like a newer, modern complex, not a thatched hut, which was normal for the area.

Each Thud was loaded with eight 750-pound bombs along with the gun. No air-to-air missiles and no defensive equipment. At this point in the war, Thuds were not equipped with radar warning receivers (RWR), and we had no onboard jamming against the threat radar. Chaff and flares to defeat radar and heat missiles weren't introduced to the theater until much later. We were all "eyeballs and assholes," visually detecting and avoiding missiles, AAA, MiGs, and the small arms fire from every farmer in North Vietnam. This was otherwise known as "the Threat."

Our route of flight took us about two hundred miles to the northern part of Thailand for refueling with a KC-135 tanker before ingress. Dropping off the tanker, we headed into Vietnam at about five hundred feet above the

terrain, and we pushed the speed up to about 540 knots. This gave us some element of surprise and was the best we could do to avoid detection by the SA-2 missile radar acquisition and guidance sites. By this time in the war, we had learned low and fast was our best defense. Conversely, we also learned early that flying above an undercast was a sure way to get nailed by an SA-2 missile. Flying just above the clouds meant there was no possibility to visually detect a missile launch, and picking up the missile visually after it broke through the clouds didn't give the pilot time to initiate a defensive maneuver. Guess it did prevent pilots from dying all tensed up. Close to the ground, we navigated by time, distance, by following rivers, and by identification of any landmarks, we could find. The hope was that by flying low and going the speed of stink, gunners couldn't see us coming or get their guns turned around in time to hit us. It usually worked, but sometimes you get the bear, and sometimes the bear gets you.

As we got closer to the target, I felt a bump. I wasn't sure what it was, so I pressed on and radioed the flight to let them know that we would fly into the target area with the target offset on our left at our nine o'clock position. We'd pop up from low altitude to an altitude, usually about twelve to fourteen thousand feet above the target to give us time to precisely put eyeballs on the target and get a good, steep dive. A forty-five-degree dive angle or more was good for the 750s. The steeper the dive, the less time the pilot was exposed to gunners, the harder it was for a gunner to visually track the aircraft and the closer together the bombs hit, called bomb trail, when they hit the target.

As I headed up, the fire-warning light came on. In training a fire light meant "EJECT" because there is a good chance the fire will burn through hydraulic lines, causing the pilot to lose control of the jet, or worse. When a plane goes out of control, it is tough to even grab onto anything to bail out. But, while I was popping up over a target with three other Thuds, all getting ready to release thirty-two bombs, twenty-four thousand pounds of very high explosives, on the locals' heads, made the idea of ejecting right then and there very much less attractive. I thought, "Shit, I am already here, I hauled these bombs this far, and there's the target; I might as well get it over with."

One of my observant wingmen transmitted, "You're on fire!"

I replied, “I know. I’ve been on fire for a while. But it’s still flyin’.”

I was told that it looked like thirty feet of fire was coming out the ass end of my Thud; the whole aft section was on fire. I really didn’t want to the light the afterburner to pop to altitude because that could start something else on fire, and I needed to get to the target and drop the bombs. But I really needed to get to a higher altitude to get a halfway decent dive angle to attack the target. I took a deep suck on the oxygen, lit the afterburner, and popped as high as I could, about ten thousand feet, which was nowhere near where I should have or would have popped had I not been on fire. I deselected the afterburner, started downhill, put the sight in the neighborhood of the target, hit the pickle button, and “bombs away.” My wingman said I hit right in the middle of the target. Shit hot!

Coming out of the dive, off the target, I pulled up, but the engine was giving me only about three-fourths power. So I jettisoned all the fuel tanks that weren’t being used, and anything else I could think of to reduce weight and drag.

My wingman, still excited about the fire, told me, “Get out of the thing! Bailout!”

I calmly—well, maybe not calmly—replied, “Well, it’s still runnin’, and we’re movin’ further from Hanoi. I got my hat in my pocket to walk home with.”

The Thud kept flying, so I just kept going for another twenty minutes or so. I knew we had to get out of the missile area, so I started to climb. The fire-warning light was still on, and the hydraulic system had gone to zero. It should have read 3,000 psi. I assumed I had lost all the hydraulics that controlled the landing gear, the flaps, and pretty much everything but the flight controls. I thought to myself, “I can handle this.”

My buddy, Don Totten, was flying next to me, telling me, “Bennie, get out of that thing! It’s gonna blow up!”

“Don, I tell you what. If you would kind of move backward or forward, one way or the other, I’d really appreciate it. When I look over at you, I can

see the reflection on your canopy of my plane burning, and it's making me nervous." I hadn't seen the fire until that point, just the fire light on in the cockpit.

Out of the target area and into Laos with the fire still burning, I decided to climb to about twenty thousand feet, and we headed to Udorn, the nearest US base that could handle a Thud. At twenty thousand feet, to the shock of all of us, the fire went out. Prior to that, it was burning like gangbusters. We radioed ahead and told them we needed emergency people on the runway, but I told them the fire had gone out. I only had a percentage of normal power because the fire had burned the "eyelids" or engine nozzles open, causing the loss of a lot of thrust.

As we were getting ready to land, I directed Ken and his wingman to recover at Takhli and Don to stay with me. I had Don land first because I wouldn't be able to get my plane off the runway with no nose-wheel steering, no flaps, and, no speed brakes. Don was aware of my plight and said, "I know. You keep losing pieces of the airplane!"

So many pieces had fallen off my jet; the stabilator was about half gone. The final approach had to be flown faster than normal. I also knew I only had one application on the brakes, one shot to get it stopped after touchdown. I landed, and the trusty Thud stopped rather uneventfully. I got out and assessed what had happened. Most of the aft section was burned away. Four or five months later, it was still sitting at Udorn about where I left it. It never flew again. I was just happy that I was able to land it and get out safely.

Note: Ben was awarded the Silver Star for valor for this mission. Ben also was one of the first pilots to complete one hundred missions over the North and earn the patch.





Photos courtesy of Ben Bowthorpe (on the left).

POSTFLIGHT MEMORIES
E. J. SHERWOOD

In November 1965, when Cam Rahn Bay (CRAB) opened for combat operations, the parking ramp was an elongated rectangle with a surface made of AM-2 nonskid aluminum planking. The ramp was an open space in the beginning with hardened revetments added in the spring of 1966. At one end of the parking ramp, the surface was constructed of perforated-steel planking (PSP) for cargo aircraft and the 12th Aerial Port operation. At the opposite end of this parking ramp, and at its edge, there were three fuel hydrants to support returning F-4s. Each hydrant (referred to as a pit) could support four parked fighters with its hose layout. A large rubberized fuel bladder, which was off the edge of the ramp, supported each pit. Each bladder held about fifty thousand gallons of JP4. Beyond the parking ramp on all sides was an unlimited amount of sand. My assigned aircraft was F-4C 63-7542, the best of the four F-4Cs that I crewed while in the 12th TFW. It was parked in the first row—spot A-3.

On a recovery day at the fuel pit in late 1965, I remember a captain pilot who just couldn't wait to get to debriefing. After stopping the bird and shutting the engines down, he stood up and gave me the double-thumbs-up sign and a big smile. After climbing the ladder to help him with his cockpit exit, I asked how it went, knowing something good had happened on his flight.

The pilot said, "I always had a dream of going to Africa on a big game

hunt for elephant. Today I accomplished that dream." He further explained that a FAC had directed him to a spot on the Ho Chi Minh Trail where the Gomers were leading an elephant that was towing a howitzer. "I smoked that elephant with 20mm HEI and ruined their day."

In December 1965 the 557th assigned its pilots to a specific aircraft by serial number. This was an attempt to bring the pilot and crew chiefs closer together and provide a morale boost since we were working long hours, shorthanded. The crew chiefs loved it, but it's important to note that morale was not low before doing this. Wing aircrews were assigned missions and matched to aircraft with the weapons load and fuel tanks configured based on meeting the wing's need. So it was common for a 557th aircraft to be flown by another squadron's aircrew.

One day in early 1966, my bird was actually matched with my assigned 557th TFS aircrew; the pilot was Captain Robert Street and his GIB Henry "Jim" Knoch. Their mission this day was to do an air-to-ground bombing mission in North Vietnam and recover at a base in Thailand. There they would be refueled and reloaded for another assault up North and return to CRAB. This would constitute two "counters" toward their one hundred missions over North Vietnam.

Before engine crank, Captain Street asked me if there was anything I wanted from Thailand if he had the chance to shop while there. I thought since he was going into Indian country, he should stay focused and not be concerned with me. I asked for the impossible and something I had not had in a long time—a banana split. Upon his return that afternoon to the fuel pits, he asked me what it was that I had asked for. And then out from under his seat, he pulled out a bunch of bananas. He had remembered. He also provided me with a new 557th-configured red cap. Never underestimate a fighter pilot—they can actually multitask!

In late spring of 1966, early one morning I launched 542 with an aircrew from another squadron on an air-to-ground mission. Its recovery was in the pits about 1.75 hours later. When I asked the pilot captain how it went, his response was it was an OK flight and everything was routine. What the captain means is (remember that one?), "The aircraft was Sierra Hotel, and he had bombed a bunch of trees to make the Gomers keep their heads down."

While my aircraft was taking on fuel, I always took the opportunity to start my postflight inspection and look at the underbelly for anything unusual. Voila—while looking under the aft area below the engines, I found a small hole in the #2 (right) engine's center bay door. Maybe debris from the runway? After putting the bird back into its revetment, I dropped the engine bay door to see if by chance the object had gone completely through. Yes, it did. I looked at that spot on the J-79 engine section, looking for signs of damage. There it was. A bullet (probably an AK-47 round, due to the small size) was smashed up against the main engine frame and just in front of the flange where the afterburner section is bolted on. Also at this attach point, there is a series of "pig tails" that are a series of stainless-steel tubing, which wraps around the engine, providing fuel to the A/ B fuel nozzles, when A/ B is selected by the pilot. The bullet was about 1/8 inch from cutting the fuel pigtail line and did not penetrate the engine frame (solid titanium); it just sat there. The fact that it was lead probably allowed it to stick to the casing where an armor piercing round might have done damage, even as a ricochet. Had the fuel line been cut, fuel would have sprayed into the engine compartment and turned the bird into a blowtorch. A quick combat patch about one square inch in size covered the hole and tail number 542 was ready to go again. I did send the bullet to the pilot via debriefing. Hopefully, some office weeny didn't hijack it.

What this proves, besides the fact that I have two eyes and can see, is that there was no such thing as a routine combat mission in SEA. The bad guys were out there; they had guns both large and small, and sometimes they got lucky.

Since my parking spot on the ramp faced the fuel pits, I would sometimes go over and chat with the POL guy while waiting on an aircrew for launch or my bird's return. One day during the chat and realizing that the supply squadron ran POL, I asked the hydrant operator if he knew where I could get a pair of jump boots. The base had no real place to buy anything, and my boots were worn out. The base exchange was only a tent in the early days. He told me for twenty dollars he could get me a pair. We arranged the meeting to make the exchange the next morning. Late the next morning, I saw my POL contact at his station by the large rubberized fuel bladder and headed toward him while fishing a twenty-dollar script note from my

indestructible elephant-hide wallet (made in Vietnam). At the time I arrived, the guy was transferring fuel from a service piping into the bladder. Earlier I had learned from another POL guy that the bladders had auto-shut-off valves to short the bladder by *x* gallons to allow for heat expansion. Ha! On this day that did not come into play. As I handed the guy my twenty dollars, he handed me a pair of boots. While facing him and saying thanks, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the unbelievable. The seam on the large fuel bladder was separating along its length like a zipper being unzipped, and fuel was pouring out onto the electrical wiring and twelve-volt batteries that operated the fuel-storage system. Yes, onto and over the top of the batteries, and we were only about fifteen feet away. While I was running to the expedite truck to halt all powered ground operations and order fire trucks, the Cam Ranh sand was drinking up the flood of JP4 and saving our asses. Thank God for sand!

In the late summer or early fall of 1966, F-4C 63-7512 couldn't get its landing gear to lower after returning to base from a combat mission. Since CRAB's runway was constructed of AM-2 planking, 512 was diverted to Bien Hoa AB, which had a concrete runway. The aircraft had been lifted by a crash-crew crane from the runway and placed off the side of a taxiway. I led a crew of about eight, with six FMS guys to recover and repair it, if that were possible. It was, and we did.

After sending the hydraulic, egress, electrical, and engine guys back, the crew chief and I needed a ride back to Cam Ranh. Base Ops told me that 7th AF had arranged a ride for us and we should be on the ramp at an appointed time that day. Lo and behold, a C-47 showed up. Being a flight-line maintenance guy, I couldn't help but notice how odd the plane looked. Instead of the normal camouflage paint, this one was just OD (olive drab) and freshly painted with no tail code or military markings on it anywhere. The aircraft serial number was stenciled on the left side of the side door in small black numbers.

The passenger pickup door required one engine (left) to be shut down. They were in a hurry. There were only a few seats on this aircraft; they already had occupants (about five guys), so we were instructed to sit on the floor and secure ourselves with cargo straps. The other occupants were dressed in OD-type uniforms but with no rank or insignias displayed. We

never saw the aircrew as they remained in the cockpit. The only cargo I could see in the bay was two wooden crates that were labeled *x*-caliber mini-guns on the ends.

I was left with the opinion from one of the guys who gave us the cargo tie-down straps that they were disappointed that they were diverted for a pickup and that we were just Air Force NCOs. Sorry about that.

After arriving at CRAB, the process was repeated. The left engine was shut down in the Transient/ Base Ops area, the two of us were off-loaded, and the plane expeditiously taxied out. I then called my flight section for a pickup.

After a bit, a step van pulled up and asked if we were on the C-47 that had just departed. The NCO wanted all I could tell him about the plane, its passengers, and the cargo. It turns out that it had crashed on a mountain not far from the base. This made my knees wobble a bit. Getting off a plane before it crashes is scary. I would find out about a week later that all on the gooney bird were lost. This aircraft loss is not listed in the book *Vietnam Air Losses* because it did not belong to the US military. Later a military friend told me it was most likely Air America, as he once supported them; and it fit the description.

THAT CAN'T HAPPEN
E. J. SHERWOOD

Our squadron, the 557th TFS of the 12th TFW deployed to the newly constructed Cam Rahn AB in November 1965. It was a part of the first PCS of an F-4 wing to the Pacific. The airfield was in its infant stage with the runway, taxiway, and parking ramp constructed of AM-2 aluminum, nonskid, planking placed over a bed of sandbags.

To help speed up the relocation of the F-4C, aircraft from the 43rd TFS of the 15th TFW from MacDill AFB were told to land at Cam Rahn and leave its Phantoms as the first aircraft delivery package. These 43rd birds flew in support of air operations in Vietnam on a temporary duty assignment. This handoff would reduce the number of F-4Cs needed to deploy over the Pacific and help speed up 12th TFW combat flight operations.

The 557th was given the first three rows (A, B, and C) on the new parking ramp for its assigned aircraft. As one of the first crew chiefs to arrive, I was given one of the 43rd F-4s to crew, tail number 682, on parking spot A-3. The aircraft still wore its gray factory paint.

The first day of flying for my bird was routine and mostly for pilot orientation/familiarization of the new area of operations. However, something unusual occurred during refueling and postflight. When servicing the engine's oil system, the number one engine took the usual quart to quart and a half of oil, but the number two engine spit out two quarts, not taking any.

With almost two years' experience as an F-4 crew chief, I knew that something was not right. It appeared number two had to have been over-serviced before the previous flight. I had not observed that condition before but had heard of it.

So after recovery from its second flight and before taking any other action, I immediately serviced the engine's oil system but got the same result. Again number one took some oil, and number two gave back two quarts. During my training I had learned that the oil system on the J-79 was a closed system; the only way oil could be added was through an oil-servicing bowser/cart on the ground, with an attendant. This meant that my right engine was manufacturing its own oil. I was dumbfounded; that just can't happen.

I had a decision to make—ground the aircraft or let it go? Would I be perceived as a possible troublemaker in the new combat environment? Good grief, we just got here. I felt bad, but I had to go with my gut feeling and told the flight-line supervisor to call the aircraft out of commission and send it out to the engine shop.

Two NCOs from the Field Maintenance Engine Shop arrived quickly, and after listening to my story, they thought for sure number two was over-serviced, and they would like to see it fly one more time and be there to have the engine shop service the oil. I understood their reasoning. They didn't know me from Adam, so they thought it was possible I had screwed up a second time. But I stood my ground, 682 couldn't fly until the oil condition was fully understood and resolved.

After some discussion, it was agreed that, rather than tie up the airplane with an unknown and never-before-experienced problem, they would change out the number two engine. This would allow 682 to resume flight operations the next day, and they would play with the suspect engine on the test cell. We had *great* engine-shop people in the 12th, and they had given me the benefit of the doubt.

The next day I went to the engine shop, and the NCOs told me they had duplicated the problem on the test cell but were still in the troubleshooting mode. They agreed to come and see me when they had the answer. That would be a couple more days. I was relieved to hear they agreed with my

findings.

When they returned, they had a story that was a first as far as they knew. It turns out that the only place that the engine oil and any other liquid come in proximity to each other is at the fuel-oil cooler mounted on the engine. This manifold acts as a radiator and cools the engine oil using JP-4 fuel. The manifold on our engine had a pinhole in it, allowing the fuel to enter the oil system. This meant that over time the oil would lose its ability to lubricate with increased potential of an engine fire.

The earlier feeling I had about being a pain in the ass disappeared quickly, and the action I took would affect my ability to make the right call on other difficult decisions the remainder of my military career.

THE WAR BEFORE THE WAR
JOHN MORRISSEY

The war in Vietnam was a tough one but not nearly as tough as it was long. Very long. Many died—around fifty-eight thousand, I am told. Many were my friends.

Most Americans today are not aware that there was another war going on before, superimposed upon, and continued after our shooting war in Indochina. It is seldom mentioned and less frequently reported. Make no mistake about it—the heavy lifting was done in that one. It lasted longer than Vietnam's eleven years. The Vietnam War was the war within the war, and that war was called the Cold War. No bombs were dropped. No shots fired. A good thing, because it was a *table stakes* war. You didn't hear about it because neither player called the other's hand. The bet was just too high—so high that the winner's reward would be a pyrrhic victory.

We and our children are alive today because that hand was not called. So no one really mentions or seems to remember that war. Or wants to. Well, we won that war in 1991. The other side quit. The Soviet Union just ceased to exist. They went silently in the night. And no one seemed to notice. There were no parades. No headlines. No drums. No bugles. That victory only took us forty-five years. And very few appreciated or were even aware, that the very thin thread holding the nuclear sword of Damocles had not broken.

During a dreadful October in 1962, it began to fray as we reached

DEFCON 2 with the Soviets.

But it held.

The photo below represents just one very small piece of that war. It represents about one hundred such aircraft in England, Italy, Turkey, Germany, Okinawa, South Korea, and Taiwan that sat nuclear alert every day, all day, all night, and all the days of the year, and with various fighters, all the years of that forty-five-year war.

From the clanging of the alarm to burner light—five minutes to get those supersonic acolytes of death airborne.

Guaranteed!

Each fighter armed with a 1.1 megaton nuclear weapon. Each manned with one highly motivated, extensively trained, frequently evaluated, dedicated B*omb* C*ommander*—the term given only to fighter pilots authorized to deliver nuclear weapons. Think of 'B*omb* C*ommander* as the ultimate James Bond license to kill, only with a nuke in place of a Walther PPK.

Day, night, regardless of weather, we were going. Target and en route winds updated at very frequent intervals. All routes, times, and altitudes committed to memory. The fate of target as well as those nearby was as certain as Euclidian geometry.

There on the hardstand, the fighter awaits the fighter pilot, the deadly catalyst required to produce the ultimate Armageddon.

The photo captures all. The F-105 with the end of civilization in her belly, the pilot's helmet, parachute, and gloves neatly placed in the empty cockpit, the desolate hardstand whose only companion is the lone air policeman with orders to shoot to kill if any unauthorized intrusion is detected. And the launch words inside the sealed plastic envelope on the top of the instrument panel.

Eighteen F-105s on their hardstands. Eighteen Bomb Commanders in their alert building.

Waiting.

The claxon sounds. My crew chief and I, always dressed and ready, race to our plane. The chief pulls the gear safety pins and completes a dozen critical checks as I race up the ladder. The canopy is already unlocked. I slide into the cockpit. My hands automatically turn on the battery, and cockpit lights while I slip into my chute, fasten my helmet strap, connect my G-suit and oxygen systems and strap in. With a glance at my chief's nodding approval, I depress the start button. The smell of the cordite from the onboard cartridge starter drifts into my cockpit as the engine climbs through her octaves to idle. I close the canopy. I check in with the command post and receive the words. I open the launch envelope, knowing that if the words match, I will be on my takeoff roll in two minutes with the afterburner's flame accelerating us toward a Soviet intercontinental ballistic missile site in Siberia. If the words don't match, I will be back in the alert shack, trying to get back to sleep.

Not an easy task then, and not any easier now—and with apologies to Fantine, those tigers still come at night.

I live in this alert pad ten days each and every month. Ready. Prepared. No doubts. No distractions. No regrets.

I am twenty-three years old. I live seventy-five hundred miles from my home on an island in the East China Sea. I am married with one little boy and a doggie in a six-hundred-square-foot house a few miles from the hardstand.

I receive $525 each month for this job. That, as well as the trust and confidence of my country, and the lifelong companionship of true warriors.

And, I was never young again.

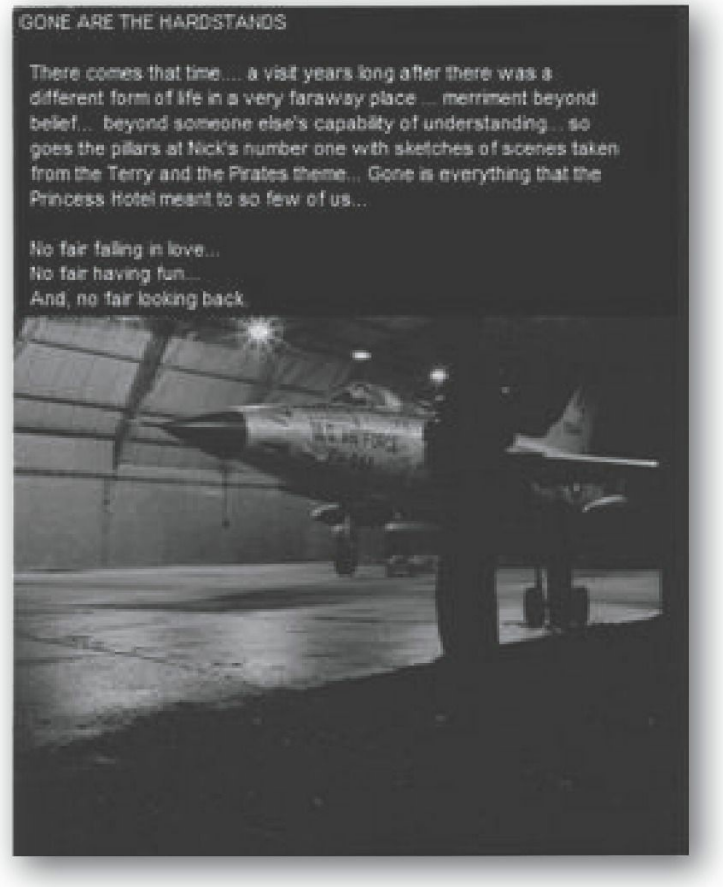


Photo courtesy of John Morrissey.

THE BUDDHA
TOM GARCIA

Thailand's people are friendly, personable, honest, and they seem to like Americans. I came to greatly enjoy my friendship with them during a 1966 Air Force assignment. My duties took me to more than three-dozen military bases, cities, towns, and villages. Most of the Thai I met were Buddhist. Their religious beliefs were largely a mystery to me. Somewhere in Thailand, probably Bangkok, I met two young law students. They, as often happened, struck up a conversation with me to practice English, or "American," as they were quick to inform me.

A few months later at a military camp in northeast Thailand, a messenger located me to inform me that I had two visitors at the main gate. What a surprise when it turned out to be the two young men from Bangkok. I brought them to the snack bar and treated to some soft drinks. They told me they were doing a kind of public-service duty for a few weeks in the northeast boondocks and wanted to see me because they had a gift for me. The gift, brought out of a tiny cardboard box, was a stone Buddha figure.

"This very old. Comes from old temple. Is special Buddha. Is for soldiers. Protects them."

"That's what I need," I replied. "Tell me more."

"There is only one day a week you can be killed. Hurt, maybe some other days, but not killed—if you carry this."

“What day?” I asked. “Tell me what day, and I’ll fix it with scheduling so that’s my day on desk duty, no flying.”

“Only Buddha knows that. The rest of us won’t know until you get killed. But,” he added, “it gives good protection. You probably won’t get killed or hurt.”

They then urged me to give the Buddha to my brother when I returned to the United States. These fellows had the idea that when my time in the war was over, one of my family members would have to replace me. Maybe that’s the way they do things in their military.

The Buddha was a welcome gift as I had just found out I would be transferring from Thailand to Vietnam, where I would need all the protection I could get. The village gold shop made me a case for the Buddha, in conformance with local practice, and I put it on a metal chain along with my dog tags.

Before long I was flying out of Nha Trang Air Base, on South Vietnam’s central coast. We needed a realistic training area for various flying activities having to do with our primary assignment in the mountainous central highlands. A place six or seven miles inland from Nha Trang was perfect. It was on the backside of a small mountain, a valley with trees and a primitive dirt road winding through it all. The area was not under government control, so there was a chance of running into Charlie, which provided the realism.

One particular afternoon we were checking out newly assigned pilots. A three-ship formation headed out to the practice area, line astern. In the lead was John Gruver, an instructor, with another pilot in the right seat, and a third pilot observing from the passenger compartment just behind the two forward pilots. Ship number two also had three pilots. The instructor pilot was Bill Lacy. I brought up the rear, with my two trainees.

John Gruver and I had known each other for many years. He was the most experienced USAF Huey pilot in Vietnam, just about to finish a full year’s tour. Bill Lacy was one of our best instructor pilots with many flying hours in a number of different helicopter types. John Gruver and I had one

thing in common on that day: we both carried similar good-luck charms—Buddhas from Thailand.

Our training drill was to simulate a fast-combat-assault operation by making an approach to a particular point along a place on the dirt road just wide enough to permit a landing, touch down for a few seconds (supposedly, the troops are jumping out to the ground), and then get up and out fast. The lead ship (Gruver) had it sort of easy, all open in front of him, no timing problems, and no one down in the landing zone unloading soldiers. Of course, if Charlie is lying in wait, Gruver would be the first to find out.

Lacy, as number two, had to time his pattern and approach so that he gets on the ground as soon as possible after Gruver has lifted off. If he is early, he has to greatly slow his final approach, making him more vulnerable to ground fire. If he has hung back too far and is late, the lead ship's troops don't have the additional firepower of the next group of soldiers should a ground fight break out. Ship number three has a similar situation as number two.

The mission's objective was to pump up the new guys—make them aggressive assault-helicopter pilots. Also, to identify those who might need extra training, spot instructor potential, and get the pilots settled into their new flying duties. Most of them had previously been in the missile-support business, flying Minuteman and Titan missile launch crews back and forth in Montana, Wyoming, and Arizona.

Gruver, Lacy, and I flew the first circuit, as a demonstration. Then the pilot in the right seat got a shot at it on the second circuit.

Gruver's ship was in and out, calling, "Lead's out," as he lifted off.

Lacy was in and out, calling, "Two's out," at the appropriate time.

It was my turn. We got in, landed, and just then heard Gruver make a call on the radio. "Two went into the trees! Right after takeoff!" He had seen it all while making his left turning climb out.

"How far in front of me?" I asked.

Gruver answered, “Less than a hundred meters, straight ahead about ten degrees to the left.”

As neither Gruver nor I had seen any ground fire and Lacy hadn’t called any on the radio, we both assumed, correctly, that Lacy had crashed for some other reason.

I sent the two trainees hoofing it through the woods toward the crash site, their M-16s at the ready, and then lifted off. It was only the second or third time I had flown solo from the copilot’s seat, which felt a little strange.

Gruver circled over the crash site to show the guys on the ground where it was, and I climbed for altitude to make a radio call back to Nha Trang. When I got in touch with the tower, I requested an HH-43 “Pedro” rescue helicopter. The nearest one was at Cam Rahn Bay, about forty minutes flying time to the southeast. That accomplished, I flew back to the dirt road down in the valley and landed. It was my turn to hike through the woods to the crash, hoping there were no enemy patrols in the area to complicate the rescue effort.

Upon arrival at the downed Huey, I saw a very badly smashed bird, a total wreck. The three pilots were seriously hurt, with broken bones, cuts, and bruises, but they were all conscious and in generally good spirits. Bob Peisher, one of the trainees, was even cracking jokes, as was usual for him. It was just a matter of time till the Pedro would evacuate them to the Nha Trang hospital.

When the HH-43 arrived, it hovered above the trees and sent a paramedic down to the ground on the hoist cable. He coordinated lifting two of the injured pilots via a Stokes Litter. Pedro couldn’t hoist any more weight and had to leave with what he had. Pilot number three, Fred Yonteck, was forced to wait for Pedro’s return trip.

While all this was going on, Gruver had gone back to Nha Trang and picked up a load of military police to come in and set up a defense perimeter around the crash. They stayed all night, and an Army Chinook lifted the wreck out the next day.

Bill Lacy’s combat tour was over, and he went back to the States. Fred Yonteck went to a hospital in Japan. When the cast came off his broken leg, he came back to Vietnam and flew as pilot on my last combat mission, the extraction of a special-forces recon team from an area along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. I don’t remember what happened to the third pilot.

Fifty years have passed. I still have the Buddha; though, I don’t carry it with me anymore. That day in 1967 wasn’t my day to be hurt or killed nor was it John Gruver’s day. Bill Lacy was the one who had the dubious honor of having a valley in Vietnam named for him. Could Buddha have protected him? Only Buddha knows the answer to that question.

THE ALL-TOO-BRIEF SAGA OF LTJG BILL MCWILLIAMS
DICK SCHAFFERT

June 7, 1966, the Sundowners were packing up and shipping out from Miramar. The checking in of a new officer from the east-coast F-8 training squadron almost went unnoticed. In fact, most of us didn't meet Lieutenant Junior Grade Bill McWilliams until our first All-Officer Meeting (AOM) aboard *Oriskany* underway to Yankee Station via Hawaii. He was introduced by our new Commanding Officer Dick Cook and promptly assigned as my wingman. Bill was only my second "official" wingman; the first being the amazing Larry Durbin, who didn't seem to "get enough" as my student at NAAS Kingsville and followed me to VF-13 aboard Shangri La. There he was both my wingman and my personnel officer. What's that old saying, "A demon for punishment?"

A few days later, we arrived off Hawaii and began our Operational Readiness Inspection. With Tooter Teague and myself, 350 gunnery flights in the F-11 at Kingsville, we easily defeated sister squadron VF-162 in the air-to-air competition. Bill's first flight as a Sundowner was a carrier qualification renewal. He did just fine. A hell of a lot of pressure on a guy who hadn't been in the cockpit for a couple of weeks while changing duty stations!

The *Oriskany* pulled into Pearl Harbor, and the Air Wing headed for Ft. Derussey, the Banyan Tree, and more Mai Tais than we could handle.

Unfortunately, it all proved too much for Bill, and he ended up "drunk as the proverbial skunk." He became quite obnoxious, especially to the pretty Hawaiian girls who frequented the club, and Skipper Cook quietly ordered me to take him back to the ship. At that moment, the little Irishman was standing on one of the tables and pulling his shirttail out of his trousers' fly! I approached him from the side, but he fell off the table and landed flat on his back. Former Texas A&M football player Tooter got there before I did and bent over Bill to help him to his feet. Bill responded by launching a sharp right hand to Tooter's nose. It was clearly broken, and blood was everywhere!

Fast-forward two days, and we're underway for Subic Bay and then Vietnam. Bill was, naturally, restricted to his room but was required to make the many briefings in the Ready Room as we prepared for war. The flight surgeon had reset Tooter's often-broken nose, and it was heavily bandaged. When we got within Soviet Badger range of Vladivostok, we went on alert. During a lull in the alert status, when Bill and the other newbies were getting some flight time, Tooter volunteered to man the alert aircraft. There were no known "inbounds," and he wanted to write some letters. He hadn't completed his first page when the alarm went off. The Russkies were inbound! Seconds later, Tooter taxied onto the port catapult. His oxygen mask was hanging down from his helmet because it wouldn't fit over his bandaged nose! Tooter was ready to go, but the Air Boss wouldn't launch him until he put on the mask. According to Tooter's later debrief, the force of the catapult launch on the oxygen mask rebroke his nose, and he was blinded for a moment by the tears in his eyes! He stuck with it and made the intercept, along with a VFP-63 guy in an RF-8A who took some great photos.

Two weeks later, on June 30, Bill and I both flew our first combat mission over Vietnam. I had about 3,000 flight hours, with over 700 in the Crusader, and he probably had at most 150. Neither of us had ever dropped live ordnance. When we manned our aircraft on *Oriskany*'s crowded flight deck, we happened to meet as we were preflighting those huge one-thousand-pound napalm bombs. Bill's eyes were as big as saucers, and his only comment was, "You got to be ****ing me!" We were a flight of four, and Bill was on my wing as number two. We found our forward air controller, call sign Bird Dog, orbiting near a burning village, which had been ravaged

by the Viet Cong. The Cong were now reportedly relaxing on a small peninsula jutting into the Mekong River. Bird Dog vectored us into position as we joined in a line-abreast formation with five hundred feet between aircraft. Our run-in was at only 350 knots to stay well within napalm release limitations. We all pickled both bombs on my call to "drop." That couple of acres of South Vietnamese jungle and everything on it ceased to exist! During the postflight briefing, I could sense that a couple of the guys, me included, were a little "shaky" about what we had done, but "new guy" Bill was cool as a cucumber!

Oriskany moved north to Yankee Station, and on July 9 Bill was again my number two in a four-plane flak suppression flight. Our mission was to protect an Alpha strike against the Vinh rail yard by hitting gun emplacements before the A-4 bombers arrived over the target. This time we carried two one-thousand-pound MK-83s with "daisy cutter" fuses designed to explode a few feet off the ground and hopefully discourage the NVN/Soviet/ Chinese gunners for hundreds of yards around. Those gunners had already taken out literally dozens of carrier attack pilots, and we knew it would be a wild fight. I briefed Bill to just stay on my wing, about fifty feet away. He'd know when we were in our dive and should pickle his bombs when he saw mine come off my wing racks.

It was as expected! When we arrived over the target ahead of the A-4s, the entire sky turned into huge orange and black explosions. I did one more violent jinxing turn, looked down and picked out a large concentration of muzzle blasts from 57 and/or 85mm guns, rolled inverted, and pulled my gunsight down to the target. I pickled at the briefed release altitude and looked around for Bill. After that wild maneuvering, I didn't expect to see him. But there he was, and he had dropped both his bombs. I was extremely proud to be sharing the airspace with him at that moment! Only one of the Skyhawks we were protecting took a hit, and he made it back to the ship.

About a month later after our first visit to the Philippines and the Cubi Point Club, a return to the "line," and more than a dozen fighter-escort missions, Bill and I were again entrusted with two MK-83s each. This time we were to take out the Brandon Bay Bridge in what was known as the "Hour Glass" region of North Vietnam's Red River Valley, the "Valley of Death!" The idea was to go in low and fast, avoid detection, and then pop up to roll-in

altitude and attack the bridge. Unfortunately, the weatherman was on the side of the NVN that day. After popping up, there was nothing but a low layer of clouds below us. We adroitly leveled off, with SAM missile warnings blaring in our headsets, and headed north where we could see the end of the low clouds. As we reached that point, with some scattered 57mm bursts mostly behind us, we saw another bridge in front of us. A much bigger one than our original target! We accelerated and were soon at a reasonable roll-in point where we were greeted by an unbelievable amount of flak, thankfully most exploding above us. We dropped those MK-83s in a run that was admittedly too fast, and as we pulled out over the top of a small hill, we saw all four of them "cratering" the northern approach to the bridge. Yeah, if you were a student of North Vietnam geography, you've already guessed it. It was the Thanh Hoa Bridge! Thankfully, we were not added to the list of some thirty-seven aircraft downed by its gunners!

Two months later, life in the supersonic lane came to an end for that courageous, all-guts, rookie Irish fighter pilot Bill McWilliams. At 7:25 a.m., October 26, 1966, he and Cody Balesteri, another junior Sundowner pilot who had previously been shot down and rescued, and our flight surgeon, the youthful Lloyd Hyde, were trapped in their stateroom when the flare locker exploded just one deck above and thirty feet forward of their location. They were not injured in the explosion, but the area where they were trapped was flooded during attempts to keep the fire from spreading throughout the interior of the ill-fated *Oriskany*. The entrance to their room was sealed with a watertight hatch, which also prevented any air from reaching them. The water stalled the compressor that normally vented the compartment, and they were doomed. It seemed God needed those three brave young Sundowners for some mission in heaven that morning.

When *Oriskany* limped into Subic a few days later, their bodies were off-loaded with those of forty-two other valiant sailors who had fought to save the ship. Their body bags were covered with American flags and placed reverently in the C-130 that would transverse the wide Pacific to return them to the nation that was their home, and to which they had all taken an oath to defend with their very lives.

The rest of us Sundowners walked off the ship and went to the Cubi Point Club. We arrived there in the early evening. We grouped around the

piano, and our piano-playing, ex-Blue Angel, Executive Officer Bob Rasmussen began leading us in song. We didn't stop singing until sunrise the next morning. The only song we couldn't really get all the way through was "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling." I'm quite certain St. Peter has since heard it more than a few times from the tough little guy who once flew my wing, through hell and back.

GOOD NIGHT, PARIS; FAREWELL, NAPLES; GOOD MORNING, VIETNAM!
DICK SCHAFFERT

In April 1965, I had the honor of flying as number six in Silver Step Leader Phil Craven's "Diamond of Diamonds" over Orly Field Paris during their annual air show. I appreciated having that low a number and being that far forward in the sixteen Crusader right echelon formation at thirty-seven thousand feet en route. RF-8 photo-escort film showed it was pretty challenging out there at number sixteen! Cracking a bullwhip comes to mind. We later descended until we were on the deck with fifty miles to go to Paris. Apparently, we weren't on the Frenchie's radar, and we hadn't made any inbound calls, so the air-show announcer told the crowd it appeared the twelve-thirty event, a flyover by aircraft from a Navy carrier in the Med., the Shangri La, would be canceled. According to on-the-ground observers, he had just made that announcement when Phil Craven loosened the rivets in their hangar roofs! Frenchies were so embarrassed they made an international incident out of it and prohibited any US military flights over their territory for a couple of weeks.

Recognizing the lure of an RON in Paris at the Moulin Rouge, the Air Wing Commander had earlier notified VF-62 Skipper Craven and VF-13 Skipper Jim Foster that all participants would recover on board *Shangri La* off Marseilles. Failure to return aboard would not be acceptable. Phil had taken us around Orly a couple of times, and fuel was scarce when we finally returned feet wet and found the *Shang* turning into the wind. One of our guys,

who shall go nameless, told Primary he was below bingo and requested a steer to Marseilles. Skipper Craven overrode Primary's transmission with "Stay in formation, or I'll shoot you down myself!"

The Mediterranean in '65 was a hoot, especially when compared with the incredible challenges being met every day on Yankee. There wasn't a pilot in our *Shangri La* Air Wing 10 who didn't recognize at least one name of a guy already in the Hanoi Hilton. Our nine-month deployment was scheduled through late fall, but in midsummer the word finally came down that we'd "share the wealth" with Air Wing 16 on the *Oriskany*. In accordance with the NAVAIR-declared policy of "every pilot getting a shot before anyone made two combat deployments," volunteers from Air Wing 10 would be chosen to replace about a third of Air Wing 16. The transfers would be made during the winter when both the *Shang* and *Oriskany* were back in CONUS. We submitted "volunteer" letters to our Skippers, and they made the decisions. Jim Foster gave me a bad time about my wife and four kids. But in the end, he named me, along with bachelors Randy "Iceman" Rime and Bob "Sledge" Grammar.

We were high on energy but, like most "peace-time" fighter pilots, very short on live ordnance-delivery experience. With over twenty-five hundred hours in tactical aircraft, I had fired only one Sidewinder missile, and that was for an air show in the Med. off the Intrepid in an F-11F. With a five-inch HVAR rocket on one wing and an AIM-9B on the other, I flew by the ship at five hundred feet, began a zoom climb, fired the HVAR, and as soon as I had the Sidewinder tone, fired the Sidewinder, which caught the HVAR easily. It was spectacular visuals for the dignitaries but not much in the way of training. My next three Sidewinders were fired six years later, in the heat of a six-on-one battle near Thai Binh at 1630 hours, December 14, 1967. The reenactment is on Discovery Channel's *Last Gunfighter*. The first "Winder" I fired at a MiG-17 flew by his right wing tip without fusing. I fired the second in a tight turn, and it apparently didn't hack the high-*g* corner required to track the target. I had a better setup for the third shot but was too busy to watch what happened after I fired the missile. Two MiG-17s, one thousand feet behind me hammering away with two 37mm and four 23mm cannons, were demanding my undivided attention.

My lack of air-to-ground ordnance experience was even more

pronounced! Achieving the second of my enlistment goals—I'd already married a girl who made Grace Kelly look like a boy—my firing of two five-inch HVARs off an F-5F Panther in the training command in 1957 and blowing up some South Padre Island sand were the only "live" ordnance I'd ever flung at Mother Earth. Now, at 0730 hours on June 30, 1966, I was preflighting two huge napalm tanks dwarfing my F-8E Crusader on the deck of the *Oriskany*. I had no idea what I was looking for, and the First Class Ordnance guy cautioned me, "Please don't try to land back aboard ship with these, sir."

I rendezvoused my flight of four napalm-laden Crusaders, and we went feet dry to look for our forward air controller somewhere fifty kilometers south of Hanoi in the midst of the Mekong Delta. "Bird Dog?" Was that his call sign—too far back to remember—but I do remember he was flying very low in a slow-moving aircraft and darn hard to see in the morning mist that frequented the Mekong. I felt like King Richard during the Crusades, arriving with all that firepower under my control and Bird Dog was happy to see us. "Tallyho, Bird Dog, this is Old Nick 206, directly overhead at Angels Five. I've got four fast movers with two Napes and four hundred rounds of twenty mike each. Where can we put it?"

Bird Dog had prime targets for us described as over a hundred heavily armed Viet Cong camped under the jungle canopy covering a five hundred-meter-wide and one-thousand-meter-long peninsula that jutted out into the Mekong. It was easy to find. Smoke was still rising from the farming village a kilometer to the north, which the VC had "raped and pillaged" the day before. "Brown Bears, check armament switches hot!" Under my breath I muttered a little El Cid, "For God, country, and those poor damned farmers!" We were setting up for our run-in when I suddenly began sweating profusely. I was about to kill every living thing in a large patch of Vietnam jungle! I nervously requested Bird Dog to mark the target for us. I felt like an absolute idiot when he replied something to the effect that this was not his day to die. If the bad guys, with their fingers on so many triggers, watching him orbit in his little kite, thought he was about to bring the wrath of the US Navy down upon them, he was dead meat!

Our run-in formation was line abreast, with one thousand feet of separation between aircraft—designed to disintegrate the entire peninsula

with napalm, directly into the morning sun. Not the best of all worlds, but we did it perfectly! The VC were indeed heavily armed, and four Crusaders made a hell of a lot of noise in that quiet jungle! As we crossed the Mekong River bank, streams of tracers blazed up through the green canopy. Three hundred feet of altitude and 350 knots. “Brown Bears, drop on my mark! One, two, three, drop!” I said to myself, “Please, dear God, forgive me. Thy will be done.” Eight billowing hideous flaming swaths of liquid fire destroyed everything unfortunate enough to have been down there on that quiet morning in South Vietnam. We didn’t have time to think about it! As we pulled up from treetop level, we were suddenly in the midst of what seemed like a hundred helicopters. I remember I was screaming into the mike and I heard Bird Dog swearing in a language that would indeed make a sailor blush. It turned out to be an attack force inbound to do business near where we had just dropped our ordnance. On our way out, Bird Dog explained the helos had arrived fifteen minutes too early. Fog of war? Above five thousand feet, and clear of all the choppers, we rejoined and Bird Dog began to assign us another target. I interrupted that we were napalm zero, but we did have four hundred rounds of 20mm each that we could lend to the fray. He didn’t take our offer. Most likely the skipper of all those helos had ordered him to get us the hell out of there.

I was back in the “napalm barrel” again the next day. Bird Dog found us a good target, and we again did it right, but I also ended up with a trip to Tan Son Nhut, and a free cup of coffee, when one of my napalm would not drop on the target, nor jettison over the water. I had to bingo to Saigon to download it. While sitting in the airport terminal, waiting for that to happen, a Pan Am 707 taxied in with a load of “fresh meat” for the battle, all dressed in clean and neat Army fatigues. I recognized one of the Pan Am crew as Dave Hamon, from my VF-13 squadron aboard Shangri La almost exactly one year earlier. Over another cup of coffee, he asked how much I was making flying combat. I told him fifty-five dollars per month, which was hazardous duty for about everyone at that time. He laughed and informed me he was getting hazardous-duty pay too, for being on the ground in Vietnam—ninety dollars per hour.

In retrospect, American taxpayers had given me a great weapons system and the opportunity to use it, and I appreciated it! I survived, and made a

contribution with 276 missions over the North, which is proof that I was a quick learner! However, I'd certainly have been more effective during those first few months of Rolling Thunder if I'd been provided with the opportunity and equipment to do a little realistic training beforehand.

That became very clear to me on my first Alpha Strike over the North, nine days after the napalm. I led a section of VF-111 Sundowner F-8E "Flak Suppressors" off *Oriskany* loaded with two MK-83 one-thousand-pound bombs equipped with Daisy Cutter fuses designed to explode four feet above ground and "suppress" the deadly Vietnamese gunners defending the Vinh rail yard. Going feet dry a half mile ahead of the main strike group, we had no trouble picking up our target. As the Vietnamese 37, 57, and 85mm guns began firing, it reminded me of a Western Nebraska wheat field on fire, a long line of brilliant orange flame and a dark cloud of billowing smoke. As we approached roll-in at twelve thousand feet, all that fire on the ground transferred to the air around us. Jink? Like a wild man! So much maneuvering that, when I looked down to check my roll-in airspeed, I was down to 250 knots! I hit the afterburner to regain airspeed, rolled inverted, pulled the fifty-mil ring on the windscreen gunsight down to the blazing gun barrels—and forgot to come out of burner. I understood the maximum release speed for the Daisy Cutter bomb-fusing system was 450 knots. Exceeding that could result in a failure of the fuse's arming propeller. Diving through release altitude of thirty-five hundred feet, I checked my speed—700 knots. Ah, damn! I came out of burner, adjusted my gunsight lead from fifty mils to pipper to target, and pickled. Following partial black out from an extremely high-*g* pullout, I glanced back and was rewarded with two beautiful plumes from those MK-83s doing their job. The Ordies (ordnance men) later laughingly told me the bombs had to go off when they hit the ground that hard. We must have made the gunners cover their heads just long enough because we didn't lose anyone on that major strike. However, flak suppression by a few tactical aircraft against the thousands of modern Soviet and Chinese rapid-fire weapons in North Vietnam was ridiculous—often described as being as effective as "urinating on a forest fire!"

Unfortunately, exactly two weeks later, VA-163 Old Salt Skipper Wynn Foster was hit by a 57mm cannon in that same area. Blew his right arm off, but "Captain Hook," as he was later known, incredibly flew his crippled

Skyhawk back towards Yankee Station to eject alongside a destroyer and complete a courageous and productive career in Navy Blue, with a little congressional intervention in passing the annual physical. Was it Michener who wrote, “Where do we get such men?” I’m so very fortunate that I was chosen to say good-bye to the Moulin Rouge in Paris, and the El Sombrero Bar in Naples, and good morning to Vietnam, and to have the opportunity to have served with *such a man* as Skipper Wynn Foster!

GOOD MORNING, NORM
DICK SCHAFFERT

To
Lieutenant Commander Norman Sidney Levy
US Navy Deceased (1934–66)

Good morning, Norm. It's Memorial Day 2014, 0729, Tonkin Gulf time. Haven't talked with you in a while. That magnificent lady on which we went through hell together. USS Oriskany has slipped away into the deep and now rests forever in silent waters off the Florida coast. Recall we shared a six-by-nine-feet stateroom aboard her during McNamara and Johnson's ill-fated Rolling Thunder, when our Air Wing 16 suffered the highest loss rates of any naval aviation unit in the Vietnam conflict. Three combat deployments, between May '65 and January '68, resulted in 62 aircraft shot down, 31 lost in flight operations, and 180 damaged by enemy fire from our assigned complement of 64 combat aircraft. With an assigned complement of 74 combat air crewmen, 59 of our aviators were killed and 13 captured or missing. Our statistical probability of surviving Rolling Thunder, where combat-illiterate politicians designated the tactics and targets, was less than 30 percent. The "probability" of one of our combat pilot's being an atheist approached zero!

Seems like a good day to make contact again. I've written every year since I threw that first "nickel on the grass" for you. For several years, it was only a handwritten note—which I ceremoniously burned to simulate your

being “smoked.” With the advent of the Internet, I shared annual e-mails to you with some of our colleagues. Unfortunately, the net is now a cesspool of idiocy! Much of it generated by those sixteen million draft dodgers who avoided Vietnam to occupy and unionize America’s academia. They clearly succeeded in “dumbing down” an entire generation that now controls the heartless soul of a corrupt “Hollywoodized” media. This will be my last letter. I’m praying Gabriel will soon fly my wing once more, and I look forward to delivering it to you personally.

This is the forty-eighth year since I last saw you, sitting on the edge of your bunk in our stateroom. You remember—it was the 26th of October 26, 1966, and we were on the midnight-to-noon schedule. There was a wall of thunderstorms over North Vietnam, with tops to fifty thousand feet, but McNamara’s civilian planners kept sending us on “critical” missions all night. At 0400, they finally ran out of trucks to bomb in that downpour, and we got a little sleep. Our phone rang at seven; you were scheduled for the Alert Five. I’d bagged a little more rack time than you, so I said I’d take it. I went to shave in the shower room around the elevator pit, the one near the flare locker. The ordnance men were busy putting away the flares. They’d been taking them out and putting them back all night as McNamara’s “whiz kids” continually changed the targets. I’d finished shaving and started back to our room when the guy on the ship’s loudspeaker screamed, “This is a drill; this is a drill - FIRE, FIRE, FIRE!” I smelled smoke and looked back at the door that separated the pilots’ quarters from the flare locker. Smoke was coming from underneath.

I ran the last few steps to our room and turned on the light. You sat up on the edge of your bunk, and I shouted, “Norm, this is no drill. Let’s get the hell out of here!” I went down the passageway around the elevator pit, banging on the sheet metal wall and shouting, “It’s no drill. We’re on fire! We’re on fire!” I was rounding the corner of that U-shaped passage when the flare locker exploded. There was a tremendous concussion effect that blew me down and out of the passageway and onto the hangar deck. A huge ball of fire was rolling across the top of the hangar bay.

You and forty-five other guys, mostly Air Wing pilots, didn’t make it, Norm. I’m sorry. Oh, dear God, I am sorry! But we went home together, Norm Levy, a Jewish boy from Miami, and Dick Schaffert, a Lutheran

Cornhusker from Nebraska.

I rode in the economy class of that Flying Tigers 707, along with the other few surviving pilots. You were in a flag-draped box in the cargo compartment. Unfortunately, the scum media had publicized the return of us "Baby Killers," and Lindberg Field was packed with vile demonstrators enjoying the right to protest. The "right" you died for!

Our wives were waiting in a bus to meet our plane. There was a black hearse for you. The protestors threw rocks and eggs at our bus and your hearse—not a policeman in sight. When we finally got off the airport, they chased us to Fort Rosecrans. They tried to interrupt your graveside service until your honor guard of three brave young Marines with rifles convinced them to stay back.

I watched the TV news with my family that night, Norm. Sorry, the only clips of our homecoming were the "Baby Killer" banners and bombs exploding in the South Vietnam jungle—recall our operations were up North, against heavily defended targets, where we were frequently shot down and captured or killed. It was tough to explain all that to my four preteen children.

You know the rest of the story. The vulgar demonstrators were the media's heroes. They became the CEOs, who steal from our companies; the lawyers, who prey off our misery; the doctors, whom we can't afford; and the elected politicians, who break the faith and the promises.

The only military recognized as "heroes" were the POWs. They finally came home, not because of any politician's self-aggrandized expertise but because there were those of us who kept going back over Hanoi, again and again—dodging the SAMs and the flak, attacking day and night, keeping the pressure on, all by ourselves! Absolutely no support from anyone! Many of us didn't come home, Norm. You know; the guys who are up there with you now. But it was our "unmentioned" efforts that brought the POWs home. We kept the faith with them, and with you.

It never really ended. We seemed to go directly from combat into disabled retirement and poverty, ignored by those whose freedoms we insured by paying that bloody premium. The politically adjusted report,

issued for the 100th Anniversary of US Naval Aviation, confirmed that we, and our brothers who flew in Korea, have been written out of American history. Norm, I only hope that today's overpaid bureaucratic "dudes," who cook the books, scramble the facts, and push the propaganda for their political puppet masters, will not succeed in scrubbing your name off the Wall. That Wall and our memories are the only things many of us have left. We hold those memories dear! We band together in groups like the Crusader Association, which is now holding its twenty-seventh "Last Annual" reunion. Some say the association has to do with flying a peculiar aircraft. I say it has to do with a peculiar bunch of guys. We'll all be seeing you shortly, Norm. Put in a good word for us with the Man. Ask Him to think of us as His peacemakers, as His children. Have a restful Memorial Day, Fighter Pilot. You earned it.

Very Respectfully,
Your Roommate Dick "Brown Bear" Schaffert

Postscript: It's been more than forty years since I finally sailed from Yankee Station in the Tonkin Gulf aboard another carrier, arrived off the southern California coast, made my last catapult launch, and proudly led my squadron home to Naval Air Station Miramar. There were no "cheering crowds" to greet us, only family and friends from whom we had literally been separated for years. We, who had cheated death or imprisonment in the Hanoi Hilton, didn't need any of the Hollywoodized fanfare that now accompanies the return of "warriors." We had each other. And, as we had learned during ten thousand days and nights of combat, flying and fighting over North Vietnam, that's all we really needed—each other! Our duty was to God, honor, and country, but our allegiance in those politically troubled times was first and foremost to each other!

I can truthfully and factually state, since my return from that combat, I have never witnessed any meaningful "act" by any politician that recognized my service or the sacrifices of my roommates and wingmen.

NELLIS EJECTION
JOHN MORRISSEY

On November 4, 1966, I ejected about twenty miles northwest of Nellis when the tach went to zero on Fighter Weapons School F-105D 529. I had a "difficult" ejection—the chute did not open automatically, broken/cracked vertebrae, some leg and "tain't" damage, 24/7 "'discomfort"' and a hard landing in the hills at approximately eleven-thousand feet density altitude. I was in the base hospital for about ten days. After about six days, I was getting restless and talked two of the nurses into dropping me at the O'Club (they used the ambulance!) for an hour or so when they promised to return and fetch me.

The main club and Stag Bar was in rehab, so an old WWII barracks was given a spot overhaul to accommodate a bartender and his liquor cabinet. I walked in wearing a hospital robe, braced with a cane, and propped myself up at the main (only) bar and ordered a double. There was no one in that dim, dusty old club but the bartender and me—for a while. I had been there about an hour when a nice-looking older couple in civilian clothes walked in and sat down next to me.

As it turned out, they were Martha Raye and Earnest Borgnine.

We got to talking, and I asked them why here—why now? Simply, they said, "To get away from the Vegas bullshit." Or perhaps it was so none of the "wrong" people would see them together. Who knows? Or cares. Regardless,

we had a great time. They asked me if I would be back the next day.

“Sure.”

“Then so will we.”

And they were. They were great folks, really great.

The way it was fifty-one years ago when the Air Force was terrific, the flying unbelievable, and the nurses who returned to pick me up and cart me back to the hospital were “understanding.”

MIGCAP, BARCAP, AND SAR
DICK SCHAFFERT

On July 18, 1967, my section of VF-111 F-8C Crusaders was assigned duty as MIGCAP to escort an Alpha strike against the Bridges at Co Trai. Unfortunately, after the catapult shot, my jet, Old Nick 106, gave me a wing-unlocked warning light. I raised and lowered the wing several times, but the unsafe indication persisted. Since my wingman ENS John Laughter had radio failure, I traded VF-162's John Hellman our MIGCAP for his BARCAP. I dropped my wingy off, so he could join the recovery in progress, and proceeded (slowly) to the BARCAP station near the northern Search-and- Rescue (SAR) destroyer, Harbor Master.

During the strike, Dick Hartman in a VA-164 A-4E, call sign Magic Stone, was hit by enemy fire. He ejected about twenty-five miles south of Hanoi, and other Skyhawks set up a RESCAP over him. Listening to all this on Strike Control frequency, while orbiting slowly off the mouth of the Red River, I again recycled Old Nick 106's wing several times—still the unlocked indication. The Magic Stone's RESCAP made contact with Hartman on his emergency radio, reported his TACAN position from *Oriskany*, and asked Harbor Master to initiate a rescue. But the Magic Stone A-4s were running out of fuel, and they had to bingo back to *Oriskany*.

I knew from personal experience with the successful rescue of VF-162's Butch Verich at Phu Ly two days earlier, timing was everything. If the rescue couldn't be made in the first hour or two, the unfavorable odds became

astronomical! So I asked Red Crown (the Yankee Station command and control cruiser) for a vector to Hartman's position and went feet dry.

I'd witnessed the death of VF-162's Lee Prost a few months earlier when his wing came off during a strafing run, so I tried to hold 106's speed down to the wing-unlocked limitation of 220 knots. Not possible! Seconds after crossing the beach, I was taking 37/57 mm flak close aboard, so I pushed it up to 300. When a Fansong tracking radar locked on, and my APR-27 warned of a SAM launch, Old Nick 106 showed me her wing would stay on through a 350 knot, 3-*g* barrel roll.

I was about twenty miles south of Hartman's reported position, down low trying to shake off a Fansong, when I stumbled across an emergency radio beeper. Going over the top in another barrel roll, I spotted what looked like a parachute. It was the first time we realized two Skyhawks were down; both Hartman and (as we found out later) his wingy, Larry Duthie; who'd been hit while orbiting, or leaving, Hartman's position. I couldn't get Duthie to answer on the radio. His emergency beeper was weak but clear, so I swung down just above the trees and brush in an attempt to pick him up visually. That brought a whole lot of 37mm my way. Not wanting to give Duthie's exact position away to the bad guys, I climbed out of there and took up a position to the west, staying within visual range.

Communications with Harbor Master indicated the Navy was launching the SAR helicopter, which had earlier been requested for Hartman. There were also reports that an Air Force HH-3 Jolly Green with Sandy A-1 escorts had scrambled when Hartman was reported down and were en route from the southwest. It was simply a matter of me staying overhead and vectoring them to Duthie's position when they arrived. That involved forty-five minutes of evading continual 37mm and 57mm, and an occasional SAM. At one particularly hazardous point, 106 kept her wing on at 400 and 4.5 *g* before the SA-2 flew past.

Unfortunately, the SAR aircraft still had a way to come when I reached bingo fuel. *Oriskany* had earlier launched all her KA-3D tankers to top off the Alpha strike and was trying to hot-spin one to get some fuel back in the air. All they had airborne right then was one A-4 buddy tanker to cover the recovery. The rules were clear! That tanker had to stay around the carrier

landing pattern.

God was in the air that day. I felt His hand on the stick many times! He also inspired one hell of an A-4E driver by the name of Mac Davis who, upon his arrival back at *Oriskany*, lied about his fuel state, took the fuel from the buddy tanker, and came back in to help me.

When I heard Mac coming, I knew we had a great chance to get Duthie if I could stay long enough to show him the location. So I changed my bingo fuel calculations from making *Oriskany* to just making it to the water, feet wet. Davis made a perfect rendezvous on me, and I dropped him off over Duthie, as Harbor Master's helo reported approaching the area and the Sandy flight reported coming in from the southwest. I was down to five hundred pounds of fuel, less than ten minutes, and suddenly realized I couldn't make it to the water. I was reporting my likely ejection position to Red Crown when tanker pilot Tom Maxwell came up on the frequency. His KA-3D detachment had dozens of "saves" during that '67–'68 cruise, and I was the lucky recipient of two of them in our first week on the line. It was against all the rules for the guys in those big slow tankers to go feet dry in the area of known SAM firings, but Tom Maxwell gave me the same break I'd given Duthie and came on in to save my rear! I heard later that he'd simply looked at his BN Jim Vanderhoek and the aircrewman while they were listening to my situation, and they both gave him an automatic thumbs-up. Tom made a perfect rendezvous on me and swung in front of Old Nick 106 with his drogue extended, and our APR-27s blaring a SAM launch warning in our ears. After the plug-in, I glanced down at my fuel gauge and saw it rising off the zero index mark.

When I disconnected with enough to make *Oriskany*, the Harbor Master SAR was checking in over Duthie's position. Unfortunately, they got shot up —real quick and real bad! One of their crew was killed, and they were forced to withdraw. Magic Stone LT(jg) Wood's A-4E was also hit during the rescue attempt, but he made it to the water, ejected, and was picked up by a boat from Harbor Master. "Perfume," the Yankee Station commander, wasn't about to give up on Duthie! Major York and his brave crew with their USAF Jolly Green HH-3 finally plucked Larry from certain capture, or worse.

Contact was reestablished with Dick Hartman, but it was too dark to try

for another rescue. Perfume directed an attempt to maintain radio contact. *Oriskany* Crusader drivers J. P. O'Neil and Pete Peters, and others, dodged SAMs in that area all night to talk with him. The brilliant glow from a SAM's booster rocket motor lift-off at night was followed by extreme difficulty in judging its closure rate. This led to JP's famous quote, "I completed three barrel rolls and was in the midst of a hammer-head stall before it ever got to me!" Dick Hartman reported an intensive weapons buildup all around him and suggested a massive strike on the area.

At first light the next morning, *Oriskany* launched sixteen aircraft, under the leadership of that natural-born courageous SOB of an A-1H Spad Driver, VA-152 Skipper Wilson, to escort a SAR helicopter from HS-2 to get Hartman. Just short of Dick's position, the helo made an unfortunate turn over a 37mm gun position—and all those brave souls on board were killed. Wilson immediately went back for another helo, but that one got shot up before getting more than ten miles feet dry, and Perfume called it off. There was talk of trying the Fulton Recovery Rig, and we attempted to maintain contact with Hartman. He evidently evaded capture for three days—then it was over. Dick was probably either killed while being captured or died shortly thereafter. His remains were returned in 1974. The remains of the heroic helo crew came home in 2012.

Years later, I wondered if Hartman's story had been the inspiration for Stephen Coonts' rescue segment in his all-too-real, and much-appreciated, movie, *Flight of the Intruder*. I know they stole VA-164 Rock Hodge's "Cool Hand" call sign. But God bless them for keeping him alive in some way! Rock was a former Air Force B-47 pilot who transferred to the Navy to get into combat. Flying a Magic Stone A-4E with Shrike missiles, he was an absolutely fearless SAM killer—until a vicious fight near Hanoi on October 7, 1967, when he took on too many Hanoi SAM sites at the same time. I escorted Rock on several Iron Hand missions. It didn't matter to him where the target was; if there were no SAMs there to shoot at us, he'd fly toward Hanoi until they opened up, and he could launch his Shrikes at them!

Rock's remains were recovered in 1996 during a joint US/Vietnam effort, finally returned to America, and interred at Arlington. In a note to his daughter, I mentioned that, while on Yankee Station, I'd added the 23rd Psalm to my prayers, and when I was scheduled to escort Rock, I'd pray,

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow death, I shall fear no evil; for Thou art with me, and I’m going there with Cool Hand.” Rock Hodges was one of only two mortals I ever knew who could give the angels lessons in courage. Mac Davis was killed seven days after he vectored the first rescue helo to Duthie. We had to prove to McNamara and Johnson that we could bomb trucks at night, under a five-hundred-foot overcast. Mac hit the side of a hill in Route Pack 1.

Major York received the Air Force Cross and his courageous crew Silver Stars. Some other participants were awarded DFCs. Tom Maxwell and his heroic tanker crew violated higher authority rules of engagement by coming into the SAM envelope to save me. “Greater love hath no man.” Unbelievably, they were not recommended for the combat award decorations they so courageously earned. Their award recommendations would have been reviewed by “higher authority” and perhaps might have brought criticism of our leadership abilities. Our Air Wing Commander Burt Shepherd was later invited to the Oval Office to display our collective Rolling Thunder hand-held combat photography. He also received recognition on the *Ed Sullivan Show* as the Navy’s (then) most decorated aviator; and now-Senator John McCain (who survived the Forrestal fire to fly twenty-three missions before he got bagged) was the star of Discovery Channel’s documentary about our Attack Squadron 163 Saints. The rest of us have just suffered in silence, through long sleepless nights, occasionally trying to type e-mail with tears fogging our glasses. God bless us, each and every one, and may God bless the America we all fought for, for which so many of us were tortured, and that many died for.

"TWO-ONE—YOU'RE ON FIRE!"
JOHNNY HUTCHERSON

"TWO-ONE… YOU'RE ON FIRE!"

Those were the last words I heard before we crashed.

I was Door Gunner on a UH–1 D Huey Helicopter, tail number 66-00936 in Vietnam. The date was September 26, 1968. I had been "in-country" for about three months at the time and assigned to D Troop, 3rd Squadron of the 5th Cavalry attached to the 9th Infantry Division. Our base was located at Dong Tam in the Mekong River Delta.

My aircraft commander was Lieutenant Jim Clary. He was a great guy who taught me officers were just regular guys too. On the ground it was "Jim," but in the air it was, "Yes, Sir," or "No, Sir." We knew who the boss was.

My crew chief was Charles Roberts. He was older than most of the guys in the Troop, and he really knew his helicopters. We usually had different copilots, also called "Peter Pilots" or just "Petes," from day to day. This day our Pete was WO-1 Mike Chapas.

I was the Door Gunner—just a young twenty-year-old from a small town in the panhandle of Texas.

That morning we had been flying a "Sniffer" mission without much

luck locating any VC, so our Troop Air Mission Commander (AMC), who was also the unit Executive Officer, or XO, Captain Whitworth, ordered us to support some ground troops from the 9th Divison. This usually meant we had to circle at one thousand feet and wait, which was pretty boring. But as soon as we got to the area of operation, there was a call for a Medevac. Lieutenant Clary never hesitated for a second when a ground commander asked for a Medevac. He was on the radio, answering the call, “This is Longknife Two-One; we have it.”

As we got closer to the LZ, Lieutenant Clary told me enemy fire would be on my side of the helicopter, and the LZ was very hot. As I looked down, I could see a helicopter with a big red cross on it turned over on its side. I knew we were going to take a lot of fire. As soon as we started down and I could see the tree line, I started firing my M-60 machine gun. We hit the LZ, and the ground troops headed to our aircraft with a guy who was hit bad; he had a chest wound.

No fire was received, so I jumped out to help lift him into our copter. We hovered over to another area, and this one was hot too. We were getting a lot of fire, a staff sergeant with a neck wound jumped on, and then I heard one of our pilots say, “I’m hit! You got it!”

We took off and were moving pretty fast, but we weren’t climbing. Then I heard someone say on the radio, “Two-One—You’re on fire!” A second later I saw the sky, then rice paddy, and then the helicopter was right over me. I was sure it was falling on top of me. I had not yet buckled my seat belt and was thrown out of the copter. The next thing I remember is seeing our helicopter turned upside down and burning. I was about one hundred feet from it. Then the fire just went out. I rose up and received fire. Before I could get back down, I took a hit in the lower right part of my chicken plate (bulletproof vest) that turned me, and then I felt a burn in my back. I thought for sure I was the only one alive, and now I was hit.

Soon I heard Lieutenant Clary call my name, “Hutch!”

I answered with, “I’m here!”

“Are you OK”?

“Yes, sir.”

“Then get over here.” The sound of Lieutenant Clary’s voice came from the other side of the chopper, so I started to crawl toward our downed ship.

About twenty-five feet on my side of the chopper, I found a black soldier with a chest wound. I thought, “This isn’t the guy I helped lift in the ship! Where did this guy come from? He must have been loaded on from Roberts’s side. I asked if he could move, and he didn’t say a word. Then he just took hold of my arm and said, “Help me.”

I started pulling him along with me, but soon he realized he had to help himself some. This guy was over 200 pounds, and I was around 140 pounds. We finally made to Lieutenant Clary’s location. I looked at everyone and could see Roberts was in a lot of pain, Mr. Chapas was in pretty good shape, but he took some metal in his leg. Lieutenant Clary had a very bad foot wound, and there was the other man with the chest wound. He was talking, and I could tell he was hurting. The sergeant with the neck wound looked OK, but wasn’t helping the other guys too much. Maybe he was in shock?

Lieutenant Clary asked if I was OK again, and I said, “I’m fine, but I think I got hit in the back.” He lifted my shirt and told me I was hit but not bad.

Jim said, “OK, guys, we need to get away from this chopper, so let’s start moving back.” We were still receiving some fire from the tree line about two hundred feet to our front. “There’s a hooch over there so let’s go that way.”

About halfway to the hooch, Mike Chapas asked Jim if he had the emergency radio. Jim said, “No!”

Mike said, “I’ll go back and get it.” I told Jim I’d better go too and get one of the M-60s.

Mike and I got back to the chopper, and when I started to pull off the M–60, we started to take a lot of ground fire, but we were able to get the radio and the gun. I also grabbed a grenade. After we rejoined the group, Jim took the grenade and rolled it into the hooch, a good way of making sure

there weren't any VC waiting for us inside. I set the gun up but soon realized that it wouldn't fire because of damage it received during the crash. I was hoping to get off a few rounds just to let the VC know we had some firepower. Maybe keep them off our backs for a while. Only a few months before, one of our Loach's was shot down, and before the Troop could get the pilot and gunner out, they had been overrun and killed by the enemy. I knew this could happen to us.

Jim made radio contact, and soon I saw the C&C ship start to come in to get us, but they pulled up. Later I heard they had taken hits and were forced to land in a rice paddy not too far from us. I saw one Loach fly by, but it also left the area. I then realized it was too hot for any of our guys to get in and get us out. That was when I started to worry. When our Loach pilots, like Ace Cozzalio, stayed out of the area, it was Hot! Ace had been put in for the Medal of Honor, which was downgraded to the Distinguished Service Cross for some reason. I can say Ace was the bravest man I ever knew.

It was late in the day, and I knew if we didn't get picked up by nightfall we didn't have much of a chance. The VC would wait until dark then make their move on us. All we had for weapons were four pistols, two .45s and two .38s, which wasn't much defense. The two guys with chest wounds couldn't last much longer. Jim told us he used the emergency radio to call in an air strike. It was on its way! Soon, I watched this Air Force jet drop his load. We were so close I could see the pilot inside the cockpit. I was later told he dropped two five hundred pounders, but that one was a dud. Whatever he dropped, it did the trick and none too soon. It was now sunset.

Jim told us to get ready and that a chopper was on its way to pick us up and we needed to load fast. This would be our only chance.

I heard the chopper coming in, and so did the VC. Just as the chopper landed, the VC started firing. Mr. Lake was flying UH-1D (00938) with two of my buddies. Crew chief Mike McGuire and door gunner Jim Driver were there to pick us up. We loaded fast as Mike and Jim covered us with their M-60s firing away. I even started firing my .38 into the tree line.

I will never forget my days as a Door Gunner for the Long Knives in D Troop 3/5 Air Cav. When I arrived in-country, we had five UH-1D (Hueys).

Four of them were sister ships 66-00936, -937, -938, -939, and 66-16480. All were lost due to combat damage or on a combat mission within nine months:

66-00937—crashed August 1968 due to tail rotor failure while on a Sniffer mission.
66-00936—shot down September 26, 1968, on a medivac.
66-16480—shot down October 18, 1968, while on a medivac.
66-00938—blew up from a grenade in the fuel tank March 1969.
66-00396—I can't remember what happened.

I got out of the army in December 1969 and went to work for Bell Helicopter in Amarillo, Texas. Amarillo was Bell's overhaul facility. One morning I was walking up the line, and for some reason, I stopped and looked at the data plate on this ship. I read the number 66-00938. This was Mike McGuire's old ship, the ship he used to save my life. A deep chill came over me as I flashed back to the Vietnam War.

I return to that war almost every night. I want to make it very clear that I am not a hero. I was just a young kid, twenty years old and full of fear. However, I did serve with many heroes in Vietnam. Sometimes I wonder why God put me in D Troop 3rd of the 5th Air-Cavalry, as D troop was made up of many of the bravest men on earth. My job as a door gunner was to protect the helicopter and support the infantry. I only wish I had done a better job.

Today I live in Fredericksburg Texas with my wife of forty-one years. I feel my wife, Theresa, is a Vietnam Veteran also. We were married before I went into the Army. She has lived with the effects and deep feelings that the Vietnam War left with me. She has suffered greatly because of me. However, she stayed with me and fought for me. I once heard her ask a VA doctor, "Can you give me back that sweet boy I married before he was sent to Vietnam?"



Wreckage of Longknife 21 in a rice paddy.
Photo courtesy of Johnny Hutcherson, Door Gunner, Huey 66-00936.



Longknife 21 after recovery.
Photo courtesy of Johnny Hutcherson, Door Gunner, Huey 66-00936.

CASTING A NUGGET FROM COLD STEEL: JOHN LAUGHTER DICK SCHAFFERT

Replacement pilots were at a premium when we left Yankee and limped back to CONUS on November 16, 1966, with a disabled, fire-blackened *Oriskany*, and a "pilot-manning level" read, "Survivors, of less than 40 percent!" We certainly were not the only Air Wing getting the heck shot out of us, and we had to wait our turn in line for the "must pump" replacements tumbling out of short-handed replacement Air Wings that had to compete with the fleet for assets. During our seven month turn around, with training access to the "under repair" *Oriskany* for only the last four weeks, we, VF-111, received six Nuggets, a first tour pilot. They all graduated from a shortened training syllabus with fifty hours less flight time in the Crusader than what had previously been considered the "safe" minimum. Three of those six were shot down during our next deployment. I was fortunate to have ENS John Laughter assigned as my wingman. We'd only been back on Yankee for a couple of weeks, and he'd flown maybe a dozen combat missions with less than two hundred hours in the Crusader when he showed us what he was made of—and it was really good stuff!

North Vietnam's Van Nhue headquarters area, read Pentagon, was located in the suburbs six miles southeast of downtown Hanoi. We tried for it on July 31 by going "straight up the gut" from feet wet near Thanh Hoa to Hanoi. The theory was it would be less exposure time, but as we found out over forty years later, our SecState was notifying the NVN "civilians" exactly

where and when we would attack so they would run and hide? We lost the first of our nuggets, Charlie Zuhoski, on that strike while he was protecting a Shrike shooting A4-E from VA-164. Thank God he came home in ‘73, but then the poor rascal ended up relieving me from a tedious Pentagon assignment with the remnants of McNamara’s Whiz Kids—from the frying pan to the fire?

About a week later, we were sent back to Van Nhue again. This time they were really ready! John Laughter joined on my wing shortly after the cat shot, and we rendezvoused with the strike group led by “Bummie Spediveckie,” a.k.a. Magic Stone’s Ops Officer Bob Arnold. As the only two MIGCAP aircraft assigned for the mission, John and I were a few miles “out front” of about a dozen A-4 bombers. We could expect to be hit by MiG-21s from either side during our run-in. The Gomers had established a tactic where Fishbeds would be positioned in a high orbit along our run-in line and would push over for a supersonic pass to salvo their Atolls. Ideally, that would happen simultaneously with MiG-17s hitting the strike head-on. However, if the MiG-17s weren’t airborne, the MiG-21s would likely attack before we entered the SAM envelope.

After going feet dry, John and I began a weave across the front of the strike group keeping eyes on both sides and with enough altitude to accelerate and counter the MiG-21s. We were about halfway to the target when my radio failed—completely! I signaled my problem by rocking my wings violently, and John immediately reacted by joining on my wing so we could communicate with hand signals. Now, the ROE for NORDO (no radio) over the beach was clear. Proceed immediately feet wet and get back to the ship so they wouldn’t think you were missing. If you were a flight of two, join up and go feet wet was the order of the day! John acknowledged my passing him the lead of our section, but when he indicated we were turning back, I gave him a violent negative headshake. Didn’t have to tell that Tiger twice! He immediately signaled the sliced hand forward toward the windscreen. We were in the fight to stay! I slid out into fighting wing, about fifteen hundred feet aft at a forty-five-degree angle; and, for the next thirty minutes, was treated to one of the most spectacular events a combat pilot could ever witness—and pray to survive!

We had approached the target from the ridgeline northeast of Hanoi,

and they waited until we turned south for the city before all hell broke loose. The skies filled with Soviet SA-2 SAM trails, orange balls of fire on the ground where they were lifting off, then the higher contrails—if they missed. The word during the intelligence briefing for the strike was that a load of missiles had arrived at Haiphong a few days earlier and they were expected to be in position. They were! Ethan Allen, RB-66s, later reported monitoring 108 electronic transmissions for SAMs being "guided" during the time of our attack. Visual reports confirmed at least forty-four missiles fired at our twenty-two aircraft.

It was like a silent movie in my NORDO cockpit! White missile trails, orange fireballs of exploding SAM warheads, then a tremendous amount of black and gray explosions as the Hanoi-complex sites joined the battle. Thousands of cannons and hundreds of thousands of small arms. Through it all, Nugget John Laughter kept us in a perfect protective position. First in front of the strike group, then a wide circle around the "mouth of hell," then again the protective weave above the last of those incredibly brave Skyhawk drivers as they fought their way back down the Red River, and finally monitoring "tail-end Charlie" Skyhawk Pilot Marv Reynolds. A SAM had hit Marv, but he made it back to *Oriskany*. His A-4 was in such bad shape it was beyond *Oriskany*'s repair capabilities.

The MiGs didn't show up for the fight. Probably too smart to go anywhere near that chaos! Maybe they saw the radar blips of John and me in a position that could give them problems if they tried to dive in or maybe our real contribution was simply adding two more targets for the Gomers to choose from. Whatever, we didn't lose any Yankee Station Assets on that mission, and "Bummie" and his wingy put their bombs into the headquarters building.

Bummie again showed initiative and decisiveness under pressure a couple of weeks later, when *Oriskany* was back in Subic Bay, RP, for a few days of R and R. One dark and steaming night most of the Air Wing decided to "live it up" at the Subic Club and give the bartenders at the Cubi Club a well-deserved rest. When the Subic Club closed that night, a forty-passenger bus was waiting to take some of us back to *Oriskany*. Unfortunately, the driver was not to be found! We, including CAG Shepherd and some squadron Cos, sat in that hot bus for what seemed too long. Then Bummie rose from

his seat, staggered down the aisle, and settled into the driver's seat. The engine roared to life, and we were underway for the twenty-minute ride over the rough road that circled the marshy area of the bay as it wound its way to the pier. Bummie was offered all sorts of navigation assistance but kept us on an even keel—until the red lights of the angry base police closed in from behind. Not to be outsmarted, Bummie pulled over, stopped abruptly, and hurried back to his seat. When the police entered the "reportedly stolen" bus, they immediately inquired as to the whereabouts of the driver. CAG volunteered that he was last seen running into the bushes alongside the road. Although his statement did not require confirmation, it was affirmed by cheers from fore to aft!

I don't have access to John Laughter's logbook, but I'd bet one-half of his first five hundred hours in the Crusader are in green ink, the color of courage under fire! I was the Sundowner's Ops Officer, and John was my Flight Officer. He always wrote the next day's flight schedule, and I presented it to Skipper Bob Rasmussen for signature. I don't recall Old Nick One ever making a change. It would have been normal for John Laughter to wonder why our Brown Bear section necessarily appeared on the "going downtown" Alpha Strike schedule so often—years later, he shared with me the thought, "It was just what Brown Bears did!" God bless you, Brown Bear Two and thanks for taking the lead that crazy August '67 day over North Vietnam, and for keeping me in the fight and alive through many of my 276 over the North.

2200, Flight Deck, USS Oriskany: Tonkin Gulf—Focus
Dick Schaffert

I peered over the right side of the cockpit of my F-8C Crusader to watch the ordinance man (Ordie) check the Focus missile with his flashlight. The growl in my headset told me the missile, located on the upper station of the Y pylon on the fuselage, was functioning normally. I gave the Ordie a thumbs-up and waited as he crossed under the nose to check the Sidewinder missile on the left upper station. It passed the flashlight check also. I knew the Ordie would also be taking a close look at the dual Zuni rocket packs on both lower Y stations. The yellow-shirted taxi director emerged from the red gloom of the darkened flight deck with his yellow wands. He gave me the crossed-wand signal, and I held the brakes as the chocks were removed.

I heard other aircraft checking-in and recognized the calm voice of my flight leader, Bob Rasmussen. Bob was a former Blue Angel and now the Commanding Officer of our VF-111 Sundowners. I'd served with "Ras" in VF-33, an F-11F squadron aboard the USS *Intrepid* in the Mediterranean five years earlier. Besides being an incredible pilot, Ras was an inspiring combat flight leader. He was exactly the guy I wanted to fly with on this particular mission. As Operations Officer, I'd penciled us in on the flight schedule the preceding day, and Ras had signed off on it.

Before leaving San Diego three months earlier, our squadron had received nine experimental Focus missiles. They had contrast-seeking heads

mounted on standard Sidewinder rocket motors. It was a predecessor for seekers that would later prove valuable on other Navy guided weapons. Our squadron had already fired five of the missiles on targets along roads leading south from Hanoi. Unfortunately, there were too many points of contrast between light and dark involved with roads through the jungle and across the Red River Delta of North Vietnam, and most of our launches had been unsuccessful. On this mission tonight the target would be the mining area northwest of Hon-Gay. The area was normally active with trucks that occasionally used their headlights.

For this particular flight, we planned to lock the Focus on a set of headlights, fire at a range of six thousand feet, continue in the run, and if the Focus set off an explosion, fire our Zuni's at the secondary.

The taxi director uncrossed his yellow wands and gave me the come-ahead signal. With my tailpipe pointed safely over the deck edge, I added considerable power to get the Crusader moving and to make the sharp right turn up the deck to the starboard catapult. In the dim red glow on the flight deck, I could see Rasmussen already aligning his Crusader on the port catapult. As I shifted my eyes to the starboard cat, I saw the lights of the A3 tanker come on, and it was immediately launched. I shifted my eyes back to the taxi director as he passed me forward to the director for the starboard catapult. The blast deflector was coming down, and I taxied forward. With the dim-red flight deck lights now behind me, there was nothing but darkness in front of my Crusader. I carefully followed the director's signals and soon felt the nose rise as my front wheel rolled over the catapult bridle attachment. Easing forward, I felt the gentle tug as I was stopped by the hold-back fitting put in place by a nineteen-year-old hero who made his living by crawling under the tailpipe of a moving Crusader on a steaming catapult track to precisely insert that T-shaped fitting into a narrow opening.

I put my hands on my helmet, and the Ordinance men removed the safety pins from the missile launchers. When the taxi director pointed his wands at the catapult officer on my left, I knew my Crusader had passed its final check by the squadron maintenance crew. At that moment, I was blinded momentarily by Rasmussen's afterburner as he was shot off the port cat. Then the catapult officer was giving me the signal to accelerate to full power. I pushed the throttle far forward, then into the afterburner detent and

muttered under my breath my customary “Please, dear God.” My eyes move quickly over the engine instruments and back to the catapult officer. Rasmussen’s faint lights were a half mile ahead as my left hand moved carefully to the Crusader’s external light switch. Gripping the stick firmly with my right hand, I positioned my head firmly against the headrest and flicked my left index finger to turn on the lights.

My left hand then quickly grasped both the throttle and the adjacent safety handle. In the next instant, I was rocketing down the catapult. The extreme *g*-force narrowed my vision, and I could see only the center of the panel, but that’s where the critical flight instruments were located. As the catapult launch pressure released from my body, I focused on the artificial horizon, rotated the nose of the Crusader slightly upward, and reached forward with my left hand to raise the gear handle. Concentrating on the flight instruments, I positioned my left hand on the stick and moved my right hand back to the wing actuator. When the airspeed indicator reached 180 knots, I lowered the wing and came out of afterburner.

Climbing through three hundred feet, I turned on my radar. I could no longer see Rasmussen’s lights, so I initiated a slight climbing left turn to proceed to our assigned rendezvous point overhead the ship at fifteen thousand feet. Switching to *Oriskany*’s “Childs Play Strike” frequency, I heard Ras checking-in. When Childs Play answered, I could hear the ship’s Chaplin in the background. It brought a smile to my face. As was the *Oriskany* custom, at five minutes past ten every night, the Chaplain was saying the Lord’s Prayer. It seemed very appropriate on this dark night with most of the Tonkin Gulf covered by a high overcast.

Passing five thousand feet at three hundred knots I spotted a set of lights at ten o’clock high. “Old Nick One, this is Two. Believe I hold you, bearing thirty degrees, up two thousand.”

Ras responded quickly, “Roger Two. I’ll go Christmas Tree (external lights to bright and flash). Turning left through three hundred degrees.”

The set of dim lights I was seeing suddenly included a bright-red rotating beacon. “Two has a tallyho.” Visualizing the differences between our headings, I continued, “I’m at your eight o’clock low, about a mile.”

Moments later, I slid into a tight position on Rasmussen's left wing. The Skipper called *Oriskany*, "Childs Play, Old Nick One. Requesting a vector."

"Childs Play, wilco. Steer three-six-zero degrees, one hundred twenty miles. Over."

"Old Nick, wilco. Two, check your gadget—check the radar operation."

I loosened my tight wing position to adjust my radar, which apparently wasn't working. The squadron had only received my aircraft last week. The previous owners were a utility squadron stationed at Atsugi, Japan, and they had little use for any of the F-8C's weapons systems. The Sundowner maintainers had done their best to check the operation of all systems, but that was easier said than done aboard ship.

I couldn't get the radar to shift out of the standby mode and responded regretfully, "Two's gadget is bent." That meant we wouldn't be able to proceed as originally planned. I was to fly a one-mile radar-trail formation on Ras as we proceeded to the roll-in point for the hoped-for Focus headlight targets. Now we'd have to use Plan B, which was for me to stay on Rasmussen's wing until the Skipper spotted a target and rolled in. Then, I'd delay four seconds before rolling in on my own target, if I saw one!

"Roger, Two. Stay on my wing. Go lights out. I'll leave mine on as long as possible." Ras knew the difficulties involved with two aircraft flying night formation without any lights, and he would delay that procedure as long as possible. However, he'd definitely have to darken his ship at least thirty miles before we went feet dry approaching the well-defended target area.

There was no visible horizon or stars, only an occasional flash of lightning off to the northwest where a thunderstorm was towering over Haiphong. That was a good thing. If the MiGs were held down by bad weather at Kep Airfield, it would make our egress from the target much safer. A year earlier, Sundowner John Sandie and I had played tag with two MiG-17s on a night mission into the Cac Ba islands off Haiphong. We were protecting an A-4 bombing mission against the NVN PT boat headquarters when Red Crown alerted us with "Heads-up, Old Nicks. Two Red Bandits airborne, now thirty miles west." We were then flying the newer versions of

the F-8, the E model, which was equipped with respectable search radar. We had quickly acquired the bandits and promptly ended up with me locked onto the trailer of the two MiG-17s, a mile back, with my Sidewinder missile giving a very nice tone. John was a half mile back, watching the whole thing on his radar. I'd begged Red Crown for permission to fire, but was denied by "Perfume," the Yankee Station Commander, on the basis that I might be locked on one of the A-4s instead of a MiG. The A-4s had promptly chimed in that they had completed their mission and were already twenty miles south. Frustrated, and extremely agitated, I'd asked the A-4s to go Christmas Tree. They reportedly did so, and there were no lights in the circle of my gunsight, which is where my radar indicated my target was positioned. The MiG's ground controller apparently finally saw our Crusaders and the MiG-17s dove for the deck. John and I chased them down to three hundred feet at four hundred knots but were still denied permission to fire. Approaching the flak and SAM screen around Haiphong, we broke away from what would have been a sure kill. Three years later, Denny Wisely in an F-4 experienced a similar situation and scored what was likely the Navy's only night kill of the war.

Approaching the Cac Ba islands, Ras cautioned that he was going lights out. We were descending through fifteen thousand feet, and the humid night air was extremely black. My only indication of Old Nick One's location was the dim red glow of Rasmussen's cockpit lights on his canopy. It was not a comfortable run into a heavily defended target! As predicted, Haiphong radars picked us up as we passed the islands. Thankfully, the pinging in our headsets was not accompanied by the warbling warning of a SAM launch, which was unnerving enough in the daylight, let alone a dark night.

"Old Nicks, go switches hot!" I risked a quick look down in front of the stick, to flip on my master arm switch and verify the wafer switch for selecting weapons stations was set for the Focus. As we'd discussed in the brief, it was not a very good setup for the mission. After firing the Focus with the "pickle" on the side of the stick handle, we'd have to reach down to the wafer switch and move it to one of two Zuni stations. Since one of the Zuni stations was the last on the dial, we agreed it would be least distracting to fire the Focus and then grab the wafer switch and turn it quickly to the last position, rather than looking down to stop on the other Zuni station, which

was before the Sidewinder station. I'd practiced the maneuver during my preflight inspection and knew I could do it without looking down.

Then we were over the coast, and the Firecan radars associated with NVN 57mm aircraft guns were searching for us. They'd obviously been alerted by their early warning radar system. The warning sound in our earphones was a bone-chilling chirping squeal, no matter how many times we'd heard it!

Ras began maneuvering for a better look at the area, and I hung on for dear life! As briefed, I'd moved to Rasmussen's right side in preparation for his expected sharp roll in to the left to attack the target.

I tried a quick look down for some lights. At that moment, Ras called, "Old Nick One, rolling in," and he was gone. I checked my flight instruments, stood the F-8 on its left wing, and stared down into the darkness. Yeah, man! There were two faint lights, maybe a hundred yards apart. I rolled inverted, pulled the ladder of my gunsight down to one of the lights, centered it in my gunsight, and was rewarded with a clear tone from the Focus. A quick check of the instruments told me I was in a forty-degree dive, at 450 knots, going through eight thousand feet. A perfect run! I could not see any trace of Ras. I was hoping to see him fire his Focus, but I did not.

At six thousand feet, with a loud Focus growl, I pressed the pickle button. The Focus streaked off the fuselage, its white flame completely destroying my night vision. I found the wafer switch and turned it smoothly all the way to the last Zuni station.

All hell broke loose in front of my Crusader! There was a brilliant, unavoidable, explosion directly ahead of me. My engine apparently "swallowed" part of that explosion, which immediately induced a compressor stall. The compressor stall interrupted the compressor-air-driven electrical generator. I was half-blinded and rocketing toward the ground at 450 knots, in a steep dive, with no lights for flight instruments, and no radio!

Reflexes developed from hundreds of wild maneuvers over ten years as a Navy fighter pilot kicked in. I kept the stick centered laterally while pulling back into what I felt was a 4-g recovery. With my left hand, I struggled to

grasp the flashlight, which was always the last thing I hung around my neck before I went night flying.

I counted to ten, eased off the *g*, and tilted my head up, hoping to see a star. I hadn't been able to see any before, and there were none there now. I looked over both cockpit rails, and there was a small glowing fire that had to be on the ground. I rolled the aircraft to position that light below the belly of my aircraft. My left hand found the flashlight, and I pressed it against my chest while searching for the on button.

"And then there was light!" I moved the beam to focus on the artificial horizon indicator. As advertised, its electrically-driven gyro was still spinning fast enough to give reliable information. I was thirty degrees nose high, and in a twenty degree left bank. Shifting the beam to the airspeed indicator, I noted 250 knots and dropping.

I quickly lowered the nose and leveled the wings. There was a distant flash of lightning in front of me, and I began a left turn away from what I knew would be the horrific air defenses around Haiphong. The flashlight beam showed my directional instrument was useless, so I focused on the old magnetic standby compass on the windscreen rail, and steadied up on a heading of 180. Remembering Childs Play Strike's last vector instructions, the *Oriskany* would be out there some 120 miles ahead. I noted the time and set my airspeed at three hundred knots. I'd be traveling about five miles a minute and made a mental note that I'd be home by 2315.

With the adrenaline rush over, I reverted to a mental review of emergency procedures. All the Crusader models that I'd flown had a backup emergency electrical source. It was a ram air turbine, RAT for short. I pulled the handle to deploy it out the right side of the fuselage and was immediately rewarded by a faint glow around the center of the instrument panel. I was also able to relieve some of the pressure required to hold the stick, as the trim system was reenergized.

There was some welcome static in my earphones, and I could faintly hear Rasmussen talking with Red Crown, "There was an explosion around angels six over the target. He must have been hit. Launch the SAR helo as soon as possible."

“Red Crown, roger that! We’ll have him in the air shortly, but we aren’t allowed to send him in unless you have contact with the downed pilot.”

“Old Nick, roger. I’m standing by over the target area.”

I frantically keyed the mike and broadcast repeatedly, “Old Nick One, Old Nick Two. Do you read? Over.” Unfortunately, there was none of the feedback in my headset that would normally accompany a successful transmission.

I tried again and again. I was safely en route to *Oriskany* and had to abort the rescue attempt somehow. I fastened the goose-necked flashlight to my shoulder harness so I could see the necessary instruments and struggled to remove the emergency radio from my survival vest. Then I remembered! The first thing that early version of our survival radios would do when I turned it on was broadcast an emergency beeper that I couldn’t turn off. Such a transmission could result in some very brave souls in a slow-moving helicopter flying into a blazing hell of flak.

I prayed silently they’d follow the rules and not go feet dry without someone being in contact with the downed pilot. The only solution to the problem was to get back to *Oriskany* as soon as possible. But what chance did I really have of finding her? How much crosswind was there to my current flight path? I’d started from a position reasonably close to the target, which had originally been about 360 degrees from *Oriskany*. How far would *Oriskany* have moved from its original launch position? It was a quiet, hot, and dark night on Yankee, and the ship had to move at max speed to generate enough wind over the deck to launch and recover aircraft. They could be as much as thirty miles from that original launch position.

I pushed my speed up to 450 knots. The RAT was not supplying power to the fuel gauges. While landing weight for the Crusader was always a vital issue for the arresting gear, it was now a non-issue. Even if the gauges started working, I couldn’t tell the ship. I was confident they’d set the gear for max weight landing, but how could they even know I was there? The RAT did not power the external light system. I’d have to fit into a landing pattern somehow and hope for the best.

“Our Father, who art in heaven—” I suddenly recalled I’d done something like this before. Almost exactly a year earlier the *Oriskany* had been tasked with furnishing a section of F-8Es to cover an SR-71 overflight of Hanoi that would occur at 0200 hours. Severe thunderstorms had moved into Yankee Station, and flight ops had been canceled at midnight. The SR-71 was reportedly coming out of Guam, and *Oriskany* had no word that the mission had been scrubbed. Communications, or the lack thereof, resulted in squadron-mate Tooter Teague, of Texas A&M Bear Bryant football fame, and I being launched into the face of a vicious thunderstorm at 0130 hours. I was about a minute behind Tooter. We were hoping to break out of the top of the storm, but that was not to be. The weather was so severe Childs Play was unable to hold us on radar. Using the *Oriskany*’s TACAN navigation system, we were able to remain oriented. Somewhere over the middle of North Vietnam, being buffeted with severe turbulence at over forty thousand feet, the call finally came, “Old Nicks, this is Childs Play. The mission has been canceled. I say again, the mission has been canceled. Your signal is RTB, return to base.”

Shortly after that transmission, a direct lightning strike blew the radar dome off the nose of my Crusader. It also fried my radio. I was left with only that great old TACAN nav system to find my way back to the *Oriskany* through one of the toughest storms in years. With more than a few “Heavenly Fathers,” I’d lined up thirty-five miles out from the ship and began the rough ride down through heavy rain and brilliant, blinding lightning. At ten miles, I was still in it at fifteen hundred feet. I gingerly descended to one thousand, then five hundred, and at two miles I was edging down to three hundred feet when suddenly I was in the clear. *Oriskany* was exactly in the middle of about a ten-mile-diameter circle of clear air. A deep sigh of relief, a sharp turn to line up, and the beautiful sight of those centerline lights and the “meatball” landing aid as a ready *Oriskany* welcomed me home. When I taxied forward out of the gear, I saw Tooter getting out of his aircraft.

What I wouldn’t give for a TACAN now! My plan was to continue on heading 180 degrees until the time I’d calculated had expired; then I’d begin an expanding square search that I recalled from my old days in the F-6F Hellcat out of Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. We’d been searching for downed pilots from a midair collision. It was simply to fly a straight line for a certain

amount of time, then turn 90 degrees port and continue for twice that amount of time, and then turn 90 degrees port again and fly for three times that amount of time, hence the expanding square of coverage.

How could it be so damned dark anywhere in this world? Somewhere out there in the black hole in front of me, there were three aircraft carriers flying the flag of Uncle Sam. Unfortunately, only one of them would be operating at this time of night. That was my *Oriskany*, and I had to find her. The ship's lights would be purposely dimmed, to make it difficult for the enemy. However, I knew that I'd be arriving somewhere on Yankee at about the same time *Oriskany* would be conducting the 2330 launch. That would mean twelve departing aircraft would hopefully have their wing lights on for at least a short amount of time. It also meant a line of twelve—no, make that eleven—would be lined up one mile apart, coming down the "chute" to land.

My watch read 2310 when I saw what could have been a blinking red light about thirty degrees left of my Crusader's nose. Remembering my night vision training, I didn't stare at that spot but kept moving my eyes around that general area. There it was again! I turned slightly to position the light just off my nose and started descending. My radio was completely dead, the fuel gauges were stuck, and unfortunately, the gyro in my artificial horizon instrument was clearly winding down and no longer reliable. With no visible horizon of any sort in the black hole, my only indication of wing and nose position was now rate-of-climb and turn-and-bank needles—instruments that were air pressure and inertia, which dated back to WWII and prior, operated. They were not new to me. I'd taken night catapult shots in the original version of the F-11F, whose attitude gyro indicator often failed, and those instruments had saved me. However, climbing out after a cat shot was one thing, and coming down to land on a carrier deck on a black night was another!

The aircraft with the rotating red beacon I'd spotted was apparently orbiting at about ten thousand feet. I guessed, hoped, it would be the A-4 emergency tanker waiting to refuel recovering aircraft that might have trouble landing on such a dark night. I could not see the carrier but suddenly realized there was a widely spaced stream of faint lights approaching from the south. I changed my heading so I'd be looking straight up that stream, and there was the faint mast-head light of a carrier at the north end of the stream!

I flew over the carrier at three thousand feet and did a descending teardrop turn to fall in position between the last two aircraft in the stream. In the midst of that turn, the faint lights in my flight instruments went out. I immediately struggled to focus the flashlight's beam on the airspeed, turn-and-bank and rate-of-climb instruments. It was exceedingly difficult to hold the flashlight steady. I ended up holding it in my left armpit while moving my left arm gingerly to control engine power.

I had to make a low pass to alert the Air Boss in the tower before I attempted a landing. If they didn't know what kind of aircraft I was in, they wouldn't have any idea how to set the arresting gear. Nothing good could come of that!

I flew a normal straight-in approach in the landing configuration—but with my arresting hook in the up position, hoping it was *Oriskany*, but willing to accept almost anything. The droplights over the stern looked familiar, but the Kitty Hawk also had those. I flew the meatball on the landing aid down to a low pass. The LSO finally saw me coming, and it was probably the first time I'd been glad to see the bright red wave-off lights flashing at me. I added power but was so far into the approach that my wheels inadvertently touched the flight deck. "Damn!" I thought, "If Pete Peters is on the platform, he'll count that as a bolter!" I tried to glance at the ship's island but couldn't be sure the numbers were 34.

Refocusing on the limited flight instruments to initiate a left turn and circle for another approach, I suddenly realized I was absolutely fatigued! My eyes were burning from the sweat running down my face, and the herniated lumbar vertebra from a bad catapult shot a year earlier was killing me, but keeping me very alert! My left arm was trembling from the tension of controlling the throttle and holding the flashlight steady.

I finished my downwind 180-degree turn directly abeam the Landing-Signal- Officer platform near the end of the ship. I was certain the LSO would be following the sound of that blacked-out Crusader, which had suddenly appeared out of the darkness a few moments before. If it was fellow Sundowner Pete Peters or the sister squadron's J. P. O'Neil, I knew I'd soon be sipping one of the Flight Surgeon's medicinal brandies.

Starting at the abeam position with five hundred feet of altitude, I'd essentially be flying the approach that was normally done in the daylight. "There I was," partial instruments, no radio, unknown fuel weight, flying in a black hole with a goose-neck flashlight under my armpit. I turned in, made it past the ninety-degree position and soon intercepted the glide path and the meatball at three hundred feet and rolled wings level. "For God, for country"—the ball started to go a little low but my trembling left arm applied exactly the right amount of power to stop the sink rate. Then I didn't have to look at the turn needle anymore! The alignment of the stern drop lights and the deck centerline lights was telling me my wing position. A little more power and WHAM! The Crusader's hook caught the #2 wire, and it was all over.

Taxiing forward, over my left shoulder, I caught the view of a Crusader waving off from a landing approach. My short turn-in approach had cut Bob Rasmussen out of the pattern. Somehow, I figured, a Skipper who would be damned glad he hadn't lost another pilot and aircraft over Vietnam would forgive me.

I was amazed to see that all the ordinance was off my aircraft. The two Zuni tubes were empty, and both missile rails were clear.

Pete Peters had a theory that proved correct. On early models of the F-8C, the pickle was a gunsight-caging button. When you were tracking the target, you pushed it to uncage the gyro and allow the gunsight to compute the correct lead on your target. And, it stayed uncaged until you pushed it again. Its function was changed to fire missiles a couple of years later, and a momentary switch was supposed to be installed. An inspection proved that change wasn't installed, and the switch remained hot after being actuated. When I fired the Focus and moved the wafer to the last Zuni, it fired the first two Zuni's, then the Sidewinder, and then the last two Zuni's. The first two Zuni's fired were caught by the Sidewinder, which had produced the explosion I flew through.

Between October 11 and 14, 1967, I flew four consecutive night strikes against North Vietnam in an effort to achieve a successful Focus missile launch. The first two missions were into the southern coastal area of the Red River Delta, near the infamous Thanh Hoa Bridge. Unfortunately, the search

for truck headlights traveling south on main roads, or lights on offshore barges, proved fruitless. The third attempt, described above, also proved unsuccessful because neither Bob Rasmussen nor I had seen our Focus hit the ground.

The fourth attempt the next night was almost hilarious! My Focus failed its preflight check. I heard no growl when the Ordie tried the flashlight test. Extremely disappointed, I motioned the Ordie to my cockpit to talk with him. The remainder of the twelve-plane launch was commencing, and it was loud and dangerous on the flight deck. Recalling last night's exhilarating no-lights, partial-instrument carrier landing, and the fact that the weight of the Focus approximated the fuel required for one night approach, I asked the Ordie to take the Focus off the Crusader's weapons pylon. The equally frustrated red-shirted petty officer scrambled down the ladder and over to his assistant, waiting in the catwalk behind our Crusader. I accomplished the remainder of my preflight checks and radioed the Air Boss that I had ordnance problems but would be up shortly. The Boss was not happy! I was spotted about halfway back on the left side of the deck and would have to get out of that position on schedule or risk delaying a ready-deck for returning aircraft.

Over my left shoulder, I saw the Ordie gesturing wildly at his red-shirted supervisor. I waved at them to get their attention, and the petty officer quickly returned to my Crusader's cockpit. They didn't have anywhere to put the missile if they took it off! All the missile carts were already off the flight deck, but the dedicated petty officer was not giving up! He shouted at me that they would find a place, just as the A-4 next to us began taxiing forward. I grabbed the Ordie's arm and hung on to him as the tail of the A-4 swung toward us. The resultant blast from the Skyhawk's engine almost blew the red-shirt off the ladder, but he clung tightly to my arm.

I was angry as hell at the taxi director. Finally, the A-4 was clear, and I shouted disgustedly at the Ordie, "Just throw the damned thing over the side!"

The Ordie descended, and the taxi director was giving me the signal to hold brakes. The Air Boss was on the radio, "Old Nick 105, we have to move you. Are you ready to launch?"

I was in a Crusader still armed with four Zuni rockers and one Sidewinder. My wingman and I were briefed for a mission to destroy Soviet weapons moving over roads in North Vietnam, en route to resupply Communist forces attacking South Vietnam.

“105, up and ready.” The taxi director gave the signal, and I began to taxi forward. A quick glance over my left shoulder revealed the two dedicated, fearless, ordinance men lifting the 250-pound Focus missile and gingerly lowering it to two other red-shirts in the catwalk.

Unfortunately, it was another disappointing mission. No visible lights on the ground. Only an occasional flash from Vietnamese flak sites apparently reacting to the sounds of our Crusader engines passing overhead in radar-trail formation. There had been a wild dive for the deck when the warbling warning of a Soviet SA-2 blared in our headsets. “Wild dive” at night meant rolling inverted, pulling sharply nose down forty-five degrees, lifting a wing to attain a ninety-degree bank, pulling through about ninety degrees of turn, then rolling wings level and pulling up into a 4.5-*g* barrel roll.

We had gradually worked our way north from Thanh Hoa, up the coast of the Red River Delta. Then saw the lights of Haiphong about twenty miles ahead. Whenever I had ordnance left on my aircraft, my thoughts automatically returned to six weeks earlier, when my friend, Magic Stone A-4 driver Dick Perry, had been “bagged” thirteen miles south of Haiphong. Hit by a Soviet SAM, Perry had made for the coast. He was barely feet wet when he ejected from his burning aircraft. As his parachute descended, flak sites along the coast fired a barrage of 57 and 85mm at his chute. A brave helo crew off the Northern Search-and-Rescue destroyer flew into that hell in an attempt to save him. The swimmer who went into the water found him literally shot to pieces. He was so entangled in the chute it was impossible to cut his body loose. Under incredibly heavy fire from the shore batteries, they were forced to withdraw.

Now, I was sure those batteries would open up again when they heard a Crusader overhead. I told my wingman, “Brown Bear Two, break off right. Proceed to rendezvous at Angels Twenty [twenty thousand feet] on TACAN bearing three-two-five, sixty miles from Childs Play.”

“Two, wilco. Give ’em hell, Brown Bear.” He had flown through this area with me before.

Back in over the beach at fifteen thousand feet, accelerating to 450 knots, guessing when I would be thirteen miles south of the lights of Haiphong. Then I made a hard turn to an easterly heading. Approaching feet wet again, I heard the expected cackle of search radars scanning the area. I pulled the nose up and tapped the afterburner briefly, broke sharply left for ninety degrees, looked down to see the AAA batteries open up on the location where I’d hit the ‘burner. I continued left into a sharp 5-*g* nose down maneuver to align my gunsight with the muzzle flashes, pickled off the first two Zuni’s, switched quickly to the last position on the wafer switch, and fired the last two. Then a 6-*g* pitch-up into a barrel roll to the left, leveling out at twenty thousand feet en route to the rendezvous with my wingy.

“For God, for country, and Lady Jessie!”

Lady Jessie was the name Dick Perry had stenciled on his aircraft. It was in recognition of the owner of a casino in Reno, Nevada, who had played an important part in Perry’s younger life. Years later, an A-4E Memorial at NAS Lemoore would also bear that name. It was a fitting tribute to the memory of a brave young man, brutalized in a brutal war, thousands of miles from Reno.

Safely back on *Oriskany*, we waited in Ready Room Three for the squadron Air Intelligence Officer. It was a required debrief for all Focus missions.

“How did it go, Brown Bear?”

“Same old crap, Gordon. No lights, occasional SAMs, and frequent 57mm! Anything to add, John?”

“No, sir. Just another night at the movies.”

Ensign Moffett laughed. “Wish you guys would get rid of those damn Focus. The paperwork is horrendous. Yours is back in the missile magazine again, John. Brown Bear, where did you shoot yours?”

“Shoot mine? Last I saw it was being downloaded from the flight deck and on its way to the magazine.”

“No way, Jose! I just recounted all those damn things on the way down here. Yours is not in the magazine. I checked your aircraft, and it’s not there either.”

My career flashed in front of my eyes. “Oh, damn! Those guys couldn’t have taken me seriously—could they?”

Skipper Rasmussen stepped through the door. “Did you hit anything, Dick? Sure would be great to finally report that we hit something with one of those damn things.”

I drew a quick breath. “Fired my Zunis at some gun flashes on the ground, Sir. But didn’t shoot the Focus. It failed the preflight test, and I had them download it before I launched.”

“Aw, damn! We’ll have to waste some more flights to get those things off my back.”

“Maybe one less, Skipper,” chimed Ensign Moffett. “I checked both the magazine and 105, and Brown Bear’s Focus is not there.”

“What? If he didn’t shoot it, where the hell is it?”

“Sir,” I began slowly, “when it didn’t check out, I asked the Ordies to download it so I could have fuel for another pass if I needed it.”

“Yeah”—laughed the Skipper—“JP marked you down for a bolter last night. I tried to talk him out of it, but he said you were lucky he didn’t write you up for a hook-up pass, which would have required your setting up the bar the next time in Cubi.”

I continued, “Sir, I have a queasy feeling about what happened to the Focus. The Ordies didn’t want to download it because all the missile carts were off the flight deck. I was only joking when I told them to throw the damned thing over the side, but…”

The Commanding Officer glared at us. “Do you jokers have any idea how much taxpayer money those pieces of junk cost?” He paused and then continued, “Neither do I, but they sure aren’t worth whatever it is. Gordon, how are we going to report this?”

The young ensign looked up from the form he was studying. “Sir, it’s pretty straightforward. Geographical position, designated target, altitude and speed at release, estimated result.”

Ras thought for a moment. “Here’s your report, Mr. Moffett. Get the ship’s 2130 position from the Quartermaster for the georef. Designated target is ‘suspected water-borne craft,’ altitude is ‘ninety feet,’ speed is ‘thirty knots,’ and result is ‘obscured by darkness.’”

Years later, while assigned to the Pentagon, I visited the Naval Historical Department at the Washington Naval Yard to examine ordnance expenditure reports from the air war over Vietnam. There it was, exactly as the Skipper had dictated it! Scanning down the form, I noted a handwritten note in the comments section: “The fog of war.”

KORAT THUD TOUR—1967
CRAIG WHITE

I never thought of flying as a kid. My dream was to be a city bus driver in Paducah, Kentucky. In my senior year of college, at age twenty-two, I had no idea what profession I wanted to pursue. I thought of the Air Force and aviation for the first time when an Air Force recruiter appeared on campus. I went to Nashville, took the Air Force placement test, a physical exam, and was notified I had qualified for officer training through the Aviation Cadet program for either pilot or navigator. Being ignorant of the consequences, I asked how long each program took and was told pilot was fifteen months and navigator twelve months. I stupidly chose navigator.

I completed the Aviation Cadet navigator program in 1960 and was commissioned a second lieutenant. I then spent four long years as a Strategic Air Command B-47 navigator/bombardier, all the while applying for pilot training. In 1964 I was accepted to pilot training at Moody AFB and graduated in June 1965. I checked out in the F-102 and F-101 and was assigned to an F-101 squadron at Wurtsmith AFB until spring 1967 when I received orders to Vietnam flying the F-105 Thunderchief. I completed F-105 training in September 1967 at Nellis AFB and then to Jungle Survival at Clark AB. I arrived at Korat RTAFB in October 1967. The first time I saw the F-105 at Nellis, I was amazed at how big it was. The cockpit was sixteen or seventeen feet off the ground, and you could easily walk under the wings without bending down. The cockpit seemed a little cramped at first, but after a few flights, it was comfortable. It was a Cadillac at low level and high

speed, like nothing you've ever experienced. Aerial refueling was easy on the boom, very, very difficult for me on the probe. I loved weapons delivery, whether napalm, rockets, CBUs, bombs, or the 20mm Gatling gun.

Up to this point, I felt very relaxed and at home in all the aircraft I had flown. I had initial problems with learning to land, but once past that, the cockpit was my home. I enjoyed the freedom and control of being in command of a wonderful machine. It was challenging to learn to do the maneuvers correctly, but I experienced no problems. Skills from my training and experience enabled me to completely trust my decisions and ability to handle anything that came along, not only in flying but also in my personal life. I gained confidence and enjoyed the prestige of being a fighter pilot in the world's greatest Air Force. Of all the aircraft I flew, the F-105 is by far my favorite.

As I remember, getting to Korat involved catching a C-130 from Clark to Saigon and then a C-47 from Saigon to Korat. Traveling with me was Major Jack Tobin, a classmate of mine from Nellis and my future Korat roommate. The first few days at Korat are hazy to me now, but Jack and I did the new guy routine of being assigned to a squadron, issued flight and survival gear, studied the rules of engagement and local operating procedures, and so on. I was assigned to the 44th TFS, one of three F-105 squadrons in the 388th TFW. The 44th was primarily a Wild Weasel squadron, flying the two-seater Thuds in the SAM suppression role, but it had a small group of pilots who flew the F-105D models as strike pilots.

Korat for us Thud pilots was a plush place compared to other facilities in SE Asia. Jack and I lived in one room of a four-room "hooch" with central bath facilities. Our room had a window air conditioner, and we had a maid to clean our room and wash our clothes, which was done by hand. Our hooch was the nearest to the Korat Officers' Club (called KABOOM) and the adjacent swimming pool and bar, which we used more often than the mess. Korat had a mascot named Roscoe, a dog who was allowed to eat in the mess and had his personal chair in the mission briefing room.

A new pilot was initiated by flying his first five missions in relatively low threat areas. My first mission on November 4, 1967, (my dad's birthday) was as Fresno 4, bombing a target 20 nm southwest of Yen Bai in RP 5. Yen

Bai was known for its high concentration of flak, and I saw a lot of it that first mission. My biggest fear was my ability to refuel and land the aircraft as it had been fifty-one days since my last flight in the Thud. I must have been better than I thought as both were uneventful. I was elated my bombs were on target. I had been shot at and seen deadly flak and done nothing stupid or embarrassing. I was very happy at debriefing and in the bar that night. I had been in combat and passed the test, at least so far. The old heads nodded, smiled, and said, “Just wait until you see Hanoi.”

Jack Tobin and I had passed our first combat test, only ninety-nine to go. I had mixed feelings about my future missions to Hanoi in Route Pack 6, where MiGs roamed, SAMs were fired, and flak was more intense. I dreaded the exposure to this threat, yet I couldn’t wait to become tested in the most intense environment in Vietnam. My second thru fifth missions were uneventful, flown on targets at Dong Hoi, Mu Gia Pass, and back at Yen Bai. Next mission, my sixth, would go “Downtown,” to the mother of all targets, Hanoi. The most heavily defended area in RP6 was around the capital city of Hanoi, lots of SAM sites and all kinds of AAA.

On November 17 it was my turn. I was Vegas 4 in the strike force attacking Bac Mai airfield on the outskirts of Hanoi. Bac Mai was the headquarters of the North Vietnamese Air Force, and our particular target was not the runway but the underground bunkers at the north end, which supposedly was the central headquarters. Armed with three-one thousand pound bombs, we had an early-morning takeoff and then hit the tankers for prestrike refueling. My mouth was really dry and I drank almost all my water before we dropped off the tankers. I don’t remember if MiGs tapped us going in or not, but definitely remember the SAMs and the intense AAA. When I rolled in on the target, the air below me was filled with small puffs of gray and black, and I thought it would be impossible to fly through that layer without being hit. But somehow I did, and coming off target at 550 knots and 5-*g*, I climbed and jinked and tried to find my flight for join up. I could see no other F-105s, and the radio was filled with chatter, so I jinked and yanked and used the burner and got the hell out of there at 600 knots until reaching the coast, where I finally slowed and began plotting a course to the tankers. I managed to find another lone Thud and joined on his wing, followed him to the KC-135 and began poststrike refueling with only six hundred pounds of

fuel left. The trip home was joyful, even with the little water I had left. We had hit the target, had no losses, and I had seen for myself what so many had described. The expression, “There ain’t no way to live through 100” suddenly became clear.

Upon landing, the brass was all running around upset, because higher headquarters and civilian officials said that an errant bomb or CBU had killed an attaché at an embassy in Hanoi, I think it may have been the Indian Embassy. We were debriefed for four hours. They went over everyone’s gun camera film and interrogated us as if we’d murdered the guy intentionally. Finally, we were allowed to leave the command post and get a much deserved and needed beer. I never knew what the outcome of the attaché’s death was, whose bomb caused it, or anything more about it after that day.

This was my first but not nearly my last mission “Downtown,” and that beer sure tasted good.



Six of us in my Nellis RTU class who flew 100 over the North. There were ten of us who were assigned to Korat: three were KIA, and one was a POW, released in 1973. The six are Colonel Stewart, Captain Craig White, Major Jack Tobin, Captain Bill Scott, Captain Art Powell, and Lieutenant Dennis Jarvi. KIA were Captain Bill Jones, Captain Jeff Hornaday, and Major Harry Klinck. Captain Carl Lasiter was a POW. (Picture courtesy of

Craig White.)

GOING DOWNTOWN HANOI, FOUR TIMES IN FIFTY-SIX HOURS
DICK SCHAFFERT

During the summer of ’67 on Yankee Station, we were shuttling old F-8C replacement aircraft we’d received to a maintenance facility at NAS Cubi Point for installation of the latest in electronic warfare equipment, code name “Shoe Horn.” On October 22 it was my turn, and I caught the daily *Oriskany* C-1A mail run to Cubi. All the carriers were on Yankee, and the Club was almost empty. Early next morning, I took a base taxi to the flight line. The friendly Filipino taxi driver asked me if I’d be taking part in the raid on Phuc Yen. Somewhat surprised, I asked him when that would be. He assured me it would happen in the next few days.

The uneventful flight back to Yankee was followed by a shoulder harness restraint system failure on the arrested landing, which resulted in my attempt to take out the radarscope with my head. The impact shattered my helmet and, as revealed by CT scans years later, caused a compression fracture of T-1 vertebra and herniation of four discs in my cervical spine. Also, I apparently sustained a concussion, which caused an occasional very distracting double vision, which persisted for two days. At the Air- Wing Alpha- Strike planning session that evening the taxi driver’s prediction came true! Beginning at ten o’clock the next morning, I flew four missions “downtown” during the next fifty-six hours.

I’ve never walked out on the field to play in the Rose Bowl, but it could

not have made me as proud as I was to rendezvous overhead the *Oriskany* with forty other Air Wing 16 pilots, and roll out on a heading straight up the Red River for Hanoi. And I got to do that four times in fifty-six hours! During one of those run-ins, someone came up on Strike frequency with a few bars from a recording of Petula Clark's hit rendition "Downtown." Some thirty-five years later, at a postconcert audience-participation event at a theater in San Diego, I had the privilege of telling the story to that gracious and caring Brit Lady. I was rewarded with a hug and a sweet kiss—in front of my wife and four hundred people!

My first two missions were Iron Hand, and the last two were MIGCAP. I had the honor and self-ordained privilege, as squadron Operations officer, of flying the Iron Hands with VA-164's incredible Warrior, Denny Weichman. Denny began flying combat over and around all Vietnam when President JFK first said, "We have to do something about that mess over there!" He already had over four hundred missions when I first enjoyed watching him in action. During the first strike on Phuc Yen, I recall, with aging memory, that our primary assignment was the major SAM complex located west of Hanoi and south of Phuc Yen. The weather over the Red River for three days was broken clouds and heavy haze below ten thousand feet with brilliant blue sky above. Perfect for our "Supreme Commander" to watch over us, to see if we performed our duty to our country, and to Him, in an honorable manner. And, thankfully, to lend His hand when appropriate. I'm living proof of that!

Suppressing SAM's "Downtown" was a mathematical impossibility, but Denny was no mathematician, and we "tore them a new one!" Thinking back, the Charge of the Light Brigade comes to mind. We evidently got the job done; our Air Wing suffered no losses to SAMs on that first strike. When we were finally "Winchester," with two SAM sites destroyed and only my two remaining Sidewinders for weapons, we covered the strike group's withdrawal. The MiGs that hadn't fled to China or been destroyed on the ground weren't having any more of us! Unfortunately, 85mm sites had locked on us several times, and Denny had been hit twice. With some of that "help" from above, we made it back to the "O" boat. His crew counted 140 holes in his Skyhawk. Eighteen hours later we did it all again. Same targets, same assignment, but this time Denny and I must not have been so effective.

We lost an A-4E to a SAM and VA-163 nugget pilot LT(jg) Krommenhoek was missing. When Denny finished with his Shrike deliveries, we both still had full loads of 20mm and I had two Zuni rockets. Phuc Yen was smoldering, but the Hoa Lac airfield was open for business and we closed them down with several very accurate attacks.

It was a “target rich” environment for our Iron Hand missions. During the first four raids on Phuc Yen, 117 SAM launches were recorded, thirty-six against our Air Wing. A few hours later, my third trip downtown was a comparatively easy TARCAP, but the fourth on October 26 was a nightmare as we lost both John McCain and Chuck Rice. There was absolutely no chance of rescue for either one. It was a bitter pill to swallow. My official Navy pilot’s logbook shows I flew a fifth Alpha-Strike Iron Hand to Hanoi on October 27 but I can’t recall the details and I have no notes about that. Hey, I’m eighty-three! During those fifty-six hours of strikes on Phuc Yen and “downtown,” our Air Wing had eight aircraft hit and four shot down; One KIA, two POW, and one rescue.

Thirty years later, I flew over “Downtown” again with my Hungarian bride. This time I was in a brand new, chartered Boeing 777 with British pilots and Chinese crew, en route to Bangkok. From thirty-seven thousand feet, the Hanoi midafternoon weather looked much the same, broken clouds and haze. However, there was a high cirrus layer, and as I stared out the first-class cabin window I saw the faces of KIA roommates Norm Levy and Ed Van Orden. There was wingman Bill McWilliams. Norm, Ed, and Bill were three of the fifty-eight we left behind on Yankee. Gone and totally forgotten by the America they died for but not by those of us who led them into the fight or fought on their wings. Certainly not forgotten by the loving God who called them to His paradise. Tears were running down my cheeks, and the cute Chinese stewardess, with the bottle in her hand, was apologizing, “Sorry sir, is our champagne that bad?”

COMBAT CURE FOR A BROKEN NOSE?
HALE BURR

I have always loved baseball and played in Little League (ages nine to twelve) and Babe Ruth League (ages thirteen to fifteen). When I was about twelve years old, I got hit in the face (nose and cheek area) by a baseball. It blackened my left eye and swelled it shut. Of course, in those days growing up in a small East Texas town, my parents didn't take me to a doctor. Instead, I stayed in bed and missed school for a couple of days. I probably suffered a broken nose because it had a small curve in the left bridge after that. Well, here's how my nose got straightened out about twelve years later!

On my first tour to Vietnam, I was assigned to the 557th TFS at Cam Ranh Bay AB from September 1967 to March 1968.

The Battle of Khe Sanh began on January 21, 1968, and the TET Offensive started on January 30, 1968. On February 1, 1968, I had an early-morning mission, and it was still dark on the flight line. As I was climbing up the F-4 ladder to strap in the cockpit, the metal plate at the top of the ladder, which fit inside the canopy rail, *broke*! Weighing about two hundred plus pounds with all my flight and combat survival gear on, I was about the second step up the ladder when it pivoted from the support points along the side of the fuselage! I suddenly rotated backward and down. Bam! It was a shock as the heavy metal ladder hit me full in the face and I fell four of five feet onto the concrete ramp. I was lying on my back with the ladder on top of

me “seeing stars” and wondering what had happened. The crew chief pulled the ladder off and helped me up. As y’all know, fighter pilots are tough and duty calls? So, after the crew chief put another ladder on the plane, I climbed back up into the cockpit and continued the mission.

The weather was bad so our flight was directed by an AN/MSQ-77 radar system on a “Combat Skyspot” mission, a ground radar site mission flown usually in bad weather or at night. We followed the verbal direction of a controller who gave us altitude/ heading directions and counted down to our bomb release. Our target was 340 degrees at forty miles from TACAN Channel 85 (Khe Sanh). After dropping our bombs somewhere in Laos into the clouds below, we flew back to Cam Ranh Bay. I hope this boring combat sortie helped the Marines fighting at Khe Sanh. However, during the 1.9-hour flight, I had a bad headache and my nose/face really hurt. After landing, I took off my oxygen mask and had lots of blood inside the mask. As we were taxiing back to our parking spot, I rotated the rearview mirror inside the canopy down and saw my nose was swollen a lot.

We had the largest hospital in Vietnam with lots of doctors and specialists, so I immediately went over there for a checkup by our squadron flight surgeon. The doctor quickly diagnosed a broken nose. This is where the worst part of this incident began! I had to take about six shots of anesthesia on both sides of my nose. Then the “quack” worked my nose back and forth trying to set it correctly. To this day, I still have a vivid memory of the crunching sound. They stuffed my nostrils with cotton, placed a wooden splint on both sides of my nose and covered it with a large white bandage. So I had a big white proboscis that would definitely *not* fit into a pilot’s helmet oxygen mask! I was placed on DNIF (duty not including flying) orders by the flight surgeon and didn’t fly again in an F-4 for a couple of weeks until mid-February.

Now for the story of what happened while I was DNIF! The infamous “Tet Offensive” began on January 30, 1968, when over seventy thousand NVA and VC attacked about a hundred cities and military bases all across South Vietnam. Since I was now “non-operational,” I got VOCO (verbal orders commanding officer) orders that allowed me to leave Cam Ranh Bay on a military aircraft and go to some R&R location in Asia. I went to CRB Base Ops and got onto a “trash hauler” (probably a C-130) that flew me to

Tan Son Nhut AB in Saigon. Since there was lots of fighting all around Saigon, many US military/civilian personnel had been pulled back into the airbase for safety. The base billeting office told me there was “no room in the BOQ (bachelors officers’ quarters)“ for me, so I had to bed down on a cot in the base chapel for the night. The next morning I got up and went to Base Operations to see what kind of space available flight I could get out of Vietnam. I met the pilots of a C-141 that was scheduled to go to Clark AB in the Philippines. I guess they felt sorry for me (with the big white nose!) and they put me on their flight crew manifest so I had priority to fly with them on leave to the Philippines. I certainly appreciated these “big airplane” pilots as we flew to Clark AB. I spent about a week relaxing and enjoying the “good life” away from Vietnam before returning back to the war zone. I recovered completely in a short time and went back to combat flying on February 13. Later, on February 18, the enemy launched a large rocket and mortar attack of over one hundred rounds on Tan Son Nhut AB that killed and wounded many US servicemen. Additionally, several aircraft were destroyed, and a direct hit completely demolished the base chapel. When I read that news in the *Stars and Stripes*, I knew I was really lucky it didn’t happen when I had to spend the night there!

So I bled a lot on a combat mission and didn’t get a Purple Heart—and certainly did not deserve one! But my nose was definitely straighter than it had been before the ladder accident.

THROWN INTO THE FIRE!
HALE BURR

As background for this story, the NVA (North Vietnam Army) and VC (Viet Cong) attacked the city of Hue at the beginning of the Tet Offensive at 0233 hours on January 31, 1968. Hue, the site of the old Imperial Palace, was the third largest city in South Vietnam with a population of over 140,000. By 0800 hours, the enemy had overrun many of the South Vietnamese forces and raised their flag over the Citadel tower. US Marine and US Army units immediately counterattacked and heavy street fighting continued for over a month until the second of March. Air support was limited early on due to heavy rain and low clouds during the monsoon and ROE restrictions on bombing this historical cultural center. Eventually, as the US forces fought house-to-house and block-to-block, the restrictions were removed, and 80 percent of the city was destroyed by US air strikes. More than 5,000 civilians were killed (about 3,000 executed by the enemy and buried in mass graves). According to US military documents, up to 8,000 NVA and VC were killed in retaking the city. NVA sources document 2,400 killed and 3,000 wounded. Allied forces had a total of 668 KIA and 3,707 wounded, of which US casualties were 216 KIA and 1,584 wounded, in one of the bloodiest and longest continuous battles in the Vietnam War.

In response to the Tet ’68 Offensive, the 3rd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division was put on alert in early February to deploy from Fort Bragg, NC to Vietnam. After a sendoff by President Lyndon B. Johnson, they arrived in Chu Lai, Vietnam on February 15. General Westmoreland assigned the

brigade the mission of Hue City security under the operational control of the 101st Airmobile division at Camp Eagle. The unit moved by road up Highway 1 (the infamous “Street Without Joy”) to the area just south of Hue and about five miles from Phu Bai airbase. The 82nd established Camp Rodriguez as a base camp in early March near Camp Eagle where the 101st division was located.

The topography of I Corps in northern South Vietnam was generally flat rice farms in the eastern half to the Gulf of Tonkin. In the western half, it was mountainous with thick triple-canopied jungle. The South Vietnamese population was concentrated in cities, towns, and small villages in the eastern half of I Corps along the “Street Without Joy” up to the DMZ. After the enemy had captured large parts of I Corps during the Tet ’68 Offensive, we had taken back the populated eastern areas and the NVA had retreated into the jungles and mountains to the west while the VC melded back into the local populations in the east.

After in-processing at DaNang with the 20th TASS, on April 18 I was assigned to a FOB (forward operating base) at Phu Bai airbase to start flying for the 82nd. Our FAC call sign was Gimpy—a fighter pilot would never come up with that name—must have been some bureaucrat! After some orientation flights with my four fellow FACs, I began solo missions on the twenty-third. My flight logbook shows that mostly I had “visual reconnaissance” (VR) flights between Hue and out to the A Shau Valley where the 82nd had positioned troops on several artillery fire support bases. Nothing much happened on those boring VR missions during the first two weeks except I got familiar with our 82nd AOR (area of responsibility). I did conduct one uneventful escort of a C-123 Ranch Hand “Agent Orange” spray mission just east of A Shau Valley. I also dodged a lot of fire by an enemy 50 caliber AAA machine gun on one flight near A Shau Valley and that certainly got my attention. But I had put in only a total of five airstrikes (one flight of A-4s, two flights of F-100s and two flights of F-4s) in a total of seventeen O-2 flights up to April 30. None of those five air strikes were for “troops-in-contact” for the 82nd. Our intel just wasn’t very good in Vietnam and I had only conducted “making toothpicks and killing monkeys” attacks into the dense jungles near A Shau against suspected enemy base camps and storage areas. I just wasn’t very proficient and experienced after only a couple of

weeks as a “qualified” FAC. It was relatively quiet in the 82nd AOR for the last two weeks of April. That all changed on May 1, 1968, in what the “82nd AB Vietnam History” calls the “Battle of the Three Villes.”

Early in the morning on “May Day,” an 82nd reconnaissance platoon discovered a huge group of Vietnamese civilians on the road just west of Hue going eastward toward the city. These civilians reported that overnight a large force of NVA had moved into their hamlets. After this report was relayed back to headquarters, Company C of the 1/505th battalion of 82nd AB was ordered to move to that area and investigate what was going on. As they approached the most northern of three interconnected hamlets from the west, they came under heavy fire while out in open rice paddies. They rapidly deployed by platoons and returned fire. The 1/505th battalion commander then ordered Company A to advance to the area of the three hamlets from the south. Company A encountered heavy machine gun and mortar fire. It was estimated from the volume of fire being received that there was an enemy company occupying each of the three hamlets. We had the enemy pinned down in a rectangular area of about two thousand meters long and two hundred meters wide containing over one hundred houses and hooches in the three connected hamlets. We actually were facing a pretty desperate situation with two American companies hunkered down in the open flat rice paddies to the west and south, plus the recon platoon on the road to the northeast. The “good guys” were outnumbered and under intense fire from numerous locations!

I was scheduled for the first FAC flight of the day and had taken off for a routine (usually boring?) VR mission out to the west toward A Shau Valley. My FM radio became very active with chatter about the ongoing firefight involving Companies A and C. I turned back and headed toward the action. I quickly became “busier than a one-armed wallpaper hanger” as I switched back and forth on my three radios (FM, VHF, and UHF). I started talking to the C Company commander to ascertain what his situation was and how I could help. He was really glad to hear from “Gimpy 35.” At the same time, I was talking on the VHF radio to the DASC “Victor” (direct air support center) at Phu Bai Airbase to get fighters headed my way. When the fighters neared my action, I communicated with them on the UHF radio.

The next four hours flew by as I got direction from the two different company commanders as to where the enemy was located in the hamlets. DASC Victor did a great job diverting all the fighters I could handle. In fact, I had to have the flights stacked up in orbits at higher altitudes until I cleared them in. Then I would describe the situation to the approaching flights of fighters and give them target information. When the fighters arrived, I would dive down to mark the target with a "Willie Pete" (white-phosphorus-smoke) rocket. On many passes, while getting heavy enemy ground fire (small arms and automatic weapons) from the villages, I would climb back up and direct the tactical fighters where to deliver their bombs, napalm and cannon fire on the NVA. Often the targets, usually houses and tree lines, were sometimes dangerously close, within one to two hundred meters from our friendly troops on the ground! Many of the attacks were gun strafe passes if American troops were near the intended target. On several occasions to prevent a "short round" by the bombs and napalm, I had to call off fighter attacks for a variety of reasons. I methodically began to destroy the fighting positions of the enemy that fired on our troops.

I had only controlled a total of five air strikes during the preceding two weeks. In four hours that went by very fast that day, I put in thirteen flights, consisting of two to four fighters, on twenty-one separate targets. Each flight made multiple weapon-delivery passes on the target. The weather was clear and they could see the previous bomb strikes and burning fires as they orbited up high. I didn't have to mark for every flight and could talk some of them into where to expend their ordnance. The fighters were a mix of Air Force and Marine F-4s, Air Force F-100s, Navy A-4s and one flight of Navy F-8s that fired very accurate five-inch Zuni rockets onto my targets. When the fighting ceased, the Army swept through the area and reported 128 NVA bodies. I'm sure most of the 128 were killed by air strikes that had even contributed to more enemy dead than the US Army was able to count. A captured NVA soldier reported that his unit was a battalion of the 90th NVA Regiment. The heavy losses made this particular enemy battalion completely ineffective.

It was only about a twelve to fifteen-mile flight back to Phu Bai AB. When I landed, I was completely drained, and my flight suit soaked with sweat! But I felt great—knowing that I had helped our American troops in the

battle. I later learned our losses between the two 82nd AB companies were five KIA and eighteen wounded. That surely would have been much higher without our tactical air strikes that day. Unfortunately, most of the three villages were destroyed. I felt sorry for the poor Vietnamese peasants who probably lost everything. On the other hand, I'm sure I saved a lot of American lives by putting in those air strikes.

My eventual total of 421 hours and 151 combat missions in the O-2 gave me a great sense of responsibility and feeling of accomplishment as a young officer in combat. As a twenty-four-year-old first lieutenant, I could mark a target on the ground, and it could be destroyed quickly. Much senior officers were flying fighters up above me waiting for my clearance to attack an enemy target. As a very junior officer, I had great control of the tactical situation and how to conduct this particular piece of warfare. While flying solo in the O-2, I learned a lot about myself and many lessons that helped me later in my Air Force career.

A LAOS SORTIE
ART SURO

I was based at Tuy Hoa on the South China Sea in II Corps. It was my first operational assignment arriving in May 1968 right out of UPT and a six-month Luke AFB F-100 checkout. The 56th TFW had three fighter squadrons of F-100Ds joined early in my year (May 1968–69) by two National Guard squadrons flying F-100Cs from Niagara Falls and Albuquerque. Those five fighter squadrons with about 25 F-100s each made up the largest fighter wing in Southeast Asia.

My first six months were spent flying in-country in all four Corps from I Corps up north down to IV Corps in the Mekong River Delta. Most missions were close air support or interdiction with the occasional escort of defoliant spraying C-123s. Beginning in early 1969 we began flying more than half of our missions out of South Vietnam into Laos. There the mission was almost totally interdiction of supplies coming along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Think of the "trail" as a large number of intertwined dirt roads occasionally choked into fewer routes because of steep mountains (karst), rivers, and other natural barriers. These points were called "choke points" and lent themselves to be much more lucrative targets owing to the smaller number of alternatives the enemy had. Consequently, we would bomb these roads to crater them and cause the supply of war equipment from North Vietnam into the south to be slowed. Trucks could not travel during the day without being attacked, so road repair crews were positioned along these roads concentrated at the choke points to repair the roads after being cratered

during the day. They hoped to have the craters repaired in time for trucks to pass in the darkness. Through various intelligence sources, it was known where the crews hid in the daytime. So a rather elaborate plan was developed to disrupt the enemy's effort.

It began with cratering of the road followed by covering the crater with CS gas (tear gas). Then a barrier of antipersonnel landmines would be sown between the cratered road and the bivouac area of the repair crews. Flying out of Tuy Hoa, the F-100s got involved in all these events as did other USAF resources both out of South Vietnam as well as Thailand. Even the Navy joined in the fun!

The one mission I want to focus on is the laying of the landmines to make the repair crew's walk to the crater uncomfortable. The landmine used was only carried by F-100s out of Tuy Hoa and to my knowledge only certified for carriage by F-100s and the A-1. The pods used a downward ejection technique of baseball size mines, which spun up to arm due to the shape of the groves on their outside. They then hit the ground and rolled to a stop. After a short time, trip wires shot out. Then they sat there waiting for the unlucky NVA soldier with a shovel. If no one came by in a few days, they self-destructed. To deliver these devils, the poor pilot had to fly straight and level for one mile at between five hundred and one thousand feet above the ground.

Now it didn't take too long for the bad guys to figure out what was going on. They moved guns in to protect the road crews. These ranged from AK-47s up to 23mm and even a few 37mm antiaircraft artillery. Without flak suppression, the four guys flying straight and level at low altitude was like skeet shooting. So what began with four-ship formations of F-100s, all loaded with land mines, very quickly changed to four F-100s, two with the landmines and two loaded for bear with flak suppression weapons, CBU and 500 or 750-pound bombs, delivered in a thirty- or forty-five-degree dive-bomb mode.

Now, to the fun part. I was number three in the four-ship, while my squadron commander, Major Larry Whitford, was the flight lead. Whitford was the best squadron commander I ever had, later commanding the Misty FACs and was killed in action. Major Whitford and his wingman had the

landmines, while my wingman and I had the CBUs and Mk-82 five hundred pound bombs. Even though we were fully briefed on the mission, we worked with a FAC. On contact with the FAC and his confirmation that we had the target in sight, Major Whitford asked him to shoot a smoke rocket usually used to “mark” the target a few miles away to cause the gomers to think we were going to attack that location. Lead cleared me and four off to climb and position us to cover lead and two as they began their straight and level five hundred foot, one-mile mine delivery. They had no sooner started their mine delivery than Major Whitford started taking fire from the top of a karst to his left. He called it out, and I saw the flashes from the guns and some tracers heading toward lead and two. As luck would have it, I was in the ideal position to roll into my dive-bomb delivery. So, from ten-thousand-foot altitude, I rolled in with all weapons armed. Using forty-five degrees of dive, I released the two CBU canisters followed by the two Mk-82s. Larry was still on his one-mile delivery when the entire karst he was taking fire from lit up with explosions from my CBUs and the five hundred pounders. Number four was right behind me with even more firepower being put onto the karst. Needless to say, the gunfire from the karst ceased. We joined up as a four-ship and headed home with a feeling of a job well done. Landing back at Tuy Hoa, I was still in the cockpit when Major Whitford came over to my jet with the first of a few cold ones and a huge smile on his face. I was his boy that day, and it was my pleasure. May he rest in peace.

HOLD HIGH, QUESTIONS?
SCOTTY ROBERTS

Academy grads will recall the summer before their First Class year, senior year for the rest of us. They deployed to Air Force bases all over the world, seeing what the real Air Force was all about. The summer of 1970 was no different. I was flying F-4D and E models, with the 390th TFS, 366th TFW, the Gunfighters, at DaNang. We had two cadets show up at DaNang for a portion of that summer seeing every aspect of the day-to-day operations of a combat wing. They also spent a lot of time nagging the Deputy Commander for Operations (DCO), Colonel Vincent V. Vesurah, to let them fly. “Not happening, guys.”

One day I got a call; Colonel V. wanted to see me. He flew with our squadron often, and I got to know him well—great guy and a great commander. We were keeping six aircraft, three two-ship flights, on alert at all times with napalm, snake-eyes, and a 20mm Gatling gun for close air support of ground troop missions. Ground troops who got in over their heads in a firefight could call for air support, and we had fifteen minutes from the time the phone in alert shack rang until we had the gear up headed in their direction. The DCO instructed me to cock a seventh aircraft on alert, no ordinance except the gun. When we got the first scramble of the day, I was to scramble with one of the cadets to the aircraft, start engines, taxi with the strike birds as number three in the flight to the arming area at the end of the runway, takeoff, join up, and proceed to the rendezvous point with the forward air controller, then, and this was very specific, “Hold high and let the

kid watch the strike birds work. But, do not place him in any danger. You hold high. Any questions?"

In the target area, we rendezvoused with the FAC, and the aircraft commander in the lead bird gave the FAC a lineup of their bomb loads and got a quick briefing on a great target. It was a huge force of bad guys, closing in on a group of US Army, 1st Americal Division troops. Here I sit at about fifteen hundred feet AGL, watching the strike go in. Lead and two made multiple passes on the target, each doing some good work laying in their snake-eyes, then the napalm, and finally strafing with their 20mm. When they each had called off "Winchester" (all ordinance dispended), Lead initiated a join up as the FAC began to give them a Bomb Damage Assessment (BDA) of their work.

About halfway through his BDA report, we hear, "Holy sh**, there's a whole sh**load of black pajamas running down the road! Don't you guys have anything left?"

"Naw, man, we are Winchester, sorry." What's the old saying, "I just passed up the perfect opportunity to keep my mouth shut." Not!

"Three's holding high with 20mm."

I hear, "Come on down!"

I told Lead to RTB, and I'd catch up shortly and heard, "No, I think we'll stick around to see this." I thought later that I wondered what he meant, see some good KBA (killed by aircraft) of these bad guys, or see me cut my career short. I never asked. At any rate, I made several hot passes, called off Winchester, recorded some really great BDA, many KBA, and joined the flight back to DaNang.

After calling, "Three's in," we checked all the aircraft over for damage, as was normal procedure, and I went on the intercom to the cadet and said, "Everything you just saw back there—it never happened."

I never heard so much excitement, "No sir, no sir, no sir, I swear, I'll never tell a soul." Why would he? He just had the best time he'd ever had

with his pants on, and all he wanted to do was get back, get recocked, and go again.

We recovered at DaNang, dumped our drag chutes, went through the dearming area, and taxied back to our revetments to be rearmed and refueled. While filling out the aircraft forms, I hear the ordinance guys calling for napalm, snake-eyes, and 20mm ammunition. Then I hear, “What about three?”

“No, they didn’t expend, just one and two.”

Then, “But, Sarge, this gun’s empty.” And, as another old saying goes, “That’s when things went downhill.” Needless to say, the DCO had some very choice words for me that day.

Several years ago, Colonel Vesurah was in Destin, Florida, where I now live, to “play with my grandkids,” as he put it. “I heard you were here and I had to come see you,” he said. We had a great visit, really enjoyed seeing him again. As you might expect, that close air support mission came up. As he got up to leave, he turned back for a second and said, “You know you did the right thing that day.”

Never saw him again, and he died a few years later.

BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE
HALE BURR

According to the book *Vietnam Air Losses*,", the 20th TASS, between 1965 and 1973, lost a total of thirty-one O-1s, fifty-five O-2s, and twenty-two OV-10s and had seventy pilots killed during the Vietnam War. During my time assigned to the 20th TASS from April to -September 1968, we lost two O-1s and thirteen O-2s, resulting in thirteen pilots KIA and seven pilots who survived shoot downs. Because of my assignment to Camp Rodriguez in support the 3rd Brigade, 82nd Airborne, I personally did not know all of the 20th TASS pilots flying out of DaNang or other locations in I Corps who were shot down or had accidents during those five months. And I was fortunate that none of my four fellow "Gimpy" FAC's were lost while we were together in Vietnam.

DaNang AB had a well-deserved reputation and was called "Rocket City" by American military members because of the frequent 122mm rocket and 82mm mortar attacks from the NVA and Viet Cong against the airbase. These attacks, over time, resulted in the loss of many US and allied lives, aircraft, and base facilities.

It was popular among US servicemen to purchase stereo music gear while in Southeast Asia. I was no exception and got top-of-line equipment in the late summer of 1968 as my end of tour approached. I bought a Teac 4010 reel-to-reel tape deck, a Sansui 2000 amplifier, a Garrard Lab 95 record turntable, and two large Pioneer speakers. This was quite an investment

expense for a first lieutenant—even one getting flight pay, combat pay, and a combat income-tax exemption! I stored all my stereo components in tall metal wall lockers located in the 20th TASS squadron operations building located on the DaNang AB flight line.

On August 24, we got word up at Camp Rodriguez that our DaNang 20th TASS squadron building had been greatly damaged during a rocket attack the night before. I got permission from Major Ron Coyle, my ALO, to fly down from Phu Bai AB to DaNang. When I landed, I taxied up to the O-2 parking area and walked directly to the 20th TASS building, which had been a large metal Quonset hut. It was now mostly a tangled mess of collapsed metal and shattered wood that was cordoned off. That was when I learned of our casualties.

There were two FACs pulling Alert duty (for any American troops-in-contact or attacks on the airbase?) on the night of August 23 in the squadron operations building. They were actually pilots, Captains Harreld Martin and Gene Austin, who I knew slightly even though we didn't fly together. I knew them well enough to think they were both "good guys." Prior to going to sleep around 2300 hours (as I remember being told), Harreld was sitting up on his cot and Gene was already lying down when a 122mm rocket hit the 20th TASS building. Perhaps it had a delayed fuse and after going through the roof had exploded inside the room area where Harreld and Gene were supposed to sleep that night. Harreld was decapitated and killed instantly while Gene was badly hurt and suffered severe shrapnel wounds in his back.

On August 23, Harreld was just a couple of weeks away from his DEROS (date estimated return overseas) and separating from the Air Force. He already had a commercial airlines pilot job waiting for him back in the States. Gene recovered from his terrible injuries and had a full Air Force career before retiring as a colonel. Later, over the years, Gene and I crossed paths several times in the Air Force, and we always talked about that "unlucky/lucky" night in DaNang AB and the random nature of fate.

I got permission to go into the rubble to search for my stereo gear. I did find the metal wall lockers shredded with numerous shrapnel holes. As I pulled my boxes out of the lockers to inspect the damage, I expected the worst. However, the hot sharp shrapnel had gone through the metal lockers,

penetrated the cardboard boxes, and had been mostly absorbed by the Styrofoam packing around my expensive stereo equipment! I did have a small three-inch cut on top of one of my Pioneer speakers. I took all my audio gear over to a friend's room in one of the F-4 fighter squadron dorms and plugged it in. It all worked perfectly! My family and I used and enjoyed those stereo components for the next twenty years, but I thought of Harreld and Gene when I looked at my speakers! I always wished my stereo gear could have absorbed the rocket blast and prevented Harreld's death and Gene's serious injuries.

TDAS AND TDBS
RUSS EVERTS

UBON RTAFB, 1968--69, 25 TFS, FIRST TOUR

The 25th TFS at Ubon had a fleet of Long Range Navigation (LORAN) equipped F-4D's that were used for precision delivery of a variety of sensors along the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos in support of the Igloo White program. These sensors recorded enemy activity along roads and other lines of communication. The information gained was collated at a facility at Nakhon Phanom (NKP) air base in north-central Thailand close to the Thai/ Laotian border. Intelligence gained was used for future and fairly real-time targeting of assets moving along the trail into South Vietnam.

The LORAN system depended on a chain of ground-based stations and provided accurate navigation for anywhere from 750 to 1,400 miles. The LORAN system station chain locations were limited in SEA. In order to refine the accuracy of the system over land in Laos, we had to "chart" the areas of Laos where sensor strings were to be dropped. These areas included such nonfriendly places like Tchepone, MuGia, Ban Karai, the DMZ, and so on—areas very well defended. Any air activity around and about these areas was certain to draw a lot of enemy activity (i.e., AAA).

"Charting" involved a single or two F-4Ds, configured with 2 x 370 external fuel tanks and usually a couple of CBU-24s or MK-82 bombs. The latter was to be used for "self-defense" in case you were shot at. The flight profile was to fly very low level over these well-defended areas and to

“mark” specific checkpoints when overhead. The backseater, me in this case, would “mark” the position by pushing a button on the LORAN display box, which would momentarily freeze the position and allow me to record the exact TDAs and TDBs. (Time Delays A and B were expressed digitally on the LORAN control box in the back seat of the F-4; they were a series of about eight numbers each and were constantly changing as you flew.) It was an effective, if not a very rudimentary, way to collect this data. It was also pretty exciting—read dangerous! Even though we did our best to “camouflage” our intended route of flight, it didn’t take the bad guys long to summon up all the firepower they could. It could be a pretty impressive show of tracers and “puffs,” all aimed specifically at us! I am not sure how many hits the squadron took doing this “charting,” but we certainly did take quite a few. I don’t recall losing any aircraft while doing this, but we did lose some during actual “string” drops later on.

As you could imagine, this was not our favorite mission to be assigned to fly. There is another part of this TDA/TDB story, circa 1972, on my third tour flying out of Takhli to be related in a separate missive…

THE NIGHT SHIFT
STEVE MOSIER

UBON RTAFB 1968–69

Every big organization operating on a twenty-four-hour basis has a night shift. The US Air Force is a big organization, and in the days of the Vietnam War was clearly operating a night shift—around the world to plan for and support allied forces engaged with the enemy in various parts of Southeast Asia. I spent some time on the night shift while I was stationed at Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB) located in the eastern central part of Thailand. Part of that was flying with the 433rd Tactical Fighter Squadron on F-4D strike missions in Laos and North Vietnam. This was the exciting part of the night shift—flying mostly two-ship sorties looking for trucks and other vehicles on the Ho Chi Min Trail after dark or supporting gunships and special-forces team as they conducted similar missions to interdict the flow of supplies (from USSR and China) down the Trail to North Vietnam Army and Viet Cong units in the south.

One of the mundane tasks of the night shift involved manning the "Frag Shop" from 1100 to 0700 (we used the term "0-dark thirty" long before the media began to throw it around over the past two or three years) where a small group of aviators, intel personnel, and some maintenance folks—all pretty much of the lieutenant variety—were responsible for taking the Fragmentary Order, a.k.a. Frag, from 7Th Air Force in Saigon and parsing the information to provide instructions:

1. To the flight line as to how many sorties (aircraft) we would fly and what ordinance they would be loaded with.
2. Whether or not air refueling would be needed, and where and when the flights would join their tankers.
3. Which squadrons would fly specific missions.
4. What and where the targets were.

Once this information was digested, it would be provided to the four F-4 squadrons, where call signs would be assigned and specific pilots would be assigned by position (leader and wingmen). Along the way, the Frag Team would do a logic check to see that weapons were appropriate for the target, review the threats in the area of operation (types, numbers, and best estimate of the location of anti-aircraft systems in the area—guns, SAMS, and disposition of MiGs), the tanker Frag married up with the fighter tasking, performed several other quality-control scrubs of the product higher headquarters has given the wing for the next flying day. Mostly breaking the Frag was a time-constrained process. There were always last minute changes causing a rework of the product and scurrying by lieutenants to get a product out before the aircrews and day shift began to show up for mission prep and preflight actions. This normally began around 0330 hours to make ready for predawn launch of 25th TFS Assam Dragons on their mission supporting the McNamara Wall with sensor drops monitoring and targeting movement on the Trail.

But all was never routine. Special missions, emergency searches for downed pilots, support for Special Ops teams operating routinely in all parts of Laos and North Vietnam, change in weather, threats, tanker availability, and the whimsy of higher headquarters were frequently sand in a well-oiled Frag operation. There were lots of changes to be jammed in up to the time the aircrews actually stepped to their jets, nominally forty-five minutes or so before takeoff.

I easily remember one night for its special nature. Lieutenants Mosier and Mulder, with the expert help of Staff Sergeant “Radar,” were taking a break with Royal Crown Cola, our drink of choice. Because there was no Pepsi or Coke, RC was the choice. We got a hotline call from the command post, “Heads-up, the ADO and a VIP are headed to the Frag Shop!” The

ADO was a junior colonel with the title of Assistant Deputy Commander for Operations. Any title with two prefixes pretty well describes the importance of the job.

We tidied up a bit and prepared for a short show and tell. In came the ADO and a congressman, whose name I don't think I ever got, and certainly don't remember. They came in the main briefing room where all the crew briefs took place and all the annotated maps and photographs were displayed on boards around the room. Now it should be noted that ADOs never have much to do. Neither do they routinely have a great responsibility. But, in fact, they are hoping to be elevated to DO status if things go well for their boss. This one was no different. He did want to give the impression he was alert, informed, and on top of his game to the congressman, and asked us to describe the night's missions. I grabbed the Frag, and Mulder went, with pointer, to the map. I described the missions on the board, with, "Sir, Dipper is working with Mk36s near Mu Gia Pass, Pintail has a mission with Covey 43 working a truck park just east of Tchepone, and Banyan is escorting Spectre 06 working Route 7 where it enters Laos from Pack 1—they have flares and CBUs"—pretty good I thought, especially since Mulder was right with me with the pointer.

Well, I was *wrong*. The ADO bristled and addressed me very sharply, "Lieutenant, in my wing we don't do anything that lacks precision; I didn't expect a brief sketch of the activity—I wanted exactness! Let's try again the Wolf Pack way!" He glanced knowingly at the congressman and apologized for having his time wasted by my casual discussion of important information. I know he wanted to strike me with a glove, like Patton, to emphasize the gravity of my lack of appreciation for the situation. Regrettably, he had no glove!

We rewound the tape: "Sir, Pintail is a flight of two F-4Ds. Each has six Mark 36 Destructor five-hundred-pound bombs with delayed fuses. Each is carrying a SUU-23 20mm cannon pod on the centerline. They will be placing their bombs on a section of road recently successfully cut with laser-guided bombs by the 433rd TFS in an attempt to keep the NVA road crews from repairing the road and moving supplies in this segment of the Trail tonight. The DMPI is WE336433." (These are map coordinates used to precisely reference a target location, common to ground troops and pilots, used before

precision of GPS came into the routine use of today, and are not the actual coordinates for these targets.) For you detail monsters, I am too lazy to find my old maps and give you the real coordinates. But the ADO and the congressman got the real ones in six-digit accuracy.

"Much better," the ADO replied, "now just where is WE366433?"

Mulder, with a deft move of the pointer, replied, "Right here, near Mu Gia Pass, sir"— pretty much where the pointer was moments ago—no, not pretty much—exactly where Mulder had placed it two minutes earlier.

We proceeded to review the details of the remaining sorties with exhausting depth and enjoyed a similar opportunity for the ADO to demonstrate his mastery of lieutenants. After some other discussion highlighting limited knowledge and actual interest in doing anything other than talking in front of the congressman, he allowed us to come to attention as they departed for another adventure in the workings of a fighter wing at night. Our RC Colas were warm by now, but we finished them anyway and prepared to turn over our work to the Day Shift and head to the club for the world famous C*hili Cheese Omelet*, proud that we had played even a bit part in keeping our leadership happy and a VIP even slightly entertained on his Oriental shopping trip. And, into crew rest, so we could get back on the flight schedule for the good gig on the night shift!

Note: This ADO was actually a FADO. I don't make any reference to Portuguese music, rather to the four-letter prefix applied to ADOs with little promise of ever-rising higher in responsibility or rank. Use your imagination. The real Colonels in the 8th TFW were WWII Aces, Thunderbirds, Test Pilots of Century Series aircraft, and competent aviators and leaders. They made sure FADOs got their combat tours, never actually harmed anyone's livelihood or career, and quietly faded into jobs they deserved.

GOING FROM FAST MOVER F-4S TO A REAL SLOW MOVER O-2

HALE BURR

After completing pilot training in 1966, our assignments were based on numerical class standing, and I selected the only guaranteed combat tour aircraft available to my class—an F-4 Phantom assignment to Vietnam, as opposed to F-4 bases in the States, Europe, or Japan. About ten months later, I had finished three survival schools:

1. Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) in Washington state.
2. Water Survival in Florida.
3. Jungle Survival in the Philippines.

And my six-month F-4 training checkout in Florida.

I was assigned to Cam Ranh Bay Air Base, South Vietnam (SVN). The Air Force policy for completion of a Vietnam combat tour was 100 missions over North Vietnam, usually completed in six to nine months, or one year in country, whichever came first. Cam Ranh Bay is located on the coast in the middle of South Vietnam and nearly five hundred miles from North Vietnam (NVN). So F-4 pilots flew most of the NVN combat sorties from DaNang AB SVN or Ubon and Udorn ABs in Thailand. Our F-4 wing flew mostly interdiction and Close Air Support sorties in SVN and Laos.

During my first combat tour, the losses of US aircraft were very high in 1967–68. This was true not only for our fighter planes but also for our forward air controller (FAC) aircraft. The US Army and Air Force had an agreement that one had to be a current and qualified fighter pilot to be a FAC with American army units. After six months in the 557th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Cam Ranh Bay AB, I knew I'd never get to 100 missions over the North. In fact, I had only flown about twenty NVN missions north of the South Vietnam DMZ. So when a personnel request came down from 7th AF in Saigon for replacement forward air controllers, I immediately volunteered for this new adventure. I was quickly reassigned and checked out in five days in the Cessna O-2A at Phan Rang AB before heading north to I Corps.

One of the most significant events of my life was the birth of our first daughter, Lara, while my wife was in Nederland Texas, and I was at Phan Rang checking out in the O-2. The Red Cross notification to me came three days after her birth. I bought cigars and cognac for the FAC instructor pilots and my fellow FAC students, which we enjoyed while sitting on the Phan Rang Officers Club patio on a hillside overlooking the airbase. So after this short checkout, I went from a supersonic Mach 2 capable, over fifteen hundred miles per hour, jet fighter F-4 "Phantom" to the slow twin-tail boom and two tandem mounted engines Cessna O-2A "Skymaster," which flew at an airspeed of about 140 miles per hour.

Besides aircraft performance, there was also a significant difference in Air Force pilots' living conditions. At Cam Ranh Bay, I lived in an air-conditioned hootch with the rest of my squadron pilots. We had hot showers, and local Vietnamese cleaned our rooms, shined our boots, and did our laundry. Our 557th squadron had, in addition to the base Officers Club, a bar and patio adjoining the hootch we lived in. Two Aggie buddies, Sergeant Buddy Bullock, Class of '65 and Second Lieutenant Russ Stein, Class of '66, were stationed at Army installations near the air base and would frequently bring a box of steaks over to my squadron. Buddy was not commissioned out of A&M when we graduated, and he was subsequently drafted as an enlisted man in the Army. They were warmly greeted and plied with adult beverages, while we fighter pilots grilled their steaks on the patio. Additionally, our fighter pilots flew for five or six weeks straight and then got five days of leave. Since Cam Ranh Bay was an aerial port, we could catch space

available flights to Japan, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Singapore, Bangkok, and so on, for some R&R.

"ALL THE WAY, SIR" AND "AIRBORNE"—MY AIR-FORCE ADVENTURE WITH THE 82ND AIRBORNE

After completing FAC U in the O-2 at Phan Rang AB, I was assigned to the 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS) at DaNang but lived with the four thousand officers and soldiers of the 3rd Brigade, 82nd AB Division for the next six months. The 20th TASS lost more than seventy pilots during the Vietnam War, while the squadron's aircraft losses over the course of the war amounted to thirty-one O-1 Bird Dogs, fifty-five Cessna O-2 Skymasters, and twenty-two OV-10 Broncos. After the end of January 1968 Tet surprise attack, the 3rd Brigade had shipped out in mid-February from Fort Bragg to Vietnam and was under the operational control of the 101st Airmobile Division. Our FAC contingent consisted of five officers, a major air liaison officer (ALO) who was in charge of three captains and one first lieutenant—me. I flew the O-2 out of DaNang and Phu Bai AB just south of Hue city. I lived in an Army installation named Camp Rodriguez, named after a sergeant who was the first 82nd AB soldier KIA in VN when the brigade deployed after Tet '68. I was in a two-man tent surrounded by a four-foot wall of sandbags and slept on a cot. I shared the tent with an Army first lieutenant until he was so badly wounded during a firefight that he had to be med evac'ed back to the States, and I had the tent to myself. My shower was a community cold-water fifty-five-gallon water drum with a faucet. I never did get the ever-pervasive red dust out of my skin until I rotated back to the USA! I did get hot meals for breakfast and supper but usually ate K rations at lunch. And there was limited ice or refrigeration, so I learned to like warm beer and soft drinks. Besides flying once a day, I had to pull regular shift duty in the brigade Tactical Operations Center (TOC) with the S-3 Air element. We monitored the radios, preplanned future air support missions, responded to immediate requests for Close Air Support (CAS) to our units under attack, and briefed all this activity at the daily Stand Up briefing to the senior leadership of the brigade. Brigadier General Alexander Bolling commanded this independent brigade. He was a real gentleman and frequently spoke during the daily Stand Up briefings of how much he appreciated what the Air

Force was doing to help the unit. I was in all the big battles, directing air strikes by USAF, USN/USMC fighters, and naval ship gunfire around Hue and west into the A Shau Valley from April to September ’68. The following war stories illustrate some of what I experienced while serving with the Army.

On my O-2 missions, I carried a CAR-15, Combat Assault Rifle—a short-barrel version of the M-16 with a telescoping stock; an Uzi, Israeli made that I got from Special Forces; a USAF issued Colt .38 caliber revolver in my survival vest; and my Walther PPK, small 7.65mm pistol in ankle hostler under my flightsuit leg.

One day my mission tasking was to patrol overhead a company of troops walking down a dirt road in the mountains west of Hue. They were going to one of the fire support bases we had built to support operations in A Shau Valley. We flew these missions routinely, and they were usually boring because nothing happened. But this particular day the North Vietnamese/Viet Cong ambushed our troops. We always maintained contact with the ground unit over the FM radio. When the shooting first happened, I was cruising about five hundred feet over them, fifteen hundred feet was a customary altitude to fly at to stay out of small arms fire range, but you obviously can see more the lower you get. A panicked-sounding voice crackled over the radio when the troops started taking fire from the jungle alongside the road. I could see our soldiers finding cover in the ditches along the road and returning fire. The radio operator, probably a young enlisted man, yelled they were taking casualties. I tried to find out where the fire was coming from and at the same time on the UHF radio requested close air support fighters from the Direct Air Support Center (DASC) for “troops in contact.” Then a cooler voice spoke up on FM. It was the company commander, and he calmly told me where the enemy fire was coming from so that I could accurately put in the air strikes. I was really busy now talking on three radios, FM, VHF, and UHF, and figuring out the GeoRef coordinates I was flying over. The DASC, located at Phu Bai air base, immediately diverted some airborne fighters to me, and they arrived within five minutes. I marked the enemy positions and put in two flights of F-4s and F-100s on places the company commander said they were being attacked from. After the five-hundred-pound bombs and napalm were dropped, it got real quiet on the ground as the enemy retreated

from our air attack back into the jungle.

About a week later, I was pulling a shift with the S-3 Air in the 82nd TOC, when an Army captain entered and asked for Gimpy 35, my FAC call sign. I told him I was Gimpy 35, and this guy in dirty, muddy fatigues who smelled like a pig came up and bear-hugged me. While holding onto me, the captain said, "You saved my ass and my company." His first sergeant accompanied him—they had just gotten off the helicopter after being airlifted back from the base camp. They gave me a captured NVA AK-47 and an SKS assault rifle that were still wrapped in cosmoline and never fired.

And now for the rest of the story. After reading several articles in *Stars & Stripes* about GIs being arrested for shipping home live grenades and automatic weapons back to the States from VN, I decided not to put these "war trophies" in my hold baggage. So I had the two Russian-made assault rifles mounted on a wooden plaque with an inscription and donated them to the 20th TASS in DaNang for the squadron operations building wall. I did put in an Army- issue Colt 1911 forty-five-caliber pistol that another Army guy gave me, another war story, and it arrived OK in my shipment without being found by customs! I still have it today, and my grandsons will inherit it along with all my other guns. Sure wish I had that AK-47 and SKS!

GOD LOOKS OUT FOR LIEUTENANTS

Low-altitude stall: One vivid and memorable mission was when I was doing visual reconnaissance above mountainous jungle on the eastern side of A Shau Valley one day. I was down around five hundred feet above the ground "jinking," moving in random motions side to side and up and down, making it much more difficult for the enemy to hit me with ground fire than if I flew in a straight line. All of a sudden, I spotted twelve to fifteen NVA troops dressed in tan uniforms with tan pith helmets jogging down a trail. I always flew with a CAR-15, a short-barrel M-16 with a collapsible stock, which I grabbed and stuck it out the left-side window. I started firing at the figures on the ground while pulling my O-2 in a tight turn to keep them in sight. That's when my airplane stalled and started falling out of the sky. To use an old Texas expression, that "scared the daylights out of me," and I pushed the throttles to full power and lowered the nose of the O-2 to break the stall. My front windscreen was filled with nothing but jungle rushing up at me! As I

gained airspeed and broke the stall, I eased back on the flight controls as the trees started to get real big and pulled out about fifty feet above the jungle canopy. With my heart in my throat, I knew how close I came to dying in a fireball of my own making. I climbed up to a higher altitude to continue the mission—and never fired my rifle out the window again!

One night around 2300 hours, I was sleeping soundly when suddenly awaked by lots of automatic rifle fire that was very close! I jumped out of my cot, pulled on my flight suit and boots, grabbed my CAR-15, and ran from my tent for about one hundred yards to the TOC. On the way, numerous illuminating flares were fired, and it created a surreal visual effect over the base camp. I actually saw a couple of NVA sappers throwing satchel charges that exploded about two hundred yards away. I got hunkered down in the TOC, which was my duty station in case of attack. It was a beehive of activity while the commanders tried to gather information and figure out what was happening. There was lots of ground fire for a short time, but it ceased as the NVA infiltrators were quickly killed. In fact, one of the Army officers who worked with me in the TOC S-3 area was a first lieutenant Citadel graduate named Blaine, I've forgotten his last name, who was awarded a Silver Star that night. He led a group that charged the area where the NVA sappers broke through the wire and rapidly killed the invaders. Unfortunately, I seem to remember that two American soldiers on guard duty were killed in perimeter bunkers—sleeping on duty? The next week, I finally got some leave from my FAC tour and left Vietnam to meet my wife for a week's R&R in Hawaii. I slept soundly in the Honolulu hotel with no night ground attacks and gained weight eating at the fabulous restaurants before I had to go back to 'Nam! I sure missed my wife for the next three months and was determined to survive and get back to her in Texas!

I was sent down to DaNang Airbase and loaded up my airplane with cases of beer and soft drinks for our Camp Rodriguez FAC unit. While at the 20th TASS squadron building, I met a fellow FAC who wanted a ride up to Hue Citadel airfield where he was stationed with a small detachment of O-1 and O-2s. Hue was the old imperial capital of Vietnam, and the Citadel was a large, walled fortress where the royal family lived. It was the scene of very heavy fighting in the Tet '68 battles. Our flight from DaNang and landing at the very short Citadel runway was uneventful. I taxied up to their operations

building and dropped the captain off. I proceeded to the end of the runway. As a young pilot, there were several important facts that I didn't consider in preparing to take off and go to Hue Phu Bai airbase. It was a very hot and humid day, and my beer and coke load probably gave me an over gross weight and aft center of gravity condition for the O-2. With these atmospheric conditions, an experienced pilot would anticipate a much longer takeoff distance and reduced climb rate after liftoff. Of course, being a young lieutenant pilot, I just didn't realize what a marginal and unsafe operation I was attempting on a short runway! After I pushed the throttles up to max power and released the brakes, I soon noticed the slower acceleration. When I finally got to takeoff airspeed near the very end of the runway and lifted off, I knew I was in deep trouble. The end of the runway was only a few hundred feet from the massive brick fort wall on the north side of the Citadel. As the aircraft approached the wall, my life slowed down and I thought I was going to crash. I rapidly pulled the landing gear up and flew just a couple of feet over the top of the wall. What a relief to be alive! I never repeated that mistake in the rest of my thirty-year flying career!

We had a visit from an Air Force Fighter Weapons School (FWS) major from Nellis AFB, Nevada. He was an instructor in the FWS and was on temporary duty (TDY) in Vietnam to observe various air combat operations so that FWS students back in the States had access to the latest information of how we were fighting the war. He wanted to observe an O-2 FAC mission and was assigned to fly with me. After a long discussion of what our mission in I Corps with the 82nd AB entailed, I gave him a detailed flight briefing on the scheduled air strikes and targets I had for that day. As luck would have it, one of our companies out toward A Shau Valley became engaged with the NVA in a heavy firefight right after we got airborne. So I flew over to their location and talked to the company commander on the ground. During a routine patrol, they came under heavy fire from a bunker complex. I had him pop a colored smoke grenade, which I identified as green smoke, to confirm his location, and he told me where the "bad guys" were firing from that smoke. I could see what I thought were the bunkers on the side of a tree-covered hill. Then my first flight of two F-100s came overhead, and I gave them all the target information and specified the enemy and friendly locations. They had me in sight, and I made a rolling left turn to mark the target with a white-phosphorus-smoke rocket. They dropped eight 500-pound

bombs in two passes in the general area of the bunkers. The ground commander liked what they had done but was still receiving some fire from the bunkers. In the meantime, two F-4s carrying 750-pound bombs and napalm came overhead to work on my target. After my in-flight target briefing to the F-4s, I started rolling in to fire another rocket on a marking pass. While rolling into the nearly wings level nose low attitude to fire the rocket, a small arms round shattered my left cockpit window and sprayed glass all over the major and me. The bullet missed both of us but scared him so much that he went ballistic and started squealing like a little girl. I told him to calm down and that we were OK. I continued on my pass toward the bunkers and fired the rocket. Although it was very windy in the cockpit, I pulled up and radioed the F-4s to "Hit my smoke"—which they did with great accuracy. After the napalm dropped on the target, the Army captain on the ground was delighted because it got real quiet down there from the enemy positions! I'm sure the major was embarrassed because he didn't say a word all the way back to the base for landing. There was no other battle damage to my airplane except for the shattered window.

A favorite aunt of mine gave me a Saint Christopher medal that I put on my dog tags chain around my neck. Despite two Vietnam War tours and flying 525 combat missions in the F-4 and O-2 and taking numerous hits, I wore that medal on every flight and never got a scratch on my body. Thanks, Saint Christopher!

Many of our fellow Americans, mostly living on the East and West coasts, were aggressively protesting against the Vietnam War and treated returning servicemen from Vietnam very badly. There are numerous stories of our warriors in uniform either going to or coming home from Vietnam being harassed, cursed, and spit on. I'll tell you one thing, I did not actually experience that, but if I had, I would have punched out the perpetrators! One of my most vivid memories is returning from my first combat tour in Vietnam. Like so many others before and after, I had just come home from an extremely dangerous life experience that only combat veterans know. It was comforting to be with my wife Barbara and six-month-old baby daughter Lara in very familiar surroundings back in Texas! As we drove in to see my parents and other relatives in my hometown, I saw a banner hanging from the I-10 overpass on Main Street, Highway 105, that stated, "Welcome Home

Hale.” I knew, at that time, that I had left Vidor, Texas, to serve in the war—but Vidor, Texas, never left me!

IT'S BETTER TO BE LUCKY?
HALE BURR

I was on a Fast FAC road recce mission, looking for targets of opportunity (e.g., trucks, supply storage areas, AAA gun sites, etc.), and the weather was unusually good in northern Laos. I've forgotten who was flying with me that day, but I'd bet he still remembers me. As usual, my F-4D Phantom was carrying two pods of 2.75-inch white-phosphorus-marking rockets (one LAU-32 launcher with seven WP rockets on each wing), a center-line SUU-23 gun pod (six barrel rotating M61 Vulcan cannon with about twelve hundred rounds of 20mm high-explosive incendiary capable of firing six thousand rounds a minute), and two 370 gallon external-wing fuel tanks.

On this particular day, I was flying from west to east over Route 7, which went from the Plain Des Jars (PDJ) to Ban Ban and continued into North Vietnam at the "Fishes Mouth." Route 7 was the main road and a major infiltration route for enemy troops and war material from NVN into northern Laos. Ban Ban Valley was a very infamous place in the Barrel Roll area of northern Laos (similar to the town of Tchepone in the southern Laos region called Steel Tiger). The NVA concentrated lots of AAA gun sites at both locations, and as a result, we lost lots of American aircraft near Ban Ban and Tchepone! I was "down in the weeds" at very low altitude, trying to maintain over five hundred knots airspeed and about one hundred feet above the ground, while making random 3-*g* and 4-*g* turns (called jinking) to keep crisscrossing the road. This was usually an effective tactic to look for enemy targets and not get shot down from being too high and on a predictable flight

path. Our F-4 crew coordination was divided, so I mostly spent my attention on looking ahead while flying the route, focused on not running into the ground. My backseater, affectionately called a GIB (for “guy in back”), concentrated on looking for targets. We crossed over the small bombed out town of Ban Ban.

While I was a Fast FAC at Udorn, the senior leadership never did prohibit us from firing the gun on targets. I’ve read or heard of Fast FAC groups at other wings that were not allowed to use their aircraft to strafe (due to combat losses?). At Udorn, we FACs agreed it was not a good tactic to make multiple strafe passes unless it was to help a fellow pilot during a search-and-rescue effort.

After I flew out of Ban Ban valley to continue toward the NVN border, I saw a large formation of enemy troops marching down the road ahead of me. What a surprise! My guess is that there were over two hundred soldiers in a long column formation—in broad daylight! As I passed close over them, I continued eastward and started to pull up to about two thousand feet. Then I made a 180-degree slicing turn back while arming up my 20mm cannon. This maneuver caused me to be displaced about two miles away when I rolled out in a shallow ten-to-fifteen-degree dive angle. I turned slightly to track toward the back end of the enemy formation on the road and at about five-thousand-feet slant range opened fire with the SUU-23. This three-second burst (about three hundred rounds) of high-explosive-incendiary (HEI) shells started at the NVA troops closest to me and went to the far end of the marching column. As I watched for an instant my HEI tracers (every fifth shell) exploding in small bright flashes on the road, I began to pull up steeply in MIL (military) power. And then I did something really dumb! This is probably not surprising to people who know fighter pilots or have seen their act while drinking in a bar. While maintaining high airspeed, I extended out to the west for a couple of miles before yanking my Phantom back around for another strafing pass from the opposite direction. Not smart!

From this distance, I could see many small black objects lying on the road and also quite a few enemy troops on both sides of the road firing AK-47s at me. I commenced firing again with the same low dive angle parameters in another three to five-second burst and slowly pushed side to side on the rudder pedals to “walk” the 20mm exploding rounds in a pattern to cover all

road.

Well, as you'd expect, my first strafe pass definitely woke up the enemy air-defense gunners, and now they were all looking at me. At this time, looking both straight ahead and with my peripheral vision, I became conscious of several AAA sites, probably ZPU, 14.5mm, or 23mm (heavy machine guns) in the valley and several 37mm guns on the mountainsides, starting to concentrate their fire on me! And besides that, my GIB started screaming from the rear cockpit, "They're shooting!" It is still very vivid to this day, and I can see the tracers (like flaming golf balls) rising toward me from all directions and began to zing past my cockpit! This is an adrenaline-rush experience that really gets your attention as you hope the enemy shells miss! I knew I was pressing my luck! So I immediately went into afterburner (MAX power) on both engines while aggressively jinking. I climbed with "my heart in my throat" and pulled up to quickly gain altitude to get away from the flak airbursts near my airplane and out of their AAA weapons envelope. When safely up at a high altitude, my GIB and I shared a nervous laugh and joked about our harrowing experience. Not through any skill of mine but due to divine intervention or just pure luck, to use a cliché, we had "dodged many bullets."

Although I was raised as a Baptist, my Aunt Syda, a devout Catholic, gave me a Saint Christopher medal before I left for my first tour in Vietnam. I'm sure glad I was wearing my Saint Christopher medal on my dog-tag chain that day. It was always with me on all 525 combat missions. Thanks, Saint Christopher and Aunt Syda!

I'm sure I caused a lot of casualties to the enemy troops on that mission, which was confirmed by looking at my gun pod camera film when I got back to Udorn. And even though there were no dark clouds (except for flak) in the sky that day, I really messed up an NVA combat unit by "raining on their parade!"

I'M GETTING TOO CLOSE TO GOING HOME FOR THIS!
HALE BURR

One of my closet friends at A&M was Murray Wortham, Class of ’65. Our time as Ross Volunteers during our junior year created a close bond. Murray was fun to be around and always the life of the party. We frequently went to each other’s southeast Texas home on weekends to get away from College Station. Then between our junior and senior year, we drove out together to Air Force ROTC summer camp at Webb AFB in Big Springs, Texas. After our graduation, he was a groomsman in my wedding, and I was a groomsman in his. Our wives and we lived in the same apartment complex while attending pilot training at Laredo AFB. Then we both went to the same F-4 training class in Florida. But when we got follow-on assignments to Vietnam, it was to different bases.

Unfortunately, Murray was shot down and killed about four months later during a mission over Laos on December 31, 1969, two months after the birth of his daughter (whom he never got to see in person). It was a tragic loss that I felt deeply then—and do so to this day. I have gotten old, wrinkled, and gray-haired, but Murray will always be twenty-four years old to me. I still miss him.

The Air Force had a fighter-pilot personnel policy that no one would be sent back as a non-volunteer to Vietnam a second time until all eligible pilots had completed their first combat tour. After my first combat tour in ’67–’68, I

felt very proficient in flying fighters and extremely confident in my pilot skills. During my first tour, fifteen out of forty-four in my F-4 training class were shot down, and eight were killed. So our attrition rate was about one-third of the total class. It's really easy to become addicted to the adrenaline rush of flying jet fighters and flying in combat! But that feeling is not worth much if you don't survive.

It is hard to explain the psychology of fighter pilots—they are self-assured overachievers, very aggressive, and have a strong competitive will to win. These traits are what it takes to be successful in air combat. When the antiaircraft tracers, enemy aircraft, and SAMs are flying, your training kicks in, and you just react, especially if you've endured lots of realistic peacetime training. In actual combat, you're in survival mode and have a heightened sense of alertness. Time seems to slow down in a battle. You are very aware of everything going on as if it's in slow motion around you.

I volunteered for a second tour! This was really tough on my wife Barbara because she now personally knew quite a few young Air- Force widows and wives of POW and MIA pilots, like John Wortham.

I received orders to Udorn AFB Thailand, the 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron, in June 1969. After a couple of days of base administrative in processing, ground training, and getting over jet lag, I started flying combat missions once again. I didn't fly every day but averaged probably five missions a week mostly in Laos and occasionally in North Vietnam. We mostly attacked North Vietnamese positions on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the road system that moved enemy troops and logistics from the North down into South Vietnam. Additionally, we flew a lot against the communist Pathet Lao forces in the secret CIA war over control of Laos. These missions were mostly dropping 500, 750, and 2,000-pound conventional "dumb" bombs and sometimes firing "Bull Pup" cockpit-guided missiles.

And then, after about four months in the 13th TFS, I was selected to become an F-4 Fast FAC in October 1969, the same mission that the O-2 FACs had that I flew in Vietnam a year before. F-4 FACs went out and marked targets with white-phosphorus (WP) rockets for other fighters to attack. Our Phantoms were configured with a centerline 20mm cannon, two WP rocket pods, and two 370-gallon external fuel tanks.

I really enjoyed this mission. We flew very low, usually well below five hundred feet, and always over 500 knots. We had a saying “Speed is life” and kept our airspeed high because the enemy air defenses were dense in Laos and North Vietnam. If not flying at extremely low altitudes, we stayed above forty-five hundred feet to avoid any small arms and automatic-weapons fire. Of course, you can’t see much that high and most missions were “down in the weeds” looking for targets. Our FAC missions lasted four to five hours with multiple air refuelings.

There is one data point I have on the most dangerous type of flying during the Vietnam War. From July 1967 until July 1970, there were forty-two Fast FAC jet fighters shot down. That’s a loss rate of 4.37 per every one thousand sorties flown, a much higher rate than any other type of aircraft loss rate during this three-year period. So it’s the same time frame that covers my tour as a Fast FAC. At the time, we knew it was dangerous but didn’t know the aircraft loss statistics—or care!

I did the FAC mission for a couple of months, and then the lieutenant colonel in charge of the Fast FAC program transferred to Europe. The wing leadership selected me, a young captain, to become Chief of the Fast FAC program at Udorn. I was fortunate to be so young and to be in that position. This was one of my most rewarding assignments because I was leading a great group of warriors, which included Captain Dick Myers, later a four-star general and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, plus Captain John Jumper, later a four-star general and USAF Chief of Staff. I don’t think anyone would have thought at that time that we’d ever become general officers due to the way we acted as young, wild fighter pilots. Later in our careers, I teased Dick and John, claiming they rose to such heights in the military because of the leadership skills learned when they worked for me as Fast FACs!

Under President Nixon’s “Vietnamization Program,” where the South Vietnamese were to take over the combat roles normally performed by Americans, our US forces began to be pulled out early in 1970. My DEROS (date estimated return from overseas) was moved back from late May to April 1. So my combat tour was curtailed nearly two months. As you might expect, I was thrilled to be going home early to my wife, Barbara and two-year-old daughter, Lara, in Texas.

As one approaches the end of a combat tour, they start counting the days until they board a “freedom bird” for the trip back home to the USA. In the last few weeks or days before the scheduled departure date from the Vietnam War, we said, “We’re getting short.” I knew several guys who got shot down in the last few days or weeks before their final mission; they were very unlucky. The more combat missions your fly, you’re exposed to more enemy threats, and the more likely something bad will happen because the risks keep going up on every mission you fly.

About four days before my departure, 7th Air Force headquarters in Saigon directed a big air strike against some SAM sites the North Vietnamese were building on their side of the border with Laos. This was during the bombing pause over NVN, and we only flew reconnaissance flights (with F-4 armed escorts) to keep track of what the enemy was doing in the North. Our wing at Udorn was tasked to attack these new missile sites. Since I was commander of the Fast FACs, I was selected to be the mission commander and lead the attack. The Frag (fragmentary order) arrived late in the afternoon of March 26, and we began work immediately to plan the mission. Our wing at Udorn was tasked to provide twenty-four attack aircraft, along with supporting aircraft from other Thailand bases, to destroy the SAM site. I worked with many others in the wing until late that night coming up with the tactics for the next day’s mission. We expected intense AAA fire because the North Vietnamese placed many AAA locations around their SAM sites. On the morning of the March 27, I stood up in front of the assembled twenty-four aircrews, along with the Wing Commander and Director of Operations, and briefed the mission.

Engine start, taxi, and takeoff were normal for the twenty-four F-4s carrying a mixed load of M-117 750-pound bombs and CBU-24s, a clamshell bomb casing that opened up and spread 670 baseball size antipersonnel/antimaterial submunitions that exploded in a large circular pattern on the ground target. We climbed out to medium altitude and air refueled on KC-135 tankers before heading into NVN toward the target.

We were lucky. The weather was clear with unlimited visibility. I dropped down to about five hundred feet and about ten miles ahead of the bomber formation. This part of North Vietnam was a mountainous area covered by trees. I pushed up my airspeed to over five hundred knots and

flew directly over the SAM site, which was camouflaged and hidden in the trees. I could clearly see the missile launchers, radar-control vans, and assorted trucks on the ground. While lighting both afterburners, I pulled up immediately and climbed to about ten thousand feet while confirming the target to the incoming fighters. I rolled over in a looping 135-degree slicing turn back to mark the target with a white-phosphorus rocket. During this time, three SAM's, which can fly at Mach 3 (nearly 2,300 mph) and up to an altitude of eighty thousand feet, lifted off the ground in large dust plumes! My radar homing and warning equipment was not active in the cockpit, which meant there was no radar locked on to my plane, so I think the NVA (or Russian?) ground operators fired the SAMs optically. In any case, I had three five-thousand-pound SAMs flying at my Phantom jet. I saw them and called out over the UHF radio frequency that all the strike fighters were monitoring "Falcon, we've got SAMs."

Later listening to my audio tape recorder after I returned to base, the first three words were in a normal tone, but I knew the SAMs were tracking toward me and "SAMs" came out in a much higher pitch—perhaps an octave higher! It was fascinating to watch these telephone poles sized missiles come up toward my aircraft. Our defensive maneuver against a SAM was a constantly changing flight path to keep the small wings on the missile moving and adjusting its flight path. Hopefully, the SAM guidance system would cause a large correction and overshoot instead of hitting their target—my aircraft. As I completed the roll in, one SAM went below me, and two flew over my F-4 so close I could feel the buffet or turbulence as they barely missed me. I fired two WP rockets into the middle of the target obvious from the large dust cloud caused by the missile launch among the green trees. As my white smoke rose from the ground, I called out to the first flight of F-4s, "Hit my smoke," and they rolled in on the target. I pulled up to get out of their way and noticed three white clouds where the SAMs exploded high above us. Then I watched the twenty-four F-4s drop their ordnance on the SAM site. It was always fascinating to see the bomb impacts and explosions resulting in numerous secondary explosions on the ground that billowed up where the SAM site had been located. As the smoke cleared, an RF-4 recce bird came zooming over to take post strike photos of our attack results on the target. I sure didn't feel any sorrow for the NVA troops that had just tried to kill me by launching the SAMs my way but rather elation that I was still alive

and they probably were not. This was one missile site that wouldn't threaten any more American aircraft. Our return flight back to Udorn was uneventful.

Three days later I safely completed my final mission in my second Vietnam War tour for a total of 525 combat sorties. I was delighted to get home to my wife, daughter, and family in Texas. And my family was excited about traveling on to our new assignment, flying F-4s at Hahn AB, Germany.

THE BEST IDEA
STEVE MOSIER

Most anyone familiar with the Vietnam War knows of the long trains of bombs the B-52s dropped, first in South Vietnam, and later in Laos and North Vietnam. The Buffs used the Combat Sky Spot ground controlled radar for heading toward a wide variety of targets, flying a steady heading and altitude to a point in the sky where the ground control called for bomb release, and vast quantities of iron bombs were dropped with varying levels of success in terms of BDA. But, whatever the results, the grunts appreciated the support and the shock effect these missions had on VC and NVA recipients.

The downside of the Buff strikes was they delivered a long trail of bombs owing to the time it took to release many tens of bombs. Good for interdicting roads and lines of enemy troops laying siege to places like Khe Sanh and An Loc. Not good for concentrating lots of weapons on point or tight area targets. So somewhere in a higher headquarters, maybe even as high as the Pentagon, or further East, the brilliant light came on, “Hey, we could bunch up some fighters, send them on a Sky Spot and they could put some heavy iron in a pretty tight pattern.” So the message traffic started to flow and ended up in the Tactical Operations Center (TOC) at the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing, Ubon Royal Thai Airbase, Thailand.

In the F-4 our radars were marginal for anything other than low level against area targets. We did Sky Spot in the F-4 when there weren’t other

alternatives, or there was a particular target 7th AF directed us to strike. Most of the time we didn't know what the target was we were "Sky Spotting" and didn't get much satisfaction if that was our mission. So when the word came down we were tasked with a special Sky Spot mission involving a mass formation of Phantoms—twenty-four in fact!

Seems like some leadership was convinced that a gaggle of fighters could deliver massed firepower on a relatively compact area. We were tasked to take essentially a squadron of Phantoms on a Sky Spot mission against a TBD target in Northern Laos. It was to be a "max effort—our load was to be sixteen M117 bombs per aircraft. That gave us a configuration of a center-line tank, five bombs on each outboard multiple stores ejector rack (MER) and three bombs on each inboard triple ejector rack (TER). They used to say a Phantom could carry as much as a B-17—this was it. Twenty-four Phantoms, each with sixteen 750-pound bombs equals 144 tons of high explosive. Put that in a tight package, and you can imagine the destructive power.

It's easy to do the math—but getting the bombs to the point in the sky that would put them on the desired spot on the ground was easier said than flown. The tacticians came up with a configuration of three flights of four Phantoms in a Vic, and another three by four stacked about fifteen hundred feet higher and three thousand feet in train. Sort of like the Combat Box that Curt Lemay employed in the European Theater of Operations. The gaggle was about as maneuverable as an ocean liner and vulnerable to AAA, SAMs, and MiGs. Also, a real gaggle to launch, get to the tankers, and form up for the run to the Sky Spot IP and the stabilized run to bomb release. But we did it—once.

Mass launch out of Ubon, several spares prepped, several used to get twenty-four Phantoms off the tankers and up to the Barrel Roll area of Laos. On the run-in leg, low formation at 16,000 feet, trailers at 17,500. Speed stabilized, 480 knots, on heading, ready, ready, pickle, bombs (roughly 380 of them) away, turn away and break-up for RTB. Debriefed, recap sent to Blue Chip, off to the O'Club for chow and cold beer. Had no clue what the target was—what sort of damage we'd done—glad to have it over—hoped we'd never do it again.

Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* was a popular read for the Ubon aircrews—we knew the characters well—many carried their nicknames well before Goose, Iceman, and Maverick became popular in the '80s. We also knew that, in some cases, a bombing mission by Yossarian was deemed successful if you had a "tight pattern" and bombed some friendly cotton.

MY LAST MISSION—THE LONGEST APRIL FOOL'S DAY

HALE BURR

The longest April Fool's Day morning began routinely in my two-man room with the alarm clock ringing at 0330 to wake up and go to a 0430 flight briefing in our squadron building. Major Del M., Captain Walt Van G., Captain Dick R., and I were all on our last combat mission with the 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Udorn Royal Thai Airbase Thailand before departing later that day for the USA. Both Walt and I were on our second combat tour in the Vietnam War and had experienced more than our fair share of exposure to bad odds of not returning from flying hundreds of combat missions. Our flight was really motivated to survive this last mission because the day before our squadron had an F-4 shot down while attacking a surface-to-air missile (SAM) site in North Vietnam (NVN). Both of our squadron mates ejected from the plane over Laos and, luckily, were quickly picked up and rescued by USAF Jolly Green Giant search-and-rescue (SAR) helicopters.

That morning at 0630 Falcon 51, our four-ship of F-4 Phantoms launched. Our takeoff was followed by an aerial refueling on "Lemon" track with a USAF KC-135 tanker flying out of U-Tapao Airbase in southern Thailand. We cycled through the refueling in one, three, two, four order and continued en route to our target, which was in an area called the "Fish's Mouth" or Barthelemy Pass between NVN and Laos. The passes through the mountains on that border between Laos and North Vietnam were heavily

concentrated with enemy air defenses and numerous logistics facilities that transported war material to their troops in Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. Of course, these passes were frequent bombing targets. The terrain is incredibly rugged with high mountains called Karsts and dense triple canopied jungles. Due to its military significance, NVN had heavily defended the pass with many AAA and SAMs designed to shoot down our planes. Of the many American pilots lost near these passes during the war, very few returned. Search and rescue was difficult not only because the enemy was present in large numbers, but North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao soldiers did not usually take prisoners.

When we were about forty miles away, we made radio contact with our "Tiger" F-4E Fast FAC from Korat. He was putting in a strike and one of the F-105s attacking the target area had been hit by AAA, and came up on Guard frantically announcing to everyone that he might be bailing out over Laos. Our pucker factor increased dramatically because we then knew it was a "hot" target area. While approaching the target, we saw all the 37, 57, and 85mm active AAA gun sites shooting from both sides of the border!

The "Tiger" Fast FAC marked the target with a white-phosphorus rocket and our four-ship of F-4s commenced our circular attack from various angles on the white smoke to complicate the enemy gunners tracking solution. I was number four in the flight and rolled in last on the target. During my descent I flew through a nearly solid cloud of black, white, and dark gray flak bursts at different altitude levels that the AAA sites had fired at the preceding three F-4s in my flight. From my cockpit as I descended to bomb release altitude with various colors of tracers coming up at my aircraft and passing by my canopy, it was like watching a WWII movie of B-17s flying over Germany! A tracer round is usually only every fifth bullet. Our flight dropped our loads of MK-82 five-hundred-pound bombs and CBU-24s (cluster bomb units) in one pass on the target and got away from the area rapidly. The "Tiger FAC" announced our bomb damage assessment as two large secondary explosions (ammo storage?), two AAA gun sites destroyed, numerous enemy Killed By Air (KBA), and several fires in the area.

Our four-ship flight quickly rejoined within ten miles away from the target and headed back into Laos for the return trip back to our Thailand airbase. It was an uneventful return except that when we let down at Udorn,

we flew a tight four-ship “diamond formation” very low pass at about one hundred feet over the runway before landing. I was “Falcon 54” and in the slot position of the formation and closest to the ground. I was hoping that our flight leader would not drag me off on the ground! Although I always felt “bulletproof” as a young fighter pilot, I wanted to make sure I got back to the “Land of the big BX” safely that day! We made a tactical pitch up to the landing pattern and got the jets safely back on the runway.

As we taxied back in, all the guys in our squadron were waiting in the aircraft parking area to welcome us with fire trucks, which hosed us down with water cannons as we climbed from our Phantom jets. After toasting everyone with lots of cheap champagne and beer, we celebrated our successful tour completion by shaking the hands of squadron friends and other 432nd Wing well wishers on the ramp. Then we changed to dry uniforms back in our squadron building, grabbed our bags and the four of us boarded the base C-47 “Gooney Bird” for the flight to Bangkok. A garbage can filled with ice and beer was thoughtfully placed on the plane by the squadron for our trip—we proceeded to drink all the beer on the way to Bangkok.

That afternoon we four “happy warriors” got on the “Freedom Bird,” a military charter B707 that would take us from Bangkok, Thailand back to our homes in America. A slight delay was caused at the Bangkok airport when the flight ticket agents did not want to let our flight leader Major Del M. on the flight because he was so drunk. But we convinced them the three of us would take care of him and prevent any problems. So they finally let Del aboard with us keeping him under control for our flight home.

Since we crossed the International Dateline west of Hawaii, our long trans-Pacific Ocean flight to Travis AFB, California arrived on the first of April. We all said our goodbyes and best wishes to each other and went our separate ways. I caught a flight from San Francisco back home to Texas, where I was met with hugs and kisses from my wife, Barbara, and my two-year-old daughter, Lara. The longest April Fool’s day was over—no jokes or pranks had been played, and no bad luck had happened to me! What a memory!

PROTECTIVE REACTION STRIKES
RUSS EVERTS

WOLF FAC (06B)
UBON RTAFB, MAY 14, 1969, FIRST TOUR

In the late ’68 to early ’71 time frame, a FAC could request a Protective Reaction Strike (PRS) across the border from Laos into North Vietnam (NVN) if strike flights they were working in Laos were engaged by threats in NVN. The request would be made to Hillsboro, the airborne battle command post, and when approved, additional strike aircraft would be sent to conduct a retaliatory attack against those threats. In mid-1970 the Rules of Engagement (ROE) were loosened to allow a FAC declare a PRS while simultaneously informing Hillsboro. These PRSs resulted in many guns being destroyed or silenced and also resulted in lots of other collateral BDA from colocated storage areas, truck parks, POL dumps/pipelines, and so on.

On May 14, 1969, Wolf 05 was the third go, working strike flights in the northern end of the Mu Gia pass area, when they were engaged by numerous visual and radar-directed 57mm AAA, as well as 37mm, 23mm, and ZPU guns from NVN. They requested and were granted permission to initiate a PRS against the guns. They spent the next two to three hours working numerous strike flights against those guns. Wolf 06, Major Skip Harrington with me in the back seat, arrived at the start of the last go and relieved Wolf 05, who was out of white-phosphorus (WP) marking rockets and 20mm after working so many flights.

We spent the next three periods, four hours, working over the same guns with ten separate strike flights, normally four F-4s or four F-105s. We made more than twenty separate marking passes for the strike flights, directing them to the numerous gun emplacements in the valley. With only fourteen WP-marking rockets, when we were out of WP rockets, we used 20mm to mark the active gun sites to help keep the gunners' heads down. Skip also fired a burst of 20mm at the gun positions just before launching a WP. When Winchester, no WP, or 20mm remaining, Skip would "mark" by diving at the next gun position and told the strike flights to attack any guns that fired at us. When we had to go to the tanker to refuel, an O-2 FAC that was monitoring the action a few miles from the target area would control the strike flights until we returned. Refueling didn't take too long, or anywhere near as long as usual, because the tanker guys extended their anchor over Laos, which of course, they weren't allowed to do.

The majority of the strike flights carried a mix of MK-82, five-hundred-pound bombs and CBU-52. In short order, it seemed the entire valley was on fire for miles on end. Obviously, there were many more supplies, ammunition, POL, and so on stored in and about those gun positions and a large amount was damaged or destroyed. The total BDA we provided for all the strikes worked was pretty impressive (not exact, of course, but as good as we could estimate from what we saw):

> Five 37mm guns destroyed; two 37mm silenced/possibly destroyed.
> One 57mm destroyed; three 57mm silenced/possibly destroyed.
> Seventeen small secondary explosions (probably ammunition).
> Twelve large secondary explosions (ammo and POL).
> Twenty-two large and seventy-two medium secondary fires (two plus hours burning).

Although many of the guns were silenced/damaged/destroyed, it was not before they and their cohorts sent a lot of lead at Wolf 06 and the ten strike flights. Ground fire estimates, based on the number of tracers observed, not an exact science but pretty close, were as follows:

> Strike flights—seven hundred seventy-five rounds of 57mm; four hundred rounds of 37mm; one thousand plus rounds of

23mm/ZPU. Wolf 06—two hundred rounds of 57mm; two hundred rounds of 37mm; five hundred plus rounds of 23mm/ZPU.

This was a pretty exciting mission. Both Wolf 05 and 06 were submitted for the Silver Star, based on the intensity and duration of the mission, most of which was under constant fire from the AAA guns. In accordance with the HQ guidance at the time, both GIBs decorations were downgraded to a DFC, but the front seaters did receive the Silver Star. This was probably my 30th or so Wolf mission of the 237 I ended up flying during two tours, and it still stands out as the most rewarding and dangerous.

POW HELLO?
RUSS EVERTS

MID-1969, WOLF 06
8TH TFW, UBON RTAFB, FIRST TOUR

During my first tour as a Wolf FAC, Jerry Linn and I, then a backseat pilot (GIB), had the second go and were working the Plains De Jars (PDJ) area in Northern Laos. In the prebrief with Intel, mention was made of a cave off Route 7 past Ban Ban not too far from the NVN border. It was a possible collection/ holding point for POWs. We were asked to take a look at it and see if we saw any signs of activity.

On our first period, we did a medium-altitude recce of the area and spotted the cave area. There were multiple caves in the base of a very steep karst formation. The karst/cave area was adjacent to a very large and pretty green valley. It had obviously been the target of a few bombs at some time. There were many old craters in the valley floor. Looking at the area from above, it also appeared that there might be a number of gun emplacements to defend whatever was worth protecting. We decided to make a very low, high-speed pass up the valley close to the karst/cave formation at the start of our second period. We departed the area and did some route/ target recce in another area of the PDJ in advance of some flights we had scheduled to work in the second period.

We hit the tanker, topped off, and started our ingress back to the area.

Jerry started down and got very low about ten miles out. We popped over a ridge and flew by the cave area at a *very* low altitude so we could see into the caves. Not long after we popped over the ridge, a whole bunch of 23mm and 37mm guns opened up. It was quite a show, lots of tracers and lead flying around fairly parallel to the ground, as we weren't too high above it. We zipped by the caves, gave a wing rock, lit the AB's and pulled close to straight up, not a problem at 450–500 knots, with lots of the tracers trying to follow us. We didn't see anything to indicate there was anybody in the caves, but there indeed was something of value to be protected by that many guns. We stuck around at medium altitude to see if we could see any more activity, took a number of pictures with my 35mm telephoto, and departed the area to work the other flights elsewhere.

After hitting the tanker a second time, we decided to make one more low pass by the caves sometime in the third period, after we did some route recce elsewhere. When we popped back into the valley (from the opposite direction this time), we got the same reception as we did the first time, lots of low-altitude lead. Again, as we came by the caves, we did a wing rock, lit the AB's and pulled up. We never knew if anyone friendly was in the caves, but figured if they were, at least they would know someone cared and was looking.

We asked Hillsboro for some fighters to go after the guns. There were at least eight different four-position 23 and 37mm sites we could identify, but we were denied, probably because of the POW possibility. If they were in the caves being held, it would have been quite a show! When we debriefed that afternoon, I had the film developed that I took with the telephoto. All the eight gun positions were quite identifiable. I still have the 35mm slides of that valley and the gun positions and used them in a Wolf FAC briefing to the Luke AFB Daedalian Chapter in 2014.

A SAD FOURTH OF JULY
HALE BURR

JULY 4, 1969
A-1H 52-137512 602 SOS, 56SOW
USAF, NAKHON PHANOM
COLONEL PATRICK MARTIN FALLON (KIA)

Colonel Fallon was the vice commander of the 56th Special Operations Wing (SOW). Like many wing staff, he insisted on flying operational missions to remain current and to inspire the aircrews and ground crews under his command. He and his wingman were flying an armed reconnaissance mission over the southern half of the Plain of Jars (PDJ) when they were directed to a group of enemy troops that had been sighted near the village of Muang Pot, on the southwestern edge of the PDJ. Colonel Fallon was pulling up from his second pass over the troops when 12.7mm antiaircraft fire hit his aircraft. He ejected near the enemy troops and came down between two high ridges. , and Fallon's wingman attacked them until his aircraft was damaged forcing him to return to base. Colonel Fallon was in voice contact with the rescue forces, but he was surrounded by enemy troops and was wounded. His final message was to bomb the enemy all around him as, in his own words, "They have zapped me. I've had it." We presumed the enemy soldiers, in a final stand of defiance, killed him. A few months later it was reported that grenades killed a US airman while he was defending himself with a pistol. Patrick Fallon had flown over 100 combat missions

during his time in Southeast Asia and had flown 125 missions as a FAC pilot in the Korean War.[1]

As radio announcer Paul Harvey used to say, “Now for the rest of the story.” On my second Vietnam combat tour, I had been flying just over a month with the 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Udorn AB in northern Thailand. My roommate, Captain Dick Roth, and I were scheduled to fly in an early-morning four-ship mission with our Squadron Commander, Lieutenant Colonel A. J. Parker, and Lieutenant Colonel Paul Mulhern, Operations Officer. Lieutenant Colonel Parker was leading the flight with me on his wing, and number three was the Ops Officer with Dick on his wing. It was the monsoon season in Southeast Asia, and the weather was typically nasty over Laos and Thailand. Our mission that day was a “Commando Nail” (CN) attack in northern Laos on a “suspected enemy troop and storage area” target that we expected to be hidden by dense cloud cover. This type mission was very unpopular among fighter pilots because you flew in a long, straight, medium-altitude spread formation in or over the clouds and dropped your bombs using our F-4D aircraft radar system. At that stage of the war and level of radar technology, we were convinced this was a very inaccurate and probably ineffective weapons delivery of conventional “dumb” bombs. We derisively called these “killing monkeys and making toothpicks” missions.

So on July 4, our four F-4s’ takeoff and climb were routine through the clouds to an altitude of about twenty-five thousand feet. After rejoining with and completing an air refueling with a KC-135 tanker, we were cleared by “Hillsborough,” the Airborne Command and Control Center (ABCCC) aircraft, to proceed with the mission. We had just started navigating to our CN target when we heard a “May Day” call on the Guard (Emergency) UHF radio frequency. “Firefly 26” was a USAF A-1 announcing to everyone listening on Guard that both he and his leader had just been hit by ground fire from a 12.7mm antiaircraft gun and his flight leader had ejected with a good parachute. His radio call was loud and clear, so we knew that we were close to his position and quickly calculated that we were only about twenty miles away. Beneath our flight, it was mostly cloud covered with a few patchy holes where we could see the ground. My flight leader radioed the ABCCC that we were aborting the CN mission and would begin a SAR (search and rescue) for “Firefly 25.”

It is an article of faith among fighter pilots that if you get shot down, you know the Air Force leadership will do everything they reasonably can to rescue you. If there is any chance at all to save a downed airman, the Air Force will launch SAR missions, no matter what the threat is, to try and bring you back home safely.

It is more difficult and dangerous to maneuver four fighters through and underneath a thick cloud deck than a two-ship formation. So my flight leader ordered number three and four to stay at altitude while we descended in close formation to try and get below the clouds. While he searched for a hole, I stayed on his wing as we went down through the clouds. We broke out in the clear over the Plain of Jars, or PDJ as we called it. The PDJ is a large relatively flat plain in central Laos surrounded by small mountains. It is named for the hundreds of ancient large “stone jars” that are present in many locations on the plain. No one knows who made them, but they are a couple of thousand years old and assumed to be associated with prehistoric burial practices.

As we flew underneath a two-thousand-foot cloud ceiling toward the location of Firefly 26, Colonel Parker directed me to assume an extended trail formation at about three thousand feet. This formation makes it easier for a wingman to see and avoid the ground. We could hear the downed pilot talking on his survival radio. He said he was OK but wasn’t more than 150 yards from the enemy gun position that shot him down and was surrounded by bad guys. Finally, we saw the airborne A-1 wingman a few miles away and below us down near the ground. Also, we could see the black smoke rising above the crash site of the A-1 leader’s aircraft coming from the jungle-covered small mountains ahead of us. The pilot on the ground knew we were coming from our radio transmissions with his airborne wingman. Then we heard the pilot say, “They’re all around me and shooting. I’m hit; just put that stuff in here, or I’ve had it.” As we approached, the airborne A-1 was flying at about two hundred feet above the ground, firing his guns in an attempt to keep the enemy away from the downed pilot. As we got closer, I could see the hilltop gun emplacement, a 12.7mm gun site, actively firing at us. A parachute lay below it on the top of trees in a valley that was between two high ridges. My leader and I rolled in sequentially on a very low angle attack on the gun position and dropped 12 Mk-82 five-hundred-pound bombs,

six each. As I pulled up from the target, I saw the blast impact of our bombs and the gun site was obliterated in fire and smoke. Then we made a second pass and dropped our remaining Mk-82s on the other mountaintop enemy location. At this time, the downed pilot made his final radio call from the ground and said, “They have zapped me. I’ve had it.” Sadly, there were no more radio transmissions from him. I then rejoined with my leader at low altitude underneath the overhead cloud cover. The A-1 wingman gave us a BDA (battle damage assessment) of a 12.7mm gun site destroyed and numerous enemy KBA (killed by air) and said he was diverting to Udorn, our home base, due to the battle damage to his airplane.

By the time we rejoined, we were both low on fuel and needed to go home and immediately land. As we climbed up through the weather to cruising altitude, I began to think about what had happened on this flight and how we failed to rescue a fellow downed airman. As I pondered what had just happened to a brave pilot, I felt a great sadness come over me about his fate and wished for a different outcome. Obviously, we could fly much faster than the A-1 and landed at Udorn after flying a 1.9-hour mission. Firefly 26 came in after us and crashed on the runway and closed the airfield. The pilot was OK and not injured in the crash landing.

While Colonel Parker and I were down under the weather, our other element was orbiting up high and listening to the rescue attempt. They went to a KC-135 tanker to top off; they were getting low on fuel. My roommate and our Ops Officer continued and dropped their bombs on the original CN target. While returning to Udorn, they were told by ABCCC that the Udorn runway was closed because Firefly 26 had crashed on the runway. They diverted to Nakhon Phanom (NKP) airbase, which was home base for the A-1s. It was raining hard, and the PSP (pierced steel planking) runway was very slick. 56th Special Operations Wing personnel who wanted to know the details of the mission met them at the parking ramp. That’s when they learned it was the Wing Vice Commander, Colonel Fallon, who had been shot down! The NKP folks were upset about losing Colonel Fallon but were glad we had worked the SAR. Colonel Mulhern and Dick had lunch at the Officers’ Club while their aircraft was refueled. Then they flew back home to Udorn after a total of four hours of flying.

While debriefing the mission to our Wing Intel folks, we played our

tape recorders and had all Colonel Fallon’s transmissions from the ground. A very frustrating and emotional day!

NOTE

1. An extract from *Vietnam Air Losses 1961–1973* by Chris Hobson.

A-1 NIGHT MISSION
DICK DILLER

November 14, 1969. I took off at 4:40 p.m., call sign Firefly 36. Frank Brown was Firefly 37. We went to Barrel Roll and did armed recce with not much happening. I called Alleycat, our Command and Control C-130, and told him it was too hazy for an armed recce. Alleycat said a Candlestick FAC was en route but still forty-five minutes away. We had been in the area for quite a while and didn't have the gas to wait, find a target, and strike, so Alleycat sent us to Bad Man, a ground FAC. Bad Man said he had bad guys about eight hundred meters from his position and directed us in on them with nape and five-hundred-pound bombs. After Frank made his passes, he called me on FM and said, "Bad Man doesn't seem to be very excited. Why don't we take our CBUs home?"

I agreed, so after Frank made one last pass, I said to Bad Man, "We're out of ordnance and going to go home."

Bad Man said, "OK" and reported, "Ninety-five KBA," which sounded inflated. We turned south.

About the time we rolled out of the turn, Bad Man called back with more urgency in his voice, "They're attacking my position! They're coming up the hill!" The bad guys obviously had a radio and heard me communicate we were out of ordnance, which wasn't the whole truth. We had enough CBUs, rockets, and guns to provide a nasty surprise for the attackers. Frank

had two CBU-14s, each with six tubes. I told him to pip off three tubes a pass. I had flares and lit the area while Frank was dropping his CBU.

Bad Man loved it. When the CBUs were gone, I rolled in with white-phosphorus rockets, one at a time. Bad Man said, “Oh, yes, that’s where they are.”

When I was out of rockets, I came in with my 20mm guns, but on the first pass, my inboard guns jammed, so I armed the outboards. Recently we’d had simple ball slugs with tracers most of the time, but tonight I had incendiary shells that sparkled when they struck the target or the ground. The incendiaries didn’t have tracers, but we could tell where they hit.

After several passes, Frank said they were shooting back. He thought it was about twenty rounds of automatic-rifle fire, but I was bottoming out high enough above the ground that it didn’t seem to be much of a threat, so I kept at it. We stayed until we had less than bingo fuel and then turned for home.

I called Alleycat to tell him of the situation. Bad Man gave us ninety KBA on the second half of the strike. Not bad if we could believe 185 KBA on one mission.

COMBAT OT&E OF "ROCKEYE II"
HALE BURR

Nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be shot at without result.

—Winston S. Churchill, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*, London 1898

An alternate title for this war story, perhaps more appropriate, would be *Fighter Pilots in Pissing Contests with AAA Gun Sites* . On my second Vietnam War tour, I was assigned to the 432nd TRW at Udorn RTAFB, Thailand from June ’69 to April ’70. At that time, we had two F-4D fighter squadrons, the 13th “Panther Pack” and the 555th “Triple Nickel,” and two RF-4C recce squadrons (the 11th and 14th). I became a “Laredo” Fast FAC in October 1969. The Fast FAC group worked directly for the director of operations in wing headquarters. In January 1970, as a young captain, I replaced a reassigned lieutenant colonel and became the Chief of the Fast FAC Branch for the last four months of my combat tour. Those six months flying as a Fast FAC were definitely the most exhilarating, to use Churchill’s expression, and rewarding that I experienced in a total of 525 combat missions during two Vietnam War tours!

Dueling with enemy AAA gun sites as a fighter pilot was one of the

most dangerous missions in the Vietnam War! That's because the enemy could send up a lot of bullets toward attacking aircraft during a dive-bomb pass or a Fast FAC marking a target with a white-phosphorus rocket, called "Willie Pete." The vast majority of US aircraft losses were due to AAA and small arms fire— not SAMs or MiGs. There is one data point I have on the most dangerous type of flying during the Vietnam War. According to General Tony McPeak's book "Hanger Flying," from July 1967 until July 1970, there were forty-two Fast FAC jet fighters shot down. That's a loss rate of 4.37 per thousand sorties. This is much higher rate than any other type aircraft loss rate during this three-year period. That time frame covers my October 1969 to April 1970 combat flying tour as a Fast FAC!

Because of the threat, Fast FACs always tried to remain unpredictable as we marked a target! We'd usually make a curvilinear-dive-angle pass of thirty to sixty degrees and fire at about five-thousand-feet altitude above ground. Usually, we'd fire one or two WP rockets to mark the gun site to pull out at around three thousand feet above the target. Our tactic was never to make a straight ahead pull-up but instead go into a hard left or right turn recovery while jinking, making erratic, random changes in direction and altitude. As we climbed back up to a safer higher altitude, we'd call out to the attacking fighters where to bomb from our white smoke cloud hit on the ground. Fast FACs would routinely dive into the heavy lethal ground fire from numerous AAA gun sites while trying to put attacking fighter pilot's "eyeballs" on the target to be attacked and destroyed!

USAF decided to test a new antiarmor cluster bomb unit (CBU) against AAA gun sites in combat flying out of Udorn because our Fast FAC F-4s and RF-4C recce birds routinely flew together to get pre- and post strike photos of targets. Captain Brian Wages in the 13th TFS was chosen to lead this Operational Test & Evaluation (OT&E) and write up the report. The test was to evaluate the effectiveness of the "Rockeye II" against AAA guns. It was conducted daily for two weeks between December 11 and 24, 1969, and I flew as the Laredo on eight of those missions.

The Mk-20 "Rockeye II" was developed by the US Navy in 1968 as an antitank weapon. It was a clamshell bomb dispenser that weighed 511 pounds and carried 247 dart shaped submunitions designed to pierce armor up to seven inches thick. The concept of operations involved having RF-4s fly over

suspected AAA sites each morning in the Barrel Roll (Ban Ban and Sam Neua and Steel Tiger, Mu Gia Pass, and Tchepone areas of Laos). Our wing intel photo interpreters would review the recce film and identify sites that actually had a real gun inside the hole. All the sites chosen were 14.5mm, 23mm, 37mm guns, 57mm sites, and even one 100mm AAA site. The "Laredo" FAC and an RF-4C "Bullwhip" would brief with a two-ship flight led by Captain Brian Wages. In the briefing, we did a lot of target study and agreed on the best tactics to minimize the danger to our aircraft and assure the destruction of the gun site. Each F-4 had four Mk-20s, two on each triple ejector rack (TER), and crews were directed to release them in "Singles" with a double "Pickle." We would take off separately in the early afternoon, and after rendezvous, proceed to the target area for the attack on the gun site. I would drop down about fifteen miles from the target to "treetop level" for terrain masking and fly very low over the gun site to confirm it was still occupied. To increase their survivability, the attacking two-ship pilots used high-angle/high-altitude releases (e.g., sixty-plus-degree dive and seventy-five-hundred-plus-feet weapon-release altitude) of the Mk-20s. A post-strike recce run took photos to determine if the gun had been destroyed or damaged by the Rockeye II. In the following days, additional RF-4 sorties were flown over the attacked sites for follow up pictures.

The Rockeye II test results between December 11 and 24 were not very conclusive, or even particularly good, for numerous reasons! The Mk-20 was difficult to accurately employ against guns because it had a mechanical timed fuse instead of a radar fuse. It also had a "donut-shaped" (with a large hole) explosion pattern of the bomblets on the ground. Therefore, it required a double pickle to try and ensure overlap of the two "donut holes." And since we were flying in some of the most heavily defended areas in Southeast Asia, the bomb droppers couldn't use lower dive angles and release altitudes that would have permitted more accuracy and a better impact pattern.

During many of the attacks, we flew through lots of tracers and flak explosions while hundreds of rounds of ground fire were directed at our aircraft from numerous different AAA sites! This affected some pilots on the release parameters that were required to get a proper dispersion pattern on the gun site. The newly assigned Wing ADO decided to fly one of the missions (to check on what and how the captains were doing?). As Brian described it,

the Colonel was “scared shitless” when multiple guns started shooting as he rolled in and wound up flinging his Rockeye out to “East Jesus.”

Another mission was diverted to assist a SAR effort in Ban Ban valley under a low cloud ceiling. They ended up just dropping the Rockeye on the small mountains around the valley with no clue of their effectiveness.

On one mission, Brian pickled much lower than planned, and the Rockeye impacted directly in the AAA gun pit. It completely destroyed the site, as proven by our RF-4 recce post strike film. Although it was an effective attack on the gun, it didn’t contribute anything for the weapons test of the Rockeye!

After he completed writing the Rockeye test report, Brian went down to brief the results to 7th AF headquarters in Saigon. When he finished the briefing, it was apparent that the senior Air Force leadership had lost interest in this effort. There was only one nonpilot colonel who had some really crazy and flawed ideas on how to employ Rockeye. I’m guessing he wanted to get a Legion of Merit for his “combat tour” at the headquarters. This was the end of Brian’s OT&E experience. He left the briefing and went straight to Bien Hoa AB to get checked out in the O-1 so he could begin his new assignment as a “Raven” FAC in Laos!

I would describe this OT&E test as probably using an inappropriate weapon against this AAA target set. The good news is that we didn’t suffer any aircraft losses during the higher headquarters directed test—and did kill some AAA gun sites. After dodging innumerable “flaming golf balls” (tracers) and countless white and gray flak air bursts for two weeks, both Brian and I agreed this “pissing contest with AAA guns” was some of the most exciting and fun flying we ever did while assigned at Udorn. Since we survived, we both definitely agree with Churchill’s observation.

THE MAKING OF A JOLLY GREEN COMBAT PILOT
TOM WALDRON

I had been a KC-135 aircraft commander for a year and had nearly two thousand hours in the KC-135, and for a thirty-year-old guy, things looked good. In fact, after my return from my second SEA deployment, my boss called me into his office and told me I was selected to upgrade to instructor pilot. That would have been a great career move at my age, an instructor pilot in SAC at the age of thirty. I had completed two sixty-day temporary duty assignments, once as a crew copilot and the latest with my own crew. I was awarded two Air Medals for the combat flights; my flying career was looking good and predictable.

But the next week, my commander called me in again. “It looks like things have changed,” he said. “The Air Force is sending you to helicopter training school in Texas, and then to Udorn Air Base, Thailand, as an HH-53 pilot, the super Jolly Green rescue helicopters.”

I suspect that the USAF was in a bind. They had the mission of combat rescue in Vietnam and Laos. Until this war, there had not been many USAF helicopter pilots graduated, as the demand was low. But since the goal was a one-year tour, something needed to be done to bring in more new helicopter pilots. They couldn’t be rookies because they would be placed in a combat role that required experienced pilots. USAF decided to tap KC-135 and C-141 aircraft commanders with a year’s experience as aircraft commanders to

fill helicopter positions. So much for SAC. So long KC-135. Hello helicopter upgrade at Shepard AFB, then Eglin AFB near Destin, Florida, home of ARRTC—the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Training Command, our last stop to train on the Sikorsky H-53, the Super Jolly Green.

Our instructors had flown many hours of combat in Southeast Asia. We learned a lot in the next months—especially how to get into an area and get out in one piece. We were also checked out in a new procedure, air refueling behind an Air Force C-130 Hercules, a four-engine turboprop modified with two pods under each wing. Each pod had seventy-five feet of hose with a "basket" attached. Our task, extend the refueling probe on the right side of the H-53 to just beyond the rotor blades and maneuver into place to connect and then slip up on the C-130 wing and fill our H-53 fuel tanks with JP-4.

First, another school, where we learned about new engines, hydraulic systems, electrical systems, flight controls, minigun operations, hoist operations, and new crew communication. Unlike the KC-135, the H-53 had no navigator or boom operator. On our H-53 flight crew were the Flight Engineer (FE) and my favorite group of USAF professionals, the pararescuemen (PJ). Little did I know that I was training with men who I later would label as heroes: other pilots, FEs who stood in an open door operating a hoist to bring up a downed pilot, and the PJs on their miniguns or being lowered to the ground to aid a downed pilot who may be wounded. All this while the enemy was firing their many weapons: AK-47s, antiaircraft guns (23mm and 37mm), and the feared handheld SAM, the SA-7. And there was always the possibility of an attack by a Russian MiG-17, 19, or 21. Many would pay the supreme sacrifice, losing their lives while attempting to save another.

"That others may live" is the motto of the ARRS-Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service. The main difference in our rescue crew structure was that for each mission you might fly with different. Since everyone was certified in his position, it didn't matter who was your copilot or engineer or PJ that day. This concept made it a bit easier to schedule flights in combat. I must admit that after a while I did have my favorites, one being PJ Doug Horka. The procedure used to rescue a downed airman is to "hover" the large helicopter twenty to fifty feet above the survivor on the ground. The FE in the door would hook a two-foot metal jungle penetrator onto a cable and lower it with

his hydraulic control box to the ground. If the penetrator was in the airstream awhile, it could build up a static charge, and if the person on the ground reached up to grab it, he could get quite a shock. The survivors had been told to let the penetrator touch the ground before grabbing onto it, but I bet if someone were shooting at me, I would not worry about a shock. This device could hold up to three people at one time. Small seats could be pulled down, and a strap wrapped around you. When the thumbs-up sign was given, the survivor would be pulled up. If the person on the ground was injured or wounded and unable to move, the PJ could be lowered down to aid the survivor, often under fire. These guys were, indeed, heroes.

On October 3, 1969, we graduated from H-53 school. We were now Jolly Greens! We were among a select group of airmen who are dedicated to bringing home their brothers-in-arms. Now, it was on to Udorn AFB, Thailand, with a short stop at “Snake School,” jungle survival, at Clark AFB, the Philippines.

On the first day of survival class, I was in the middle row about halfway to the rear of a large classroom with unusual decor. I looked around the room and saw hundreds of names on the walls—too many to count. “Attention,” was the command from someone. All students stood at attention as the school’s commander entered to give his welcome speech. “Gentlemen, welcome to Clark,” the commander said. “During your break, I hope that you look at the names you see on these walls. You have something in common with each one. They also sat where you are sitting. After they completed this course and went to fly in Southeast Asia, they were shot down and either killed, missing-in-action, or captured and thrown into a cell somewhere in North Vietnam. What you learn here may keep your name off my walls. Good luck and Godspeed.” I don’t remember in my thirty years of living a more powerful attention getter. I would soon learn a few lessons I would take with me to the combat zone, and, hopefully, if needed, they would work. In addition to days of classes, we often went into the field to examine traps the bad guys would set. Finally, it was time to go into the jungle with a group of natives, the Negritos. Their relatives had helped our army against the Japanese during WWII. They were very slight in build, and they had an innate ability to live off the jungle—things a kid who grew up in Illinois never experienced: how to find water in a plant and how to use a cane section

with water added to rice to cook a great supper. Those guys were very unusual in their approach to life; they made survival look easy. On day two, our job was to be able to conceal ourselves in a jungle area. For a demo, two of the Negritoes hid in a field, and we were to find them. After our group of twenty guys stomped all over the field, with no success, the instructor asked them to stand up. They did, and they were just under our feet. How did they do it? I would have liked to take them along, just in case we were shot down somewhere and had to hide in the jungle. For our "final exam," our class spent a night sleeping in the jungle. (This included various uninvited critters.) We were simulating being shot down and the need to hide and spend the night and avoid capture. Our hunters were the "friendly Negritos." If they found us, we had to give them a metal "dog tag" we had. They could turn the tags in for a pound of rice per tag. We each had three tags, and you would like to have at least one left after the night to pass the test. The NCO in charge gathered all his students. "Gentlemen," he said, "I am passing out these C-rations (like those used in WWII). That is your dinner. Oh, and by the way, there are many jungle rats in our area. If one bites you, you will need to take the series of shots for rabies. And finally, don't walk around at night. There are two-hundred-foot drop-offs. So are there any questions?"

Our instructor departed, and we began to seek out hiding places in the brush. I could see where some of the guys were hiding, just in case I needed to get away from any critters lurking around. It was still light when I finished the chow and realized that the crumbs I generated could provide an incentive for a visit from a rat and his friends. I used some of my drinking water to clean up my very greasy hands. It was going to be a long night. I had never heard anyone snore in the jungle. It was amazing when I heard Major Gill begin sawing Zs. Hah, I thought, I bet he gets caught by the Negritoes. Just about the time I was nodding off, I heard several rats running about in the brush. Damn, they sounded big! Really big! I decided to keep one eye open during the night. A few minutes went by, and I heard a new noise. This noise was familiar: mosquitoes. They were a bit larger than those in Illinois and Florida. I pulled out the plastic bottle of 6-12 and spread the stuff on my arms and face to keep the bugs away. I was ready for what was to come. And they did. I heard a noise, someone walking and sniffing. The 6-12 was acting like perfume, and a Negrito guy came right up to my spot. I handed over one of my dog tags. One dog tag was gone; two were left. Within five minutes I

heard another walker-sniffer. He was coming for his metal dog tag for rice. I guess the guys worked in pairs. The rats were still running about doing whatever rats do at two am. After a very long night, I heard a great sound, a rooster crowing. Great, those guys usually crow at sunrise in all the western movies I had seen. I don't know why, but I checked my official Air Force watch. It read three o'clock, and it is way before sunrise. If I could have found that rooster, it would have been his last day to crow. The night finally ended. A rescue H-3 helicopter came to take us back to the base: a shower, real food, and a nice, soft bed. I never thought that something we take for granted every day could become a luxury. I realized that if I had been shot down, I might still be in the jungle, evading enemy soldiers. Instead of handing someone a "rice chit," the soldiers would either shoot me or tie me up and drag me off to a prisoner of war camp. Yes, I did learn something, and I hoped I never had to use it. I would never look at 6-12 in the same light. It was now a perfume.

School days were over, and it was off to Thailand, first Bangkok and then on to Udorn Air Base in the northern part of Thailand. I understood where we were going to work was not a friendly place. Actually, it was a place that could become quite lethal in a very short time. During WWII, someone said there were no atheists in foxholes. In the Vietnam War, I don't think there were too many atheists in cockpits either.

Why were these Air Force rescue helicopters located in northern and eastern Thailand when this was the "Vietnam War"? In 1969, USAF and USN/ USMC aircraft were bombing trucks and infantry using the roads to take supplies through the Mu Gia pass from North Vietnam into Laos, and eventually into South Vietnam. If an F-4 or F-105, common USAF attack fighters, or a USN A-4, or A-6 from carriers was hit by a SAM or a MiG, the airborne warrior(s) might be forced to eject from a burning aircraft, most often into an area that was not friendly. Our workplace was often hostile since the same guns that shot down the survivor's aircraft were also waiting for the rescue guys to come in their slower helicopters to attempt a rescue of the survivor(s).

The next day it was off to our squadron to get fitted for a parachute, a "bullet-proof" flight helmet, and an explanation of the weapons, an M-16 rifle and a .38 caliber pistol, we would be issued on each flight. We had

qualified shooting these weapons while in Florida. There was also the “blood chit.” This laminated document was about twelve by twelve inches and had information printed in several languages. It translated into: “Take this US airman soldier to the nearest US embassy, and you will receive $100 in gold.” You folded it to about three by three inches, and it fit into one of your survivor vest pockets. It was a controlled item and had to be checked out each time you flew. It was great to turn it in after a flight; that meant you made it back!

We also met two instructor and evaluation pilots, Major Phil Prince and Major Al Heeter. We would train with them to learn local flying procedures and combat techniques. Once a pilot had enough experience, and minimum flying time, one of these evaluators would give him certification to fly as an aircraft commander with his own crew in combat operations. As pilot evaluators, their job was challenging. They were your comrades in flying combat missions, but they also had to evaluate each pilot to confirm that he was indeed qualified to be in charge of a combat crew. During my time, there were a few H-53 copilots who never checked out as aircraft commanders. I guess something in them did not make the grade. A point emphasized on each training flight was that there were not just two pilots in the H-53. There was also an FE and two PJs in the back. It did not take long to appreciate each one of them.

The FE would typically operate the rescue hoist, called a jungle penetrator, to retrieve a downed airman. All three were qualified to fire the three H-53 miniguns. In some cases, it was necessary to send a PJ down on the jungle penetrator to attend to a downed crewman who was severely injured or even knocked out. These were not routine flights such as those we flew in Florida. In the war zone, there were folks who would like to shoot you and your helicopter out of the sky. The natives in Destin, Florida, were always friendly.

After lunch, we had briefings by personnel from the Tactical Fighter Wing Intelligence Section. Each day, these “Intel Specialists” sorted through lots of data and analyzed various sightings to give the flight crews the best information available. On the day you were flying, they could predict what air defenses to expect and just where you would find them. We were all given plastic coated navigation-type maps where we could easily mark known

locations of SAM sites and AAA sites, usually 23mm or 37mm in our areas. The MiG airfields were all located within the North Vietnamese borders. The main one was outside of the capital, Hanoi, code name HOTEL. Another MiG airfield was south of Hanoi at a place called Vinh, code name CRAB. It was close to the border with Laos and South Vietnam. The most difficult type of AAA to locate was the mobile AAA. These guns were mounted on or towed behind trucks, and they constantly moved around the theater of operations. Damn, smart bad guys!

The major from Squadron Operations also gave a briefing. “Gentlemen, you are all qualified in the H-53 by position—pilot, copilot, FE, or PJ. A big difference: while flying in Florida no one shot at you. That is not so here! “Since some pilots are coming in as copilots, you will need to upgrade to aircraft commander within a few months. This is only a year tour, and we need qualified aircraft commanders as soon as possible. After your in-theater checkout as copilot and some combat mission flying time, an instructor pilot will evaluate you. If ready, you will enter the aircraft commander upgrade program. The PJs will receive continual training in medical procedures by our assigned Air Force flight surgeon.” I knew that all PJs were qualified to do tracheotomies, administer morphine, and stop serious bleeding to keep a survivor alive and get him back to a hospital. “Let me go over what happens when an aircraft is shot down and the crew has bailed out,” the major continued. “Most Air Force and Navy fighters come into an area and work with a FAC. These FACs are pros. They know their assigned target areas like the backs of their hands. They also know enemy AAA and SAM locations and the proficiency of each gunner. When someone is shot down, the FAC may be the one who calls in the search-and-rescue request to higher headquarters in Saigon. The air war stops! Every effort will be made to retrieve the downed crew. “The C-130 aircraft changes its call sign to King and begins to locate airborne resources to use, if needed, in the survivor’s area. There might be enemy AAA sites to take out and/or enemy soldiers to neutralize near the survivor. MiGs could also be a potential threat in the immediate area. If so, USAF/ USN fighter aircraft would need to be configured to fight air to air.”

The major stopped to sip some coffee and continued, “By that time, our squadron will have received a call to ‘Launch the Jollys!’ That is your cue to

get to your helicopters, start engines, and take off in the direction of the mission. The exact mission location will be given using the closest TACAN navigation site, if possible. As you head in the mission direction, your A-1 fighter support aircraft, now called Sandy Lead and Sandy 2, will contact you on your assigned frequency. Since the two Jollys are in formation, we call the lead 'Jolly Low Bird' and the other 'Jolly High Bird.' Each Jolly will have two A-1 escort fighters. They are your big brothers. The Low Bird is the primary helicopter to make the pickup. The Sandy Lead is the On-Scene Commander and will direct air strikes against hostile forces. When Sandy Lead determines the rescue area is safe for a rescue attempt, he will notify the lead Jolly, who then receives final information as to the heading and situation of the downed airman. On the run-in to the survivor's location, the A-1s will escort you and take out enemy gun positions. Your PJs will all be on their guns, as will the FE. Within the crew, use your interphone to tell the pilot what you see or need. If you are taking fire and need the pilot to rotate the H-53 while in a hover, he can do that. On the final run-in, the Jolly Green aircraft commander becomes the On-Scene Commander. It is in your hands. Gents, our job is to keep our brothers from being killed or captured. Don't ever forget that we are all in this together. Your first flight will be scheduled within a few days. I recommend you study your maps and enemy gun locations. Look for defined rock formations in Laos. One might look like a duck, another, a castle. Know them and use them quickly to reference the position of a downed crewman. That is all." "Wait," he added. "There is something else you will carry on each mission, and that is the gas mask." He held one up. "Often, tear gas is used that makes the recipient sick. It won't kill you, but you won't feel like flying for a bit. Sandy Lead will determine if and when it is used. The code name changes each day. Also, the bad guys have some of our radios they have taken from captives, so they can monitor our Guard frequency."

Two days later, before getting our first H-53 local training flight, Major Bob and I were told to see our Operations Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Catlin. Both Major Bob and I, while flying in SAC, had two previous tours of sixty days each in the KC-135. We each got half of that time toward our return date from this tour, so our one-year tour became ten months. Detachment 1, 40th ARRSq at Nakon Phanom Air Base (NKP) flew the Sikorsky H-3s and was undermanned by two pilots, and the new H-3 pilots

were not being sent to the Detachment. Since Bob and I both had gone through the H-3 training just before the H-53 training, and we had a few months credited to our year's tour, we became prime candidates for temporary duty at NKP flying H-3s. We didn't know if we would be there one, two, or three months. We packed again and caught a flight on a C-130 to NKP, one hundred miles due east on the border of Laos. NKP had five H-3s and only eight pilots, plus their commander.

Sikorsky made both the H-3 and the H-53, but there were significant differences. The H-3 weighs twenty thousand pounds, has two jet engines, can air-refuel, and has two older M-60 machine-guns, one out of the crew entry door, and other out the opposite window. The Jolly Green crew was an aircraft commander and a copilot, an FE, and two PJs. The H-53 weighs forty thousand pounds, has two larger engines, can also air-refuel, and has three 7.62mm miniguns, six barrels that can fire two to four thousand rounds per minute. The first two guns are located like the H-3, and the third gun is on the rear ramp, which can be opened during flight. The rear gunner, a PJ, stands inside a bulletproof tub that protects him from any piercing rounds that might come from underneath the helicopter. The H-53 pilots had no triggers to fire guns, but we did have a red switch that turned on the guns. The pilot could maneuver the helicopter around a point to enable the crewmembers to fire at any bad guys. There were physical stops on each gun to make sure one didn't shoot the fuel tanks or tail rotor. Another big operational difference between the two helicopters was the external fuel tanks. Where ground fire was possible, the fuel tip tanks could be hit by ground fire. External fuel tanks on the H-53 had fire-suppressant material inside so if a bullet hit it, the tank would not explode. Not so with the H-3! Without fire suppressant inside those tanks could explode and destroy the H-3. The H-3 external tanks had to be jettisoned prior to a rescue attempt whenever there was a threat of gunfire. After jettison, the H-3 had less than an hour's flight time unless refueled.

NKP was a smaller base and easier to get around. Our unit had a small jeep that could take us from our quarters to the flight line. Our H-3s were parked close to the runway and could be airborne very quickly. Down the parking ramp, I could see A-1s, OV-10s and some A-26 night fighters. Mission call signs were assigned to each aircraft. The one with tail number 61-17836 was Jolly 74, and another was Jolly 72, and so on. The call sign

stayed with the aircraft and not the pilot. The A-1s had three squadrons: call signs were Hobos, Fireflies, and Zorros. They carried different types of ammunition, but all had 20mm guns located in the wings. The pilots were very accurate and could put bullets very close to some bad guy hiding in the bushes. Once a rescue mission was determined, the A-1s on site changed their call signs to Sandy 1, Sandy 2, and so on.

The forward air controllers at NKP used the call signs Nail and Raven. These pilots and crewmembers worked the same geographic area each day and quickly became experts on AAA emplacements and SAM locations. On a rescue mission, FACs directed our fighters to take out the AAA defenses. These FACs often were shot down themselves, due to the dangers associated with their job. If a jet aircraft had a FAC mission, he would have a Misty call sign if flying an F-100 or maybe a Wolf call sign for an F-4. Those jets used a lot of fuel, and they were always looking for a KC-135.

All of the pilots at NKP shared an officers' club, which cost five bucks a month for dues. That was where we ate most meals and downed a few cold beers after a flight. The NCOs also had a club, as did the younger airmen. We did eat off base at times and were surprised at the great French onion soup you could find. Of course, the French had been in Indo-China a few years earlier and influenced some food dishes. A Thai woman and her girls cleaned our living quarters. We paid a few bucks a month to help buy items such as boxes of Tide and scrub brushes. The shower floor was used as the washing machine. If we smelled bad, it didn't matter since all clothes were washed from the same water source. I guess our noses adjusted.

After Bob and I had once more settled in, it was time to fly the H-3 again.

TWO THOUSAND POUND BOMB DROP
DAVE VOGL

1969–70 KORAT AB

Although I flew two tours in Tiger FAC, I was assigned a squadron mission on this day and was number two in a two-ship dropping MK-84 two-thousand-pound bombs with four-foot extended fuses. After lead dropped his bombs, I was cleared in by the FAC and started my roll-in. As I had not been doing much bomb dropping, I needed a few extra seconds to get the pipper where I wanted it. Thank goodness my sharp WSO was extra loud with his pickle call, and I pushed the release button and immediately began my 5-*g* pull.

And that's when things all went to shit! My bomb on the left wing did not release, and with two thousand pounds gone from the right wing, I instantly rolled inverted to the left while still in a forty-five-degree dive. I scared my poor WSO to death, as he had no idea WTF I was doing.

As I regained my composure, I was able to fight the heavy wing and get the nose pointed upward. We both started to relax a bit as the FAC transmitted, "Holy shit, what was *that* all about?"

We spent the next thirty minutes trying to get the bomb or the pylon to come off. Nothing worked. Not even pulling g's again while pushing the switches. We finally gave up and brought the jet back to Korat.

We advised everyone we had unexpended ordnance and told them what we had tried. We decided to make as smooth a landing as possible. After touchdown, I delayed the drag chute for a second and then pulled the handle.

Shit! When the chute deployed the drag released the bomb, and I saw this two-thousand-pound bomb bouncing along right beside us.

What should I do? Jam on the brakes and let the bomb continue ahead of us or, ditch the chute, hit the burners and hope we could stop before we ran out of runway? I decided on the latter.

As we began to pull away, we saw the bomb bouncing on the nose, then the tail, and then repeating. Just as I was just losing sight of it, I saw the bomb bounce off the hard surface of the runway and impact the dirt, nose first. I suppose we were saved by the four-second fuse arming time, and the impact in the dirt stopped the fuse from rotating and arming the bomb.

Except for having to get fresh flight suits, everything turned out OK. But I never want to go through *that* again!

BOXER 22
TOM WALDRON

New H-3 crews came to NKP on temporary duty from the 37th ARRSq in DaNang, South Vietnam. Normally, one of our NKP copilots would fly with one of their aircraft commanders, and vice versa and each chopper had one PJ from each location—so we had a very mixed crew. Most of the PJs knew each other from previous training schools. They were all super guys, so it did not matter who was on with you for the day. The Flight Engineers (FE) were also all top-notch guys. Most of them had maintenance backgrounds and understood the mechanical, hydraulic, electrical, and fuel systems.

On December 5, 1969, Major Bob was up early on alert duty, flying copilot with Captain Chuck Smith. I was to fly a training mission later that afternoon, so I made my way down to the operations building on the flight line. I liked to stop and watch the A-1s taxi out, four at a time, run up their engines, and then make their takeoff rolls. It was great to hear the sound of those big engines roaring as they lumbered down the runway, waiting for that magic liftoff speed. I could see Bob's H-3 sitting on the ramp, ready to launch if needed. After a phone call from Saigon, the operation's clerk would turn on his mike and announce, "Launch the Jollys!" If someone was shot down, the air war in Southeast Asia would virtually stop while USAF and USN aircrews supported the rescue effort to bring them back safely. No new POWs on our watch!

A little after ten o'clock in the morning, I entered the operations area. A large map was used to track any current rescue missions. The map was not marked. Before each training flight, you still needed to get your flight gear: parachute, combat survival vest with radios and a first aid kit, and weapons in case you were diverted from a training flight to an actual combat mission. We were always prepared for the worst-case situation.

The operation's phone rang shortly after 10:30 a.m., and "Launch the Jollys" was the clerk's message. I could see Major Bob and Captain Smith heading toward their chopper. It was Bob's first mission. Slowly, the mission details came into operations. An F-4 had been shot down near a small village in Laos near the border of North Vietnam. His call sign was Boxer 22. On board were a pilot and his backseater (guy-in-back or GIB), usually a navigator. They would now be known as Boxer 22A (pilot) and Boxer 22B (GIB). That way the On-Scene Commander would know which crew-member he was talking to during the mission. They would normally use Guard channel, 243.0 UHF or 121.5 VHF, to talk to the survivors. All other aircraft in the area could monitor any conversations between the downed crewman and the On-Scene Commander.

As I studied the map location of the rescue site, I suddenly froze. The site, Ban Phanop, Laos, was just on the west side of the famous Mu Gia Pass. It was one of four passes that came from North Vietnam and fed into the infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail on which many trucks and beasts of burden traveled to take ammo, fuel, and other supplies to the Viet Cong and Regular North Vietnamese troops in the South. I quickly pulled out my maps of the area to look for known antiaircraft sites and SAM sites. Many such sites surrounded the area, and it would take a while to silence the antiaircraft guns. Immediately USAF began to launch strike aircraft, F-4s, and F-105s, to take out the AAA guns. We had several rescue crews airborne and standing by in the area. The crews were from Udorn, NKP, and DaNang. Also in the area were fighters armed for air-to-air fighting against any potential MiG threat in the area. The Russian/Chinese-built MiGs could be launched from two nearby areas. One, of course, was the Hanoi area, and the other was an airfield located near Vinh. A C-130 with the King call sign controlled the mission, keeping track of available incoming aircraft, and they would designate the safe areas where strike aircraft could hold until needed. More

KC-135 refueling aircraft were diverted to provide needed fuel in the coming minutes or hours. USAF was very involved.

Not to be left out, the USN was sending strike aircraft from carriers. It was now a total US effort. We could hear some of the pilot's conversations on our radio receiver in operations. Whoever was not on the schedule was gathered around the radio. We could hear the Sandy Lead, "Jolly 17, understand you are taking severe gunfire, and you are pulling out to the west. Jink, Jolly, Jink!" Damn!" That was Major Bob's chopper. "Jink" is a fighter pilots term meaning don't fly in a straight line! About forty minutes later, the first two H-3 Jolly Greens landed at NKP. I went out on the ramp to see if I could help. Bob was walking toward me. "Tommy," he said, "I didn't think we'd get out of that place alive. Those big guns rolled out of the caves, and all hell broke loose! We were in a hover at about fifty feet, and then we had to turn the chopper around and head west. I still don't know how they missed us." He was now a combat veteran.

The FACs ran another series of air strikes, and the Sandy lead called in Jolly 72, an H-53. Captain Ron was flying copilot on that one. They, too, got shot at and were heading westward when it happened. A mobile 37 mm antiaircraft gun opened fire as they flew directly over the gun. Direct hit! The 37mm round exploded on the H-53 cargo hook located just under the center of the aircraft. They landed at NKP as well due to the severe battle damage. Bob and I walked over to Ron. He was shaking his head back and forth.

"What happened?" I asked.

Ron said, "We went out the same route that we went in, but the 37 site waited until we were leaving to open fire. Thank God they hit the cargo hook, and it absorbed the explosion. Every cockpit gauge was in motion. Things were flying all over the chopper. Can you believe it? No one in the cabin area or cockpit was hit by flying pieces of metal. The exploded round made a hole in the bottom of the fuselage the size of a card table!"

By the end of the day, more than half a dozen H-53s and a couple of H-3s were hit by ground fire in the rescue area. The bad guys liked to shoot at the six rotor blades, perhaps thinking that by shooting them the chopper would crash. Most of the H-53s could still fly, though a bit rough. Once the

chopper landed, it was grounded until the main rotor blades were replaced. The supply officer at Udorn had just complained about storing over forty main rotor blades. But at six blades per chopper, he'd soon run out.

Most of the first day attempts were made to rescue Boxer 22A. On the last rescue attempt, the pilot just missed getting on board the H-53, but he revealed his location to the bad guys. Sandy Lead told both the downed crewmembers to settle in for the night, and we'd be back at first light. That meant that rescue crews would be airborne before sunrise so that they would be on station just at sunrise to make a quick pickup. This procedure had worked before.

The next day, December 6, 1969, it appeared the bad guys had been busy. First, there was no reply from Boxer 22A. Sandy lead called Boxer 22B. He came up on his radio. "I heard gunshots last night and some screaming," he said. "I moved a bit further west of the small river." The GIB, Lieutenant Bergeron, was alive and well and, so far, hidden from the enemy.

No word from Boxer 22A. Was the pilot dead? Was he captured? Captain Holly Bell and crew made one of the first attempts that day. His copilot that day was Captain Wade Weeks, a fellow fixed-wing convert. They, too, were hit by ground fire. Someone on the crew was hit, and they were coming back to NKP. The base hospital crew was standing by with doctors and med-techs. When they landed and taxied in, Holly Bell called in, "One of my PJs was hit. He didn't make it." Dead? One of our PJs was shot and was now dead?

Slowly, Holly's crew came into the operations room. I recognized Captain Weeks and went over to talk with him. He was a bachelor and didn't have any brothers or sisters. He and I always got along since he went to NC State, big rivals of my Clemson Tigers.

"Wade," I asked, "did you bring in your classified package and M-16?"

"No," he said.

"Sit down. I'll run out and get your package and weapons."

As I trotted over to the H-53, I noticed many of the base guys hanging

around the chopper. A young PJ inside had been shot and killed in action. Why were these guys looking at the helicopter? I became a bit miffed and went over and began to chew out the lookers. Many out-ranked me, but I didn't care. One of the colonels said to me as he left, "You're right, I'm sorry." He turned to the others and said, "Let's go!" They did. I climbed in the H-53 and gathered up Wade's personal gear. I looked back. There next to his bulletproof floor pan were the young PJ and the medical crew.

Somehow a bullet came through the floor, missed the pan, and came under his helmet. I don't think he felt anything. He was a young airman, David Davison, about the same age as my youngest brother, Terry. This young hero was someone's son, somebody's brother, someone's nephew, or friend. He would never be someone's husband or father. This was my first time during combat to see someone who had paid the ultimate price. He gave his life in defense of his country. He did so trying to rescue a comrade in harm's way. He was a hero. I am sorry I did not know him better in his short life. From then on, I made it a point to know my PJs and flight engineers. I knew that they were the most dependable warriors I would meet during my lifetime. We couldn't forget what we saw and had to keep memories alive, but, most importantly, we had to move on to tomorrow. Our friends would expect us to do so.

On the third day, December 7, Major Bob had gone back in with Major Ed Robbins. They had a 37mm shell go off very close. Bob later said that Robby's ability to handle that H-3 saved the chopper and their lives. Two new H-53s moved into the area for another attempt to rescue Boxer 22B. Next, it was my turn in the barrel. I was flying with our Detachment Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Joe Lyle. I gave our assigned H-3 a thorough check to ensure it was ready for flight. We would be next. We are strapped in awaiting launch. But, before we lifted off, it happened! Lieutenant Colonel Shipman and Captain Rich Basket and crew picked up Boxer 22B. They were headed back to NKP. The base commander and others involved in the rescue gathered with the base medical crew who were waiting to take the rescued lieutenant to the hospital for examination and treatment if needed. The H-53 pulled off the runway and taxied up to the parking area.

Lieutenant Woody Bergeron stepped out of the H-53 and walked toward the waiting crowd. He stopped, saluted the base commander, and then he

reached into the flight-suit pocket on his lower right leg. He pulled out a bag of muddy water. He turned and handed it to the doctor and said, “I lost my water purification tablets two days ago. I’ve been drinking this stuff, so you might want to see what is in there.”

Woody was still thinking, even after all he’d been through. Tonight he would once again sleep in a bed. His thoughts will always be with his pilot, Boxer 22A. More than a dozen choppers received various degrees of battle damage during the rescue attempts, but most would become airborne again. We couldn’t afford too many. By day’s end, the three-day rescue mission was one of the longest of the war up to that time. We Yanks just don’t give up. It was then I realized that I was flying among heroes every day. I remembered reading about “giving your life for a brother.” I believe it was in the New Testament in the Book of John. I need to read that again.

NEAR MISSES
DAVE VOGL

1969–70 KORAT AB

While flying F-4s out of Korat, I had two extremely close calls that nearly resulted in some horrific midair collisions. My first near miss came when I was an F-4 FAC controlling a four-ship flight of F-100s. My practice was to mark the target and then climb to an orbit altitude 1,000-ft thousand feet above the flight. When I was established at my altitude, I cleared the flight to drop their ordnance at will while holding at their assigned orbit altitude.

After the first airplane dropped his bombs, I was in a forty-five-degree bank watching the impacts and preparing to give corrections as necessary to the following flight members. I had just pushed the mike button when an F-100 flew past my cockpit from above and no more than inches away from my cockpit. All I saw was his belly as he flashed down in his dive. Obviously, this guy had not held to his orbit altitude and had climbed above my altitude before starting his run. I was so shocked at this breach of directions I couldn't say anything except "Knock it off" until I could get things back in order. It was a couple of minutes until I could get my thoughts organized.

My second, and even more dangerous, event happened as I was leading a flight of four F-4s into refueling position behind our tanker on a beautiful afternoon strike. We had stabilized 500 feet below the tanker and were given permission to move into refueling position. I began my slow climb with

everyone in close formation, and as I got to about 150 to 200 feet below the tanker, I did a quick glance at my airspeed to confirm I was not approaching with too much overtake.

Just as I returned my vision to the tanker, an RB-66 passed immediately above my canopy and just below the tanker, 180 degrees from my heading. I distinctly remember reading “Do Not Paint” on his UHF antenna. If I had been a foot higher or he had been a foot lower, we could have lost five airplanes.

Or, perhaps, if he had hit the tanker, he could have taken all six of us out. It is amazing that the RB-66 missed seeing a tanker and four F-4s in tight formation. God was watching out for us that day!

NINE LEVEL GUNNER
DAVE VOGL

1969–70 KORAT AB

Flying Tiger FAC missions almost always included a refueling before entering the target area. After refueling, we spent about forty-five minutes searching for new targets and verifying the assigned targets for the day. We looked for any changes from our last reconnaissance and planned our sequence of targets to be struck.

We tried to cover all areas best as possible, but we did find one area that always seemed to be waiting for us to fly by their neighborhood. We could always count on a high volume of 37mm and ZPU-4 activity, always shooting at us with great accuracy precluding us from getting down close enough to see what they were hiding.

After being chased away every day for about a week, we came up with a new plan. We decided to leave the tanker and head directly to the area staying at altitude. At the appropriate time, we began our descent and picked up airspeed until we were supersonic. We descended to about two hundred feet and screamed by the target in a nice bank so we could both look out on one side of the aircraft. We figured that going so fast and so low we would be able to enter and exit without fear of being seen or heard and fired at.

It worked!

We didn’t see any targets, but we did sneak in and out without being shot at.

When our film came back, we went over it carefully looking for what we didn’t see on our high-speed pass.

And then we saw the images that really caught our attention.

Our camera had a front and a back lens going throughout our pass, and we saw a 37mm shell streak by both the front and the back lens no more than a foot away. We could even see the size of the projectiles! If we had been one knot faster or one knot slower, one of the shells would have taken us out.

We now knew we were facing the best gunner we had ever encountered and that we had flown right between the rounds of a clip of 37mm! How he knew we were coming and was able to aim perfectly and fire was too hard to contemplate.

We decided that this one guy we didn’t want to mess with again.

"BEEPER, BEEPER, COME UP VOICE": MY FIRST COMBAT MISSION
TOM WALDRON

Major Bob and I tried to get our lives back in order. Christmas was coming up, and the "care packages" began to arrive. Families were great about sending goodies and fruitcakes. We even had a one-foot Christmas tree with lights. Our Buddhist maids had not seen a Christmas tree and didn't understand the fuss about gifts, but they did like the fancy metal cans the fruitcakes came in. So they got their first presents: used fancy cake cans. We heard on the Armed Forces Radio Network that President Nixon had issued a cease-fire order for December 25, 1969. It was the only "day-off" from the air war that our group would have during our tour. New Year's Day was warmer in Thailand than I was used to, growing up in the Midwest, and I was back in the saddle January 2, 1970, on alert in the H-3 with a Major George.

We were the "low bird" or first to go in on a rescue attempt if needed. After preflight, we settled in for a long day. We checked fuel status, ammo for the M-60 guns, extra water, and ammo for the M-16s and .38 caliber pistol we carried in our survival vests. We also checked out our blood chits.

If you had not launched during the day on an actual mission, the procedure was to take off about an hour before sunset to allow you to be in a position to make a last-minute rescue before the bad guys could get organized. This procedure had worked in the past.

Packed in each crewmember's parachute was a small device that transmitted a signal on radio guard frequency: 243.0 UHF and 121.5 VHF. The theory was that if the person who bailed out was unconscious, we had a chance to find the downed airman by homing in on his beeper signal. The downside was that the beeper blocked out voice communications with all others in the area. The downed crewman would have to reach up and turn off the beacon. Hard to do if you are not conscious! The bad guys could also find the downed airman using their directional radios set to our frequencies.

Major George had been in country longer than I but had not yet been on a combat mission. We were about to change the status for both of us. Flying with us that day was FE Staff Sergeant (SSgt) Thayer "Tom" Pope, two PJs, Sergeant (Sgt) Doug Horka, and Sgt Rick Beasley. I was always impressed with the medical knowledge these young PJs had obtained in a very short time. They could keep you alive with proper medical attention, including performing a tracheotomy to keep you breathing until reaching a hospital. These guys would not hesitate to get on the rescue penetrator to be lowered to the ground to aid a downed airman, often under hostile fire. I had already met a young PJ, not yet a sergeant, who had been awarded the Air Force Cross, just a notch below the Medal of Honor. They wore maroon berets, and they earned every inch of them. The PJs and FEs were all heroes in my book.

We often flew different routes to keep the bad guys guessing which way we were heading. There are many limestone formations in Laos. Some looked like other things, such as a duck or a banana, so when you used those features to give your position, others knew very quickly where you were located. That January second, our crew, Jolly 32, had been airborne about forty-five minutes, and we were getting ready to head back to NKP to fly some training approaches when I heard a call on Guard channel.

"Beeper, Beeper, this is Nail 42, come up voice!" I looked at the major and asked if he had heard any "beeps"? Nope. But when he turned the H-3 south, I heard the haunting "beep, beep, beep."

Our A-1 escorts, Hobo flight, now got into the action. "Nail 42, this is Hobo Lead. Do you have a visual?"

"Roger that," he said. "I see wreckage—looks like a USN A-6. And I

see a parachute on the ground." We had no communication with the downed airman; we only heard the Nail FAC. I was trying to plot just where the guy was downed. I soon found the general location and turned to the major.

"This guy is about twenty miles west of Ban Phanop, Laos," I said, "the site of the Boxer 22 mission, which lasted three days in early December. This is not a good place! There are a lot of bad guys in the area."

Suddenly Hobo Lead changed his call sign to Sandy Lead. We were now in rescue-mission mode.

"Jolly 32, do you want to attempt a last-light pickup?"

Major George looked at me, and we nodded to each other.

"Roger that," the major replied.

Major George asked me to do the pre-pickup checklist. The first item was to alert the crew to prepare for a pickup. First, they had to ready the two M-60 machine guns, our only firepower on board.

PJ Doug Horka calmly said, "Guns are ready." Sgt. Pope reported the rescue penetrator was checked and ready to be lowered. Then I came to the big item, jettison the fuel tip tanks.

Before I did that, I coordinated with Major George, because when those tanks were jettisoned, our H-3 would be down to internal fuel, or about forty-five-minute flight time unless refueled. I noted the time so I could compute our remaining fuel as needed. There were no Exxon gas stations nearby, only bad guys.

As we began our descent into the valley, I thought of the 23rd Psalm which mentions the "Valley of Death." I also knew that I was a gunshot away from being in charge. I just said a quiet prayer, "Lord, I don't have time to think or worry about our safety. I have to be of sound mind to make decisions if need be. I am leaving the safety part up to you. Thanks."

As we approached the pickup site, a large wooded area with a road on our left side, we still were not hearing anything from the downed airman.

“Get ready to go down and help the survivor,” Major George said to the PJ behind him, Rick Beasley.

Behind me, PJ Doug Horka was manning his M-60. We had not received any ground fire from the NVA or the Pathet Lao. It was too quiet. Major George brought the H-3 into a twenty-foot hover and zero airspeed. Sgt. Beasley secured himself to the jungle penetrator and was lowered by Sgt. Pope to the ground adjacent to the downed pilot. It was still light, but just barely.

I could see the A-1s flying low, checking for any antiaircraft gun emplacements. So far so good, Sgt. Pope kept us informed about Sgt. Beasley’s actions.

“Sir, he is on the ground and looking at the survivor. He’s turned him over and he gave me thumbs down!” That meant, by the PJs evaluation, the pilot was not alive. Just prior to that, I noticed what appeared to be smoke from a rifle barrel just off my ten o’clock position.

“Doug,” I said, “we are taking ground fire from our ten o’clock!”

“Roger,” he replied. I could hear Doug’s gun in action just behind me. Then, it happened, very quickly! We had gotten someone’s attention at a 37mm antiaircraft site somewhere behind our location.

“Jolly 32, there is a 37mm gun firing on you, and he is closing in on your position from your rear,” exclaimed Sandy Lead. “Get the hell out of there—now!”

I recognized this Sandy pilot’s voice, and if he elevated his voice, I knew we were in big trouble. He normally was a soft-spoken guy.

“Pull him up now,” Major George shouted to our flight engineer.

Sgt. Pope began bringing Rick into the H-3. He was coming up at an angle, but I was sure he saw the shooting coming from our rear. He did not have time to cut loose the pilot and had to abort his attempt. We moved slowly from our twenty-foot hover and began to gain some airspeed.

“Stay down,” directed the Sandy pilot. “Don’t climb out until I clear you.”

All of a sudden, the situation had changed. As pilot in charge, Major George had made a decision, five lives versus a recovery situation of the probably dead pilot. We moved along the field, gaining airspeed, and still taking enemy gunfire fire from our left until we reached the point where Sandy Lead told us it’s clear to climb and gain altitude.

We were near the end of the field when we started a climbing turn toward the northwest. As I glanced to my lower left, I saw what appeared to be a smaller antiaircraft gun, a 23mm. It had two barrels side by side, and I could see alternate puffs of smoke as the guns fired. I waited for the shells to hit. They missed. I quickly tuned in the NKP TACAN station to get us a heading home, and to check the distance to the airfield. I gave Major George a heading of 228 degrees to take us home. Our radio didn’t transmit on our unit’s frequency, but I did manage to contact the NKP tower, and we were cleared to land.

We taxied to our parking spot, and I noticed quite a few of our guys coming out. As soon as we shut down the engines, they walked around the H-3 to check us over. I opened my window and saw Major Bob outside.

“Hey, Dufus,” he said. “We thought you guys were shot down since we lost radio contact with you. After you gather your gear, come out here and take a look.”

I climbed out of the seat, gathered my helmet, parachute, M-16, and stepped out onto the ramp. It was a great feeling to stand on solid ground again. As I walked around the front of the H-3, I saw our crew chief pointing at some bullet holes in our refueling probe. That was close! Then, Major Bob said, “Check this out,” his right hand pointing up just above my seat. I squinted and then I saw a bullet hole about a foot above where my head would have been. That would not be a good way to get a Purple Heart.

The day was almost done. As usual, our PJs had done an outstanding job. They risked everything in an effort to bring back a downed USN pilot. Sgt. Beasley, who had been on the ground, felt badly, but, he knew we had to

leave or we would all be lying dead in a Laotian field. When we were debriefed, Beasley told the staff debriefer that the USN pilot's neck must have been broken when he bailed out. We never saw a second chute, and this was a two-man crew. The bad news was that these guys would be carried as Missing-in-Action since our PJ was not a medical doctor and could not pronounce the pilot dead. I felt bad for the families left behind who might have hopes of the return of those two crewmen. Such is war. Rules are rules.

So my first combat mission was in the books. We wanted to bring back the deceased pilots. Their families could have at least had closure. It was not to be. It had been an exhausting day and evening. I went to bed, hoping I could get some sleep. I didn't think that I would take a bed for granted again, at least not in the near future.

JUST FAC IN AROUND

STEVE MOSIER

433RD TACTICAL FIGHTER SQUADRON

In Mike Ridnouer's recent book, there was an absence of discussion about the role of FACs of the airborne variety. Well, my role in that mission is limited (I will discuss it later), but as I thought about some of the experiences of my tour, I decided to make some notes on the subject.

First, I'll start with when I became sort of knowledgeable about the FACs in Vietnam. I had two instructors in pilot training at Vance Air Force Base with FAC experience—Captain Harvey and the Baron von Lang were O-1 FACs in Vietnam. They were quiet instructors but, in the off times, would discuss how they flew their O-1 Bird Dogs low and slow (as if they had a choice in those aircraft!) supporting US Army and in many cases ARVN (South Vietnamese) in contact with Viet Cong forces. They operated off classic airbases like Ben Hoa and Plekiu as well off primitive strips out in the boonies close to the troops they were supporting. The Bird Dogs had 2.75-inch white-phosphorus (WP, Willie Pete) rockets on each wing fused to mark targets for the USAF, ARVN, and on occasion Australian aircraft providing Close Air Support (CAS) for friendly forces engaged with a very wily enemy. Both described how on some occasions they used the classic trick of taking a hand grenade, pulling the pin, and inserting in a glass jar. Once dropped, and the glass is broken (I always wondered how the glass broke in a rice paddy or on the jungle floor?), the grenade would arm and provide some light antipersonnel effects for offensive capability.

As the war expanded, new equipment was brought into theater for CAS support. First came the O-2A (a.k.a. Cessna Sky Master), pusher-puller twin engine with more speed, range, and altitude capability. The O-2 was able to carry two personnel, nominally the pilot, and an observer. It had more sophisticated comm and, with the exception of less capability to operate off the same primitive strips the O-1 could use, was a pretty significant improvement in capability to coordinate and control CAS operations for US and allied ground forces.

The O-2 also did a lot of work "out of country," mostly in Route Pack 1 in North Vietnam and the Steel Tiger area of Laos—they were known by call signs Nail and Covey. Most of these missions were not classic CAS with troops in contact, but in the surveillance and monitoring of the various lines of communication comprising the spider-web miles of the Ho Chi Minh Trail leading to strikes by USAF, US Navy, and US Marine fighters coming out of Thailand, South Vietnam, and carriers on Yankee Station. Targets were roads, bridges, pipelines, ammo/supply dumps, SAM and AAA sites, roadwork teams, and the dreaded pervasive truck parks. In this area of operation, the O-2s operated in the twelve-to-sixteen-thousand feet above most of the AAA and kept clear of known SAM rings. As the threat changed, particularly with the introduction of SA-7 handheld IR SAMs, tactics evolved accommodating the threat and still providing control of Fast Mover strike aircraft. O-2s flew at night, with an observer in the right seat, using a Starlight Scope to provide night vision scanning of the route structure for movers and any signs of activity on or around the "Trail."

While I was stationed at Ubon I flew several hops with a Nail FAC I'd met at the club. I remember the first ride very well. We checked the Frag for our fighters, got a weather update, and headed to the plane. Our area was in the neighborhood of Tchepone—a hub on the Ho Chi Minh highway and populated with the spectrum of AAA from 12.7mm up to 37mm. We checked in with Cricket, the Airborne Command and Control C-130, called on station and awaited our fighters while orbiting and looking over the area. Jim flew here frequently and was able to recognize some changes suggesting recent activity and possible targets. The O-2 had a noisy cockpit, and it was a hot day, so the back windows were open. So I reached around to close the window on my side to better hear the radio chatter and the intercom. I got a

quick, friendly, but sharp rebuke—shut the damn window—that's my RHAW gear—huh? I did as instructed and then got the brief. O-2 FACs, at least the savvy ones, kept their windows open so they could hear the Triple-A bursts go off—that was the warning to move the aircraft to a different altitude and a different flight path. When I HEARD a clip of 37mm go off and looked to see the dirty black smoke a couple of hundred yards behind me, I anticipated the nose down acceleration, rudder and aileron inputs as a slow mover jink. No further questions, boss!

Later that mission we "worked" a flight of F-100s, call sign Sun Valley, on a suspected ammo dump. They dropped their four each Mk-82 slicks, and we got some good secondaries. Sun Valley guys were a guard unit and had a good reputation for putting their bombs where the FAC marked and having professional flight discipline and always using good sense, and good tactics.

On another mission in Southern Laos, we had a pop-up mission from Cricket. It turned out to be a single A-6 Intruder, call sign Cupcake 503, on a divert out of Route Pack 2. The single checked in with a load of twenty slick MK-82s or the equivalent load of five F-100s. The serendipity was, I recognized the voice of Cupcake—it was my next-door neighbor from my hometown in Northwest Missouri! I asked to give the brief and was allowed to do so. After the pro forma spiel, I used his hometown nickname and noted, given his call sign, I hoped for some bombs better than I might expect. He gave us multiple passes and his BDA was good. Our chance encounter was given due publicity in the local (very local) newspaper.

An O-2 sidebar. I never flew a night mission because it took some experience to be effective with the Starlight Scope and use of the ground markers (a.k.a. logs) instead of the Willie Petes used during the day. Jim had a regular night crewmate, a nav named Harry. Harry was a multiple deferred B-58 nav, but a very capable night FAC team member. One very distasteful memory from my Air Force career was the goodbye party I attended for Harry. Once Harry set foot at Travis AFB, he became Mr. Harry, no longer Captain Harry, because the service had used his last few months in the Air Force on a combat tour and turned him out when he returned to CONUS. OK, so he was a guy that never made major, but he was at one time an elite SAC combat crew and had just flown twelve months of combat. Put this in the s****y deal category for the 1960s! Sorry Harry, you deserved better—much

better.

The defenses crept down from the upper Route Packs, driving the O-2s to higher altitudes, reducing their capability to operate where AAA and handheld SAMs were concentrated at key choke points along the Trail. Thus, the introduction the Fast FACs—first came the Mistys—F-100Fs that made their bones in Route Pack 1. Their exploits are legend, no kidding. Bud Day, Ron Fogelman, Don Shepard, Jonesy Jones, and a host of others took their Huns into tough situations. Read Shepard's book *Bury Me Upside Down* for a great recounting of the Mistys.

In early 1969, the OV-10 Bronco was introduced into the FAC mission. They brought some performance improvements over the O-2 in terms of speed and maneuverability. The pilot was in the front, and there was an observer position tandem. This seemed pretty ideal since the view was near identical for either crewmember—but it wasn't. The propellers were pretty much in the way of the observer. There were operational workarounds during the day but not for night ops—too much glint from the propellers to allow the use of Starlight scopes and minimal instrumentation to enable the backseat crewmember to fly the aircraft at night and have the front seater use a scope. So the OVs were day only operators in Laos and the lower Route Packs.

The OVs came into theater using the call sign Snort but soon were on the Frag as Nails. They had a good ordnance capability for the FAC mission and had 7.62mm machine guns in the fuselage sponsons. These guns were (to my knowledge) never used in the FAC role; in-country, for troops in contact, they probably had utility. Not in the out-country war where the enemy had defenses of large numbers guns ranging from 12.7mm up through 85mm and a few of the 130mm variety. The OVs used the standard 2.75-inch Willie Pete rockets very effectively to market targets. I had the opportunity to fly some Snort missions with a very seasoned lieutenant colonel. He had good air sense and some background in fighters. On a few occasions, I flew the aircraft and even marked the target—the ejection handles were pretty good pipper substitutes. The real challenge in any flying from the back cockpit was the absence of trim controls on the stick; it was meant for an observer, not a flyer! Pushing forward on the stick as the speed increased in a dive was not a natural maneuver. The OV Nails were effective and provided improved survivability for the out-country FAC force. They begin to lose their

operational utility as man-portable SAMS were introduced into theater. I recently saw that some OVs were taken into the Middle-East for evaluation—I am sure they are very much upgraded from the days of Vietnam—but so has the threat.

A-1s were also part of the FAC force. In my experience, they operated mostly in the Barrel Roll part of Laos and were both FACs and Strike aircraft because of their great endurance and very impressive weapons loads. On occasion when we went north out of Ubon to the Barrel, we often worked with Hobos, Fireflys, and Zorros in their A-1s doing interdiction as well as Close Air Support for Laotian troops and some operations by Three-Letter agencies. I think the A-1s appreciated the firepower the fast movers brought to the fray (especially the laser-guided Paveway bombs of the two-thousand pound class). But A-1s were pretty capable of putting 20mm, bombs, rockets, and assorted other weapons exactly where they were needed, in part because on many occasions that had a local guy in their cockpit to coordinate with the supported forces.

As good as the Misty FACs were, there weren't many F-100Fs to support the mission. The operating areas in Laos were a pretty good haul from their base in South Vietnam, and the threat was getting tougher and tougher, so other Fast FAC alternatives arose. The Phantoms entered the business. First, Stormy out of DaNang, then Wolf out of Ubon, Laredo often collaborating with the RF-4Cs also at Udorn, and as the Thuds phased out of Korat, the F-4Es newly arriving in theater were in the business as Tigers. The Marines, operating as Playboy, entered the fray with their TA-4Fs. There was work for everybody.

Fast FAC operations were for the most part similar in practice. Two seat Phantoms and A-4s were used in areas of relatively high threat areas, using speed and maneuverability to gather intel data, control strikes and provide post strike Bomb Damage Assessment (BDA) in near real time. On numerous occasions the FACs would uncover new targets and would work with the Airborne Control Agencies (ABCCC in the form of C-130s) orbiting 24/7 in Laos. The FAC cadre was also useful for developing options for future interdiction operations. Some intelligence was developed by observing differences in the target area from one day to the next, by sometimes catching "movers" on the Ho Chi Min Trail and getting flights fragged for other

targets diverted on new opportunities. Visual Reconnaissance was the norm for finding and assessing targets and BDA. This was pretty much an "eyeballs out" operation—binoculars and other visual augmentation devices were used on a few occasions with very limited success. Canopy shape, condition, and reflections plus vibration and the constant maneuvering were not favorable to most optical devices in a Phantom.

On many occasions targets were "developed" when the FACs would draw fire from ground defenses. Often this meant something was hidden under that jungle canopy the FACs didn't actually see, but the VC or NVA forces wanted to defend. Or in many cases they tried to lure the FACs into a nest of Triple-A in hopes for a kill. The first light missions of the FACs were often tasked to assess the claimed battle damage from the night before. Often this meant counting trucks hulks, fords breached, and roads cratered and validating strikes by the Night Forces—fighters, AC-130s, and B-52 Arc Light operations. Like in any conflict, the numbers often didn't add up—oh, well.

F-4 FAC configurations were pretty standard, two fuel tanks, two pods of nineteen 2.75-inch Willy Pete rockets for marking, and a 20mm cannon, on the D-models, in the nose for the Es. On rarest occasions the Air Force Phantoms got their hands on some of the pods of 5-inch WPs—great for marking—darn good for "flak suppression." Scotty, one of the early Wolf Ops Officers was a Night Owl. He was always looking for the best configuration for the FAC mission—day and night. One of his "favorites" was a true hybrid: one outboard tank, one outboard flare pod, two cans of napalm on one inboard pylon, one rocket pod on the other inboard pylon, and a 23mm gun pod on the centerline—known as "Scotty's Battleship." A real potpourri of ordnance—but untrimable, and having a playtime of single-digit minutes. I believe it flew once or twice before load crews, and Wolf crews alike got it off the schedule.

I had another FAC experience of a very different sort. Assigned to the 53rd Tactical Fighter Squadron at Bitburg, Germany, for a year I had the additional duty of ground FAC for one of the brigades of the Third Armored Division stationed in a *kaserne* about thirty minutes north of Frankfurt, a couple of hours by VW from Bitburg. So, at a given state of alert, I was to jump in my VW with my fatigues and such and motor up to Ayers Kaserne to

join up with my Radio Man (ROMAD) and other members of the FAC team to provide the ground link between the Army and the NATO Close Air Support system. I did this for a year, including spending a thirty-day stretch as the acting Air Liaison Office (ALO) for the 3rd Brigade. The ground FAC story deserves its own time, but suffice to say, if you've read the first part of this paragraph, you can see as many holes in this concept as a pound of Swiss cheese.

I was on the Tactical Air Command staff in the time of transition to Air Combat Command. There was some after-action discussion on the Killer Scout operations with F-16s in Desert Storm. I dug out some notes on how the Wolf FAC operation was conducted for some context on Vietnam Fast FAC with the more recent experiences. I have included those papers as an addendum to this discussion.

Addendum

Background Paper
On
Fast Fac Operations

SUBJECT

PACAF implemented Forward Air Controller (FAC) operations with high performance jet fighter aircraft in the1966–67 time frame in response to increasing AAA and SAM threats to traditional FAC aircraft (O-1, O-2) and requirement to provide surveillance and air strike control in areas outside useful operating ranges of existing forces. Fast FAC mission emphasized interdiction of lines of communication versus direct support of friendly ground forces.

DISCUSSION

* Slow mover aircraft were increasingly threatened by daytime ground- based air- defense capabilities of opposing forces in Laos and North Vietnam.

-- High density AAA, potential SAM threat grew as conflict escalated from low intensity to more traditional conventional warfare.

* Transit time to/from bases in South Vietnam and Thailand and areas of interest reduced responsiveness of prop FACs, caused increase in number of aircraft required for coverage, reduced capability to respond to ground force requirements, building as level of conflict in theater increased.

Initial AF effort was with F-100F (two-place Super Sabre) flying visual reconnaissance (VR) sorties in lower portion of North Vietnam, followed on with more extensive Fast FAC efforts in Laos and other parts of North Vietnam.

* As F-100s phased out of SEA, F-4 units picked up the mission
  -- 366 TFW (STORMY), 8 TFW (WOLF), 432 TRW (LAREDO), and 388 TRW (TIGER). (USM conducted limited Fast FAC efforts with TA-4 aircraft supporting their own operations and spotting for naval gunfire.)
* Mission of Fast FACs was VR on LOCs in Laos (STEEL TIGER and BARREL ROLL) and NVA to
  -- Deny enemy movement by presence of air,
  -- Control air strikes on designated (fragged) targets or targets of opportunity,
  -- Conduct Bomb Damage Assessment (BDA),
  -- Develop future targets, and
  -- Monitor enemy activity, supporting Igloo White sensor system along Ho Chi Mihn Trail.
* Collateral efforts included coordination of SAR in high threat areas when presence on scene dictated and to capitalize on inherent strike capability (routinely 20 mm cannon and 2.75 WP rockets--—occasionally GP bombs and napalm) against fleeting priority targets while observing strict ROE dictated by HHQ.
* Normal concept of operations provided dawn-to-dusk coverage of Laos, and portions of NVN, depending on existing ROE/ political constraints.
* Owl FACs from 8 TFW provided night surveillance coordinated with other operations and defense suppression (flak) support for gunship missions.

-- Exploited targets of opportunity developed by AC-123/130 operations and controlled other fast mover sorties on lucrative/fleeting targets.

* Routine mode of operation was responsive to Frag (ATO) from 7 AF to VR assigned area.
  -- Daily, each wing typically flew 3-4 Fast FAC sorties during hours of daylight (additional 2-3 by 8 FW at night).
* Wings designated crews (six) to work directly for DO; aircraft provided from wing pool, generated in configuration required for FAC mission.
* Crews plus admin and intel (photo interpreter) worked in WOC, collocated with intel, coordinating with other FACs, face-to-face if on the same base, by telephone or liaison trips otherwise, to plan missions, and crosstell.
  -- Assignment of crews to FAC mission at discretion of DO -- — routinely 4-6 months.
* Extensive map and photo study to familiarize with topographic cues, route patterns, and terrain features prior to mission, gain insight on LOCs, AAA sites, SAFE areas, etc.
  -- Used “Aarmy” maps (1:25,000), like scaled photos, to prepare for missions-—–had some capability to task recce for specific coverage of areas of interest (worked best at Udorn where FACs and RF-4s were part of same organization).
* Typical mission profile 4-6 hours in duration:
  0+40 to target area
  0+40 VR, coordination with ABCCC for fighter missions, strike control
  0+40 cycle to tanker for AAR
  0+40 for strike control/more VR
  0+30 cycle to tanker for AAR
  0+40 tor strike control/VR
  0+40 RTB, post strike tanker if required
* Typical mission included control of 5-8 flights of fighters (USAF, USN, and USMC) on predesignated targets, or hot items developed by FAC or assigned by ABCCC.
  -- – All COMM in clear; used word- of- the- day cards and authenticators with fighters and C2 agencies.

-- Target designation by “smoke”— -- white phosphorous rockets, 20 mm sparkle, or flares and ground markers at night.
-- FAC would use map coordinates and terrain features to develop common picture with fighters, assign desired aim-point verbally if practicable to avoid telegraphing intention, use marks if required to designate threat axis, show winds, make adjustments for follow-up weapons deliveries, etc.
-- Some strikes were probes for effect when no definite aim-point was available from intel or VR.
-- Strike results were passed to ABCCC, including recommendations for additional activity or diversion to other aimpoints for lack of bomb damage (BD) results, and wx, etc.
-- Post mission debriefs included face-to-face with intel, cross-tell with follow-on FACs and fighters fragged into the same area, plus recommendations to HHQ for future targets.
--- Maps carried in aircraft as well as order of battle charts in WOC were updated to reflect threats, and items of interest-—new roads, repaired bridges/ ferries, etc., — and studied to develop trends of enemy activity.

Training supervised by head FAC at each base; no HHQ guidance, cross talk between units and cut and try methods used.

* All crews were volunteers.
* Experienced in theater, normally 40-50 missions flown before assigned to FAST FAC role.
* Preflight each crewmember prepared his own maps, studied area for orientation, knowledge of terrain, SAFE areas, etc.
-- Maps updated continually, based on recce photos and VR evidence--—master maps in FAC ops used by strike crews as the most current info for target study.
-- – First 2-3 FAC missions with old head, and then formed crew concept applied almost exclusively--—DNIF the exception.
* Occasionally, (2-3 times per month), crews flew with parent squadron to keep current on weapons, and tactics, and retain unit identity.

* ROE on missions included prohibition of flight below 4500’ AGL to reduce exposure to light AAA and small arms unless on SAR or HHQ directed.
* Target acquisition by visual means:
  -- Attempts to use monoculars, gyro stabilized binoculars, and starlight scopes at night frustrated by equipment shortfalls.
* Normally prohibited from striking target unless specific lucrative targets specified pre-mission or allowed by ACCC, on SAR or support for special activities.
* Pilots flew 20-25 times per month; waivers for flying hour limits required occasionally.

CONCLUSION

* Benefits of FAST FAC program.
* Provided real- time control of strike missions in high- threat environment.
* Gave commanders capability to focus on hot targets developed inside frag decision loop.
* Reduced susceptibility to deception.
* Provided near- real- time validation of BD and intel threat projections.
* Real- time VR of areas of interest enhanced by familiarity with enemy disposition, and wx.
* Support for SAR, special ops sensitive missions with comm, indirect surveillance, flak suppression, and defensive counterair if required.
  -- Supplemented other forms of recce with ops eyes on target.
* New technology--—sensors, comm, nav aids--—would enhance concept.
  -- Capability to train better today.
    --- Red Flags and Air Warriors provide real target sets, with ABCCC, ground C2, exercise of Airborne Control Element (ACE) concept.
    --- Continuation training in multi-aircraft CFTs, in composite wings gives opportunity for closely coordinated efforts.
    --- Excellent capability to improve ops/intel interface with

target study, target development, training scenario development, exercise of reporting, procedures, and recce request for AF and National assets.

* Check out program of 3-4 supervised sorties emphasizing crew/ flight coordination;, pre-mission photo/map study would be appropriate.
* Currency sustained with 2-3 missions per month as dedicated two-ship on discrete sortie, or as part of a multi-flight mission to controlled range, part of Army exercise, CFT, Red Flag, Air Warrior, etc.
* Flight emphasis on adherence to ROE, mutual support, observing areas, acquiring targets, passing info to other fighters and C2 agencies, and marking by GPS or other coordinates.
* Post mission debriefs with intel, mission -planning teams, would include preparation of requests for HHQ recce support, etc.
* Ground training would include discussion of FAC lore from SEA, SWA, other lessons learned on how to avoid AAA, reaction, and use of FM with ground units, etc.

SON TAY
TOM WALDRON

On August 24, 1970, I turned the ripe old age of thirty-one. With all that happened during the year, it seemed like I should be at least forty. Finally, reassignment orders began to arrive for our group. Since I had credit for one-half of our temporary duty time while flying in the KC-135s, we had nearly two months taken off my one-year assignment. No complaints from me. I was going back to Eglin AFB in Florida to be an instructor pilot in H-53s. I would be the first fixed-wing conversion pilot to go back as an instructor in helicopters. So long KC-135s.

The night before I left was very quiet since many of the guys had to fly combat missions the next day. I'd be going to Bangkok and boarding a Continental Airlines flight back to the west coast of the good old USA. Adios SAMs, MiGs, and bad guys with other guns that liked to shoot at you. It should be relatively quiet in Florida with only a few alligators to watch out for on the golf courses. Destin is on the gulf coast, about forty miles east of Pensacola. A few hurricanes had visited the area and blown down a few buildings and washed out roads. But the seafood was great. Shrimp, oysters, grouper, and red snapper were at the top of the menu.

After getting the family moved from South Carolina and located in on-base housing, son David was enrolled in school. I was back in the grind, studying for my checkout as an instructor. My new boss was Lieutenant Colonel Jack Allison. His boss was Lieutenant Colonel Warner Britton.

Shortly after my arrival, I was called to Lieutenant Colonel Britton's office for an award ceremony. I was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for a mission I had flown as an aircraft commander in the H-53. I was also awarded two more Air Medals, for a total of seven.

One morning Lieutenant Colonel Allison came into my area. "Tom, can you come into my office a second? Oh, and please close the door. Thanks."

So I went in, closed the door, and had a seat.

"Tom, there has been a slight glitch in a special mission that we have been flying at night." I remembered seeing several night flights involving only the instructors. "Major Smith has developed a serious eye problem and will be grounded for quite a while. I would Iike for you to volunteer to take his place flying with Major Donohue. I can't tell you where the objective is. It is highly classified since lives depend on secrecy. Please let me know tomorrow what your decision is. Thanks, that is all."

I got up and left the room to go home. It was going to be a long evening. What was that all about, a secret mission? Where to? Cuba? Russia? China? Africa? With the H-53s ability to air refuel, it could go almost anywhere in the world. Great, I was just back from the war zone, and I couldn't say a word about this to my family or friends. How was I going to be able to pull this off without a glitch? I'd been gone for the last two Thanksgivings and Christmases, and this year's were just around the corner. But something inside me said, "Go for it!"

The next day I went to Lieutenant Colonel Allison's office. I knocked, entered his office, and gave my answer, "Colonel, I am on the team." I didn't know what was in my near future. Was l going back into the ring of fire? More MiGs and/or SAMs? More bad guys? Time would tell.

Later that day Lieutenant Colonel Allison took me over to Lieutenant Colonel Britton's office, and I was introduced to several people in civilian clothes. I had no idea who those guys were. CIA? I remembered working with a guy with a 9 mm pistol a while back in Laos when we rescued a lot of women and kids. Secrecy seemed to be paramount.

My first night flight on the special mission was in late September 1970. Major Marty Donohue was flying as pilot, and I was flying as his copilot. Between us we had a lot of helicopter flying experience. Marty had flown over six thousand hours in helicopters with more than a hundred missions in Southeast Asia, including a few into North Vietnam. Our Flight Engineer (FE) was SSgt Aaron Hodges, and our two PJs were SSgt Jim Rogers and SSgt Angus Sowell III. Everyone on Marty's crew was an instructor in his position. All were combat veterans with a lot of combat hours, missions, and military decorations. There were no rookies on our crew. Lieutenant Colonel Allison and Lieutenant Colonel Britton were also involved. This was the first team. There were more flying hours in the H-53 with this small group than you would find anywhere else in the world. Major Jay Strayer from my old unit in Thailand was also there flying as copilot for Lieutenant Colonel Allison, and Major Al Montrem, another instructor pilot, was flying with Lieutenant Colonel Britton.

We had a standard briefing to include weather and what was going on at Duke Field just north of Eglin AFB. Once we had landed at the range, Army Special Forces soldiers would climb on board with weapons. We would take off with them on the H-53, fly around, and then "attack" some sort of objective, a building with sheets attached. Was this a prison somewhere in Cuba? The Bay of Pigs fiasco was not that long before. Were some CIA guys being held prisoner there? Within our helicopter crews, there was a lot of speculation going on, and that was not good. The problem with a secret is that you could slip up talking to the right people in the wrong place. So we just kept quiet. I was convinced that our lives and the mission success depended on it. A lot of people knew that there was a lot of flying going on at Eglin AFB. During WWII Jimmie Doolittle used the airfield to train his bomber pilots in short field takeoffs. They would later take off from a carrier in the Pacific in B-25s and bomb Japan.

Our families began to wonder why we worked all day and also flew several late night flights a week. We weren't paid overtime in the military. Wives often met and played cards and probably talked a lot. "Loose lips sink ships" was a saying from WWII, and I could have added "and might shoot down helicopters."

The training flights became more intense as we added more helicopters

and Army guys. We would fly in formation with the C-130 and practice night air refueling with lights off. Major Donohue switched seats. Since we were on the right side of the C-130, with two other H-53s on our left, he thought it provided a better line of sight looking out the left window rather than the right side, which was where the aircraft commander normally sat. It was difficult to look toward the left at night with no lights. Some of our flights went up into Georgia, and when we returned for the assault, it was a little over three hours' flying time.

We could leave from southern Florida and make it to Cuba and back in that time. That must be the target I thought. Operation Ivory Coast was the code used for our missions. Were we going to Africa? Often I could see and hear the A1s flying over the landing areas. I probably knew of few of the crews from NKP days. Sandy pilots and rescue usually went hand-in-hand. Where in the hell were we going?

Time became a factor. On a late October morning, all the assault H-53 pilots and two H-3 pilots were driven to nearby Hurlburt Field, home of the USAF Special Operations Wing. We entered a large rectangular building and saw the guys in civilian clothes whom I had met a few weeks earlier when I first joined this mission.

We went down a hallway, and our escort entered a special code on the door posted "Top Secret." We were then escorted inside a large briefing room. In the middle of the room was a big model, some four by five feet, sitting on wooden sawhorses. There was what looked like walls around what appeared to be some sort of camp. Inside were very realistic models of buildings and trees.

"Gentlemen," said the briefing officer, "meet 'Barbara.' That is the code name for your objective, a prisoner of war (POW) camp some twenty-three miles northwest of Hanoi. Operation Ivory Coast is the code name for the mission, a POW camp located outside of the small city of Son Tay, North Vietnam. We are going to fly there and bring back over sixty American prisoners of war."

My jaw dropped. Hanoi was the area where SAMs and MiGs shot down most of our POWs. And now we would be headed there with US Army

Special Forces to bring POWs home? Wow! Six helicopters flying in formation with a C-130 at night and no lights.

"Inside there are about sixty POWs from the USAF, USN, and Marines," the officer continued. "You are going to penetrate one of the most heavily guarded areas in the world. There are SAM sites, MiG airfields, and AAA sites."

I looked around and saw the overall commander, Brigadier General Leroy Manor, commander of the USAF Special Operations Wing at Hurlburt Field. With him was a US Army Special Forces officer, Colonel Arthur "Bull" Simons, who was the ranking Army officer there. Wow, what a secret. I had never envisioned going back to where I had just flown in harm's way for the past year. Now, it was our objective, Son Tay, North Vietnam. Just a few months earlier, I flew combat missions near the "lion's den," the North Vietnamese border. It was dangerous then, and soon we would be going inside the den itself. I was now officially a member of the Son Tay Prisoner of War raiding team as an H-53 pilot.

After a short break to let the secret location soak into our heads, it was time for more briefings. Next up was Lieutenant Colonel Ben Kraljev, one of General Manor's staff.

"Many of our captured pilots and crewmen are dying in prison camps, mainly due to injuries not properly treated, malnutrition, and other health issues," he said. "Some of our aviators have been prisoners for over seven years. We need to send a message that, we, the USA, are concerned about the health and welfare of our soldiers in captivity. It has been decided at the highest level to proceed with this operation. (Did he mean President Nixon?) The question that has been asked by those in high places was what time of the month is best to attempt a rescue mission in North Vietnam?"

The briefing officer continued, "We know that your training sorties, which involve formation flying to include night air refueling without cockpit or external position lights, have been quite challenging. Our planning staff believes that with full moonlight conditions, your visibility while flying with the MC-130 will improve and help to identify the objective during the final leg of your attack. Two future dates meet the criteria, late October or

November. This time of year there are threats of major cyclones in the area."

"As of now," he continued, "a final decision as to the launch date has not been made. You will be informed a few days prior to the date of launch. We will have C-141 Military Airlift Command aircraft at our disposal to move all the men and equipment to Korat Air Base in Thailand, with fuel stops in California, Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines. You will have temporary duty orders showing that you are on an inspection team, and there is a block checked on your orders that has 'variations authorized' to cover our mission after it is over. Are there any questions?"

I had a few, but I kept quiet.

"The H-53 Jolly Greens assigned to the 40th ARRSq at Udorn Air Base will be available for us to use on the mission. The A-1s will be sourced from assets at Nakon Phanom Air Base (NKP), east of Udorn. Each A-1 will have an NKP pilot flying with the Hurlburt pilots."

It would be good to have the old Sandy pilots with us on the mission. Our cover story was that the H-53s had been grounded. Many flights were needed to test the perceived problem. Since we were all instructors, it would not be suspicious that we were going to Southeast Asia to help test the H-53.

Another of General Manor's staff, Major Dick Pleshkin, got up to brief. He walked over to the POW camp model, Barbara. He pointed to the model and said, "The camp is about one hundred forty feet by one hundred eighty feet with walls that are ten feet tall and two feet thick. We analyzed our intelligence photos and saw two gun towers on the north and south sides of the western approach to the camp. We can assume there are guards with machine guns in each tower. As you go from west to east down the center of the camp, the buildings on the left side are our POW's prison cells. The buildings at the center of the camp near the far eastern end are the prison camp commander's area. Special Forces will insert an assault team called Blueboy, who will be flying in the Banana helicopter, which will land in an open area inside of the camp. The assault team will go to each cell and release our POWs and then lead them to the southwestern wall for extraction and freedom. Oh, from now on the POWs are known as 'Items.'"

Major Pleshkin continued, “The joint planning staff came up with a unique diversion plan just prior to attacking the camp. The USN will be tasked to launch eighty plus jet fighters about thirty minutes before the assault team’s arrival at the POW camp. That should keep the radar sites busy.”

President Johnson had created a no-bombing zone to include Hanoi in October 1968. So the North Vietnamese watching their radarscopes at two in the morning would wonder, “Why are USN fighters, after a long period of not bombing Hanoi, attacking and breaking President Johnson’s pledge?”

Great diversion! Our staff planners are using surprise and diversion, two great historical military options that have worked in the past. Hopefully, while watching some eighty fighters bearing down on Hanoi, the MiGs and SAMs would be looking east while the assault team, an MC-130 plus six helicopters and one with five A-1s slips in the back door in the West. Great plan, guys.

There were only a few US Army officers who knew where we were going. Most of the other soldiers would not know the target until the night of the attack. It was “need to know” only.

So why were we Air Force helicopter crews in the plan? I soon found out. Lieutenant Colonel Britton stood and began to brief about what the Air Force rescue helicopter crews would be doing on this mission. He had been involved from the beginning, which was great because he knew helicopters, particularly the H-53 model. Our H-53s were assigned call signs of Apple 1 through Apple 5. The fixed-wing A-1s were assigned call signs of Peach 1 through Peach 5. We had flown several training flights information with a US Army Huey, the H-1 helicopter, call sign Banana, which was to insert the Blueboy assault force in the compound. One of our MC-130’s crew was from Germany, call sign Cherry 1. They would have the helicopters with them in formation. The other MC-130 and its crew were from North Carolina, and they had the Air Force A-1s flying formation on their wings. Their call sign was Cherry 2.

When the Army H-1 flew in formation with the H-53s and the MC-130, the airspeed was well below 100 knots and required a complex drafting

procedure on its part. The H-3s and H-53s could easily fly at 125 to 135 knots and not give the HC or MC -130s any control problems. Our Army ground commander began to sense something was not right. The H-1 could only fly for a couple of hours and then needed fuel. The H-1 could not be refueled from the air, so they would have to land somewhere in Laos or North Vietnam for fuel. Not a good idea. The Huey had another limitation. It could only carry eleven of the Blueboy attack element, versus fourteen if an H-3 was used. Another plus for using the USAF H-3 was it could be air refueled while flying in formation at the same time the H-53s were air refueling. Also, the higher airspeeds of the H-3 and the H-53 were compatible, allowing the MC-130 helicopter formation to arrive at the camp much sooner.

Several issues still remained, and we continued to examine each detail of the mission. With all the talent involved, we knew solutions would be found. This was the first team.

Then Colonel “Bull” Simons stood and began to express his main concern about the very beginning of the assault. Since the Army H-1 Banana helicopter was not going to be used how could the two gun towers be neutralized as we inserted Blueboy Force, now inside the H-3 USAF helicopter, into the compound? We couldn’t risk landing inside the camp if there were gunners in the towers who could take out the Blueboy assault force. The AF H-3 would have a tough time landing inside the compound with the trees and buildings close by. Could they also take out the gun towers prior to landing? Maybe it could be done.

The H-3 had less fuel than the H-53 and had to jettison the external tip tank prior to probable small arms fire to avoid an explosion if hit by a bullet. The fuel status of the H-3 would then be down to less than an hour’s flying time, and that was not enough to reach an MC-130 tanker in a safe area to air refuel. It was also very likely the H-3 could be damaged when making the confined landing. So, the assumption was it would not be coming back. A decision was made to blow up the H-3 using a timing device set to go off ten to fifteen minutes after the last H-53 loaded with our “Items” departed the POW camp. The three Air Force crewmen in Banana and the fourteen Army Special-Forces Blueboy element would get into Apple 1 or Apple 2 when it was time to leave.

Standing up, Lieutenant Colonel Britton explained, “Apple 3, 4, and 5 will be called in to load up our Items. A little over twenty-plus Items, and off you go. The PJs will examine each Item en route and provide any lifesaving medical attention needed. The Army will have prepositioned water and baby food. Lieutenant Colonel Cataldo, an Army surgeon, who will be on the mission, has dictated that these items be on each of our H-53 choppers. There will also be blankets and slippers. We can assume the Items may also be in shock. They may experience joy and want to stop and give you a big hug. We will have to do that after we land in Udorn. There will be a medical evacuation C-141 aircraft at Udorn that will transport the Items back to Hickam AFB in Hawaii for medical attention as required.”

The USAF element would have specific tasks. Banana 1 would land inside the compound with the fourteen Army soldiers, Blueboy. Blueboy would go to each prisoner’s cell and cut off the lock with bolt cutters. Then they would bring out the prisoners and lead them to the southwest corner of the camp for extraction. The other assault H-53s, Apple 1 and Apple 2, would have the remaining forty-two Special Force soldiers in two elements, Redwine element and Greenleaf element.

Britton would be in the lead H-53, Apple 1. On board would be Army Special Forces Colonel “Bull” Simons, personal call sign Wildroot, and his force, the Greenleaf element, a total of twenty-two men in this support group. The remaining twenty-man force would be on Apple 2 flown by Lieutenant Colonel Allison with his USAF crew. Lieutenant Colonel Sydnor was ground force commander of the Army attack forces at Son Tay. His force was known as the Redwine element.

Simons then stood up and repeated his concern, “I have more than a hundred volunteers for this mission. My officers have begun to reduce our team from one hundred eight volunteers down to our mission total of fifty-six. This is no easy task. All these men are highly experienced and I would trust any of them with my life. I still feel something needs to be done so that I can be sure that those two gun towers will not take out our Blueboy element landing inside the compound. Using our Army Huey H-1 as a gunship, with all its limitations, is not feasible. Do any of you have any other suggestions?”

Then the mission of Apple 3 in this assault plan suddenly changed. To

my left, my aircraft commander, Major Donohue stood up and addressed Simons. “Sir, I am Major Marty Donohue, Apple aircraft commander. In addition to taking out our Items, Apple 3 can first complete the task as mission gunship and make sure the way is clear for Banana to land without enemy machine gun fire from the two towers on the west end of the compound.”

“Go on,” said an encouraged “Bull” Simons.

“On our final approach to the camp,” Marty said, “say some ten miles west of Barbara, our helicopter can drop down from our formation position and take over as formation lead for the last three or four miles with Banana and Apple 1 and 2 behind us in trail formation on our right side. Apple 4 and 5 have the backup flare mission, so they would stay with Cherry 1. We can find the POW camp after the four flares are deployed from Cherry 1. We can line up near the center of the camp and continue to fly at forty feet altitude and airspeed under twenty knots. My gunners on the left side and right side can fire our miniguns and take out the gun towers. We also have another minigun on the rear ramp that could take out any other potential targets. Sir, these miniguns can fire up to four thousand rounds per minute.

“With Apple 3 taking out the two gun towers,” Marty continued, “that would leave the landing assault area inside the compound clear from hostile fire from the towers and allow Banana, with the Blueboy element, to land inside the compound without hostile gunfire from the tower. Apple 3 would then turn about one hundred eighty degrees and land a mile back from the camp, adjacent to where Apple 1 One and Apple 2 will be landing after inserting their Army attack forces. Apple 3 would then revert to our mission of extracting Items from the camp.” Marty had thought this plan over, and it made sense to me.

Simons looked at Marty and said, “Major, I am from Missouri, so show me.” He looked at the staff and said, “I want Apple 3 to do a test flight to see if the crew can handle this gunship mission. If there is just one bullet hole in the area of the Items, it is off. Good luck!”

I knew our three crewmen in the back were among the best in the USAF on the miniguns. It was like challenging Matt Dillon, Paladin, and Wyatt

Earp to a gunfight.

The briefing concluded with details about how the C-130 would drop several flares over the POW Camp with Apples 4 and 5 serving as backups.

Then we were told how the MC-130 would drop a “combat package” several miles to the south of the camp. That would delay any enemy troops heading our way. The planners had thought of several great diversions with this and the USN fighter diversion. This was a great joint team effort with all services involved.

I knew that flying into North Vietnam at night, with six helicopters flying on the wing of an MC-130 with no external lights would be very challenging with all the SAM sites, MiG airfields, and radar sites along the way. We would need F-105s to take out the SAM sites, and F-4s configured with air-to-air armament to take on any MiGs.

Security continued to be important. If the bad guys knew we were coming, a lot of C-130s, A-1s, and helicopters would be sitting ducks.

As Apple 3, we’d be the last H-53 into the camp to load up the rescued prisoners, Items, and any Army soldiers that would be there. Pilots flying the other H-53s were on loan from Thailand and South Vietnam. They had been in Florida all this time to train with us as a group. They were told to hold in an area five miles west of the Son Tay camp at a place called Finger Lake. The US Army ground commander would call them in, one at a time to load up Items. No one would be left behind.

Our next challenge was to see if we could become the gunship for this mission. We left Hurlburt Field and returned to Eglin to plan our next mission. We also had our current students to contend with, and that had to continue. It was busy times for the fly-boys at Eglin AFB.

Major Pleshkin had given the attack group; MC-130s, H-3s, H-53s, and A-1s, call signs with the names of fruits; thus the nickname “fruit salad” was invented for our group. Our last fruit was Lime 1, a King C-130 that would air refuel us after takeoff and before attacking Son Tay. Lime, Cherry, Banana, Apple, and Peach were our call signs, one big fruit salad, and an Air

Force rescue crew had become an Army assault gunship, Apple 3.

The Russian satellite schedule would dictate our training mission time to fire the miniguns on Apple 3. The planners didn't want the Russians to see an H-53 flying around in a rectangular pattern trying not to hit large white sheets attached to a wooden frame. Two days later, about 2:00 p.m., our Apple 3 crew launched and headed to the gunnery range outside of Hurlburt Field. This was a bit strange since on this gunnery mission we were trying to hit something, a simulated gun tower, while trying to miss something else, the large white sheet that represented the POW cells.

The planners had assembled a mock-up that replicated the two gun towers on the gunnery range with clean white sheets attached to wooden planks down the left side of center where the Items would be housed. Simons had said earlier that if one bullet hole was in a sheet it was a no-go. Around we went, Marty and I taking turns flying at forty feet and twenty knots down the center of the model compound with our PJs and engineer taking turns firing the miniguns from all positions. We also had Simons and a couple of his officers on board. They had not used the six-barrel miniguns at two to four thousand rounds per minute.

We flew for an hour and a half, and then it was back to Eglin AFB to debrief. There was a large white sheet folded in the front of the room. Our crew was as curious about our results, as the Army officers. Simons came in, cigar in hand, and sat down in the rear of the room. He reminded me of John Wayne. I was glad he was on our side.

Simons nodded to the briefing officer, who got up and began, "Colonel Simons, gentlemen, we removed the sheet from the camp model and examined each panel. Sir, we found no evidence of any bullets striking any of the cloth sheets. Therefore, we recommend Apple 3 be designated as the gunship for the Son Tay mission."

Simons stood up and said, "Do it," then turned and left the room. He was a man of few words.

Apple 3 would have a dual role, first into the assault area as the gunship and then last out with POWs and any other US forces still there. Marty and I

discussed the mission and agreed no one would be left behind, not on our watch.

There seemed to be a lot of knowledge as to the number of POWs imprisoned at Son Tay. Estimates of between sixty-one and sixty-five POWs were mentioned at several briefings. We had three H-53s, and each could get twenty-five to thirty-five on board. Was there a spy inside Son Tay? How did we know that three H-53s would be enough? A lot of us had friends who were being held prisoner in North Vietnam. Were they at Son Tay?

October 1970 passed without our being launched, so the next window of opportunity would be later in November. Thanksgiving was November 26. I couldn't discuss with the family what we would do; maybe go to the Officers Club so there would be no need to cook. That was a good option. Friday, November 13, with the morning training flights for our new H-53 students complete, Lieutenant Colonel Allison came into the instructor's area, "We have a meeting in Lieutenant Colonel Britton's office, *now*!"

I guessed the time had come. The Apple and Banana crews assembled in a secure area. Britton came in and closed the door.

"As you might have heard," he said, "the H-53s are grounded, worldwide, so that means our inspection team will leave Hurlburt Field this Sunday night. You will be picked up in front of your quarters at seven thirty p.m. Have your personal and flight gear packed and ready to go. Temporary Duty orders will be activated Sunday morning. Tell your family that where you are going does not have communication capability to make personal calls, so you will be isolated for a short time. Hopefully, we will be back for Thanksgiving. With the H-53 grounded by the Pentagon edict, our students shouldn't wonder where we are, since they will be off for a few days and won't be at the squadron. Good luck and Godspeed."

Sunday evening came rather quickly. I made my farewells to my wife and boys. I took my personal and flight gear in hand and walked to the curb to wait for the shuttle to pick me up. I looked around and wondered. Will I be back for Thanksgiving in a few days or new resident in a POW cell? Or? No time to think about that! I had to be on top of what was about to happen. I was going back to Udorn Air Base.

Among the five Apple crews were two Udorn H-53 pilots who had been flying the training flight with us. Major Ken Murphy and Captain Bill McGeorge. I knew both of them while I was at Udorn earlier in the year. Bill and I were the only two USAF captains flying in the helicopter assault/ rescue group. The rest were majors or lieutenant colonels with many combat hours and year of flying experience.

One-by-one the Eglin aircrews checked in and got boarding passes and box lunches. One of the Eglin fixed wing pilots with us was Major Bill Kornitzer Jr. He was an HC-130 instructor pilot at Eglin and would fly as aircraft commander with a flight crew presently stationed in Thailand. Their mission call sign was Lime 1. They would provide the helicopter air-refueling platform for the H-3 and H-53s.

C-141s were provided to transport the aircrews and Army unit to Thailand. Departing Florida, we stopped at Travis AFB, California, changed the C-141 aircrew, and refueled. Then on to Hawaii to land, refuel, and change flight crews again. We already had eleven hours flying time and a few hours on the ground. Then we flew to Guam, the Philippines, and finally, Takhli Air Base, Thailand some twenty-eight hours later. We still had a few days to review flight plans and mission operational procedures before Sunday's proposed attack. After checking into quarters, we changed into our khaki uniforms so we wouldn't look like a bunch of aviators in flight suits wandering about the base with no airplanes to fly.

The Air Force crews all assembled in a secure room for briefings on the Son Tay mission plan and the all-important weather forecast. The intelligence officer reported that recent pictures taken from the air showed activity inside the Barbara compound. I would never ask what method was used. If I was captured, I couldn't tell anything.

The flight crews updated our flight maps to plot current known AAA sites, SAM sites, and MiG airfields. Nothing changed, still a lot of bad guys with guns of all types. Many big guns and a whole lot of bad guys circled the place where we were going, near Hanoi. Our projected launch was Saturday evening to hit the Son Tay camp around 2:15 a.m. local time on November 22. While we were firing our miniguns at the guard towers at Son Tay, American sports fans would be watching college football on a Saturday

afternoon. I wondered whom the Clemson Tigers were playing.

The weather officer was the next to brief. “General Manor, Colonel Simons, we may have a weather problem for November the twenty-second,” he said. “As you know, Cyclone Patsy is moving in from the east. We expect low visibility, very heavy rains, and high winds in the Son Tay area, which will cause extreme hardship for the assault on the camp. Sir, we recommend you move the date forward at least twenty-four hours or delay the launch for at least a week.”

I noticed a few heads moving about and words exchanged. Then General Manor stopped the briefing, got up, and left the room with Colonel Simons and a few planners. I assumed they had a long distance call to make on a secure line. If our launch were moved up a day, then the launch would be Friday evening, the twentieth, to arrive at on Tay the following morning, around 2:00 a.m. Time was suddenly being compressed.

On November 19, we were notified that we are back on. The launch was set for the evening of November 20, with the assault to be around 0215 hours local time in North Vietnam in the early hours of the November 21. I had not brought many personal items with me. My billfold had a few pictures and my driver’s license that l was leaving behind in the desk drawer. In a pocket of my flight suit were my Military ID card, a Geneva Convention Card, and, soon, a “blood chit.”

It was a short walk to the briefing room. The big difference was that the Army Green Berets were all there. They were in combat uniform, and I was glad they were on our side! Most still did not know where the target was. Simons came up to the stage, and the whole group, Army and Air Force crewmen, stood at attention. “Seats!” was the command. “The US assault forces are here and will soon be departing: Redwine, Greenleaf, Blueboy, and the Apples, Peaches, Banana, Cherry, and Lime crews.” He continued, “I know you want to know where we are going tonight. After several months of intense training, early this Saturday morning it will be complete. Gentlemen, we are going to attack a North Vietnamese prisoner of war camp some twenty-three miles northwest of Hanoi, just outside the village of Son Tay. We are bringing home sixty-one US prisoners of war to have Thanksgiving dinner in freedom with their families.”

The Green Berets were on their feet, fists pumping with many loud hoorahs. The adrenaline was already flowing. Those brave men trusted the Air Force rescue crews, A-1 fighters, and the C-130 combat aircraft escorting the helicopters and A-1s into the heart of North Vietnam. They trusted the Air Force crew to get them there to do their jobs and then get them back home in one piece. Having that trust was a great honor.

The room quieted down a bit, and the briefing continued. Weather in the area was soon to worsen. Cyclone Patsy was closer to our assault area, and the surface winds going at the target area would be very strong from the north, or coming from our left. This meant the attack force would drift to the right without proper drift heading correction. The lead MC-130 navigator in Cherry 1 would announce a corrected heading to the assault formation over the radio at a point about eleven miles west of the camp.

Marty turned to me and said, “Tom, I am going five degrees left of the heading the C-130 navigator gives us. I’d rather be a bit north of the camp than south.”

“Roger that,” I said. “Five degrees left.”

I had gone over the target area many times. I could see where the POW camp was just west of the village. A river just west of the camp ran from the northeast to the southwest of the camp. About a quarter mile south of the camp was a facility called “secondary school.” It was located inland from the river and near a fork in the roads. I didn’t have any other info.

It was time to go. One-by-one we departed the briefing facility. I walked to the nearby hanger on a raised wooden sidewalk, which kept us from stepping on a cobra. Before reaching the hanger, I stopped and looked behind me. No one was there. No one was ahead of me. I was there, all alone. I jogged the last few yards and entered the hanger, which had several crew-members already loaded on the bus. The bus would take us to a transport C-130 parked on the ramp, then to Udorn to get into our H-53s.

Our C-130 transport departed at 8:00 p.m. (2000 hours) from Takhli, landed at Udorn before 2100 hours and parked on their ramp. The AF helicopter crew got onto a crew bus that took us to the H-53 squadron’s

operations area. It was strange to look out my window and see a building I had recently entered many times. As I walked toward the entry steps, I looked left and saw our H-53s all in a line from north to south, with the H-3 parked in the row behind. The five H-53s were for our Apple crews and the H-3 was for the Banana crew. I also noted what appeared to be mission spares; two more H-53s and another H-3 parked one row behind the others. If one of the Apples had mechanical problems, the crew would need to get to the spare ASAP.

If I had still been stationed there, I would have wondered why all those H-53s and the H-3 were out there ready to fly somewhere when no one in the 40th squadron was tasked to fly. And just a few days before the Air Force grounded the entire H-53 fleet. What is going on? As I looked in the window, I saw a few pilots I knew.

Lieutenant Colonel Ed Modica, the 40th ARRSq commander, had arrived in March of 1970, just a few months before I departed for the USA. I wondered what he thought when tasked to have all those helicopters ready to go for an 11:00 PM takeoff time that evening, with none of his crews tasked to fly them.

The door opened, and the parade of H-53 crewmembers, mostly from ARRTC began. Lieutenant Colonel Modica's jaw dropped. In walked several senior pilots that he knew from his recent Eglin AFB training. In addition to Lieutenant Colonel Britton, Lieutenant Colonel Allison, and Lieutenant Colonel Zehnder, there was Lieutenant Colonel Royal Brown from Da Nang and several majors from ARRTC, as well as two of his pilots who had been on temporary duty at Eglin AFB, Major Jay Strayer, and Captain Bill McGeorge. I was tagging along in the rear, and I saw Lieutenant Colonel Modica give me a "What in the hell are you doing back here?" look.

"Colonel Modica, good to see you, sir," I said, taking his right hand in mine and giving it a good shake. "I'm back."

Just then, the squadron staff duty officer, Captain Rich Baskett came up to me and mumbled, "Why the hell are you back at Udorn? Where are all of you headed in our Jolly Greens?"

“Rich,” I said, “I can’t say. You’ll have to watch Armed Forces TV tomorrow.” The secret was still in play!

I gathered my weapons, a .38 caliber pistol and an M-16 rifle, then my parachute, and my “blood chit.” I loaded my .38 and placed it in my holster above my heart, along with a few more rounds in the vest. I had time for a quick visit to the men’s room. Then, pack up my gear for the walk down the steps and along the ramp to find Apple 3.

One by one, the aircrews exited the operations building and looked for their assigned H-53s. The helicopter ground crews scampered around each helicopter to ensure they were ready for flight. I counted back from the north and saw the third H-53. Not a Jolly Green call sign this evening, this H-53 was now Apple 3, the mission gunship. We were to be first over the POW camp at low altitude, less than forty feet. Our three gunners were ready. I hoped the North Vietnamese gunner would be sound asleep at two am. All this training and coming a long distance for a few seconds over the POW camp! Only a few seconds to take out the two enemy tower gunners to protect our Banana helicopter landing inside the POW camp with the fourteen-man Army Blueboy element.

I went inside our H-53 and put my gear in the right seat for this mission. As instructor pilots we often flew in either seat depending on our student category, (i.e., a new copilot or aircraft commander). Marty had chosen to fly this mission in the Ieft seat, normally the copilot’s position in a helicopter. Regardless of which seat he was in, Major Marty Donohue was the “boss” on this mission.

As in the past, each H-53 pilot’s M-16, with an ammo clip inserted, was hung over the top of the opposite pilot’s seat. I also had a bandoleer of M-16 ammunition hanging over the top part of the seat. You could never have too many bullets!

“Tom, go ahead and do the outside preflight,” Marty said.

“Roger,” I replied.

I grabbed my small flashlight and stepped back down on the ramp. I

walked around the outside of our H-53 looking under the helicopter to check for any hydraulic or fuel leaks and found none. I stopped and looked up. Many stars were out that night. To my left I saw many people milling about outside each helicopter. The Army elements were putting their gear on Apple 1 and 2, just next to us. After the preflight was completed, it was time to get back inside and strap in.

Our three crewmen were in the fuselage area behind the pilots' seats checking out their miniguns. One PJ was on minigun number one, which was out the left window. His target would be the north tower of the POW camp. The FE was on the number-two minigun, which swings out into the crew entry door opening. His target would be the south gun tower, on my side of the helicopter. The second PJ was our backup on an M-60 machine gun in case a forward minigun jammed. If both forward guns fired, he could lay the M-60 down and run back to his ramp gun to cover our rear. These guys were beyond good. They knew their way around the H-53 and knew just what was expected of them.

During combat rescue missions, there was another piece of personal equipment used by the pilots that was not used in stateside training flights. This equipment was a bulletproof ceramic vest. It fit under the pilot's shoulder straps and it was supposed to protect your heart from a direct hit from small-arms fire or flying shrapnel from an explosive burst. Marty and I each had one lying in our seats. Before strapping into my seat, I did a final walk about the cabin area with the two PJs. We had the special items on board just for our POWs, directed by the Army doctor, Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Cataldo.

I looked out our rear ramp with its minigun bolted down, and just behind us I saw Blueboy element, all fourteen soldiers, getting into Banana. Since the H-3 was not to return, the three Air Force crewmen would have to join the Blueboy element to get a ride home on one of the H-53s. There were no PJs on Banana, just two pilots and a flight engineer. With fourteen Army guys inside, I was sure they could find a couple to man the two M-60s on board. They were the backup gunners to take out the gun towers in case we were blown away.

Marty and I strapped in and began the pre-engine start checklist when

PJ Jim Rogers came on the interphone. “Sir, what do we do with the Claymore mines?” he asked.

“What Claymore mines?” I said.

“Well,” Jim said, “one of the Army guys just handed me these two Claymore mines and said if we go down they can set up a perimeter defense with them.”

I turned to Marty, “Sir, what do you know about some Claymore mines the Army left on our doorstep?”

Marty looked at me and said, “What Claymore mines?”

I replied, “Our PJs say one of the Army guys just dropped off a couple of them.”

Marty went on the FM limited range radio and asked Lieutenant Colonel Britton the same question. No one seemed to know why Claymore mines suddenly appeared on Apple 3’s doorstep. I thought the Army just liked to pull off surprises. Well, it worked. I turned and asked Jim Rogers, “If a bullet hit one of the mines, will it explode?”

No one seemed to know if they would or not. I made a quick decision.

“Marty, give me your chest protector!” He looked puzzled. I said, “The PJs can put both of our vests around the Claymores. If a stray bullet comes through the cabin the vests might keep them from exploding.” So much for *our* chest protection! Before I work with the Army again I’d read up on Claymore mines.

We were about to start engines, taxi, takeoff, and depart an airfield all without getting verbal clearance from ground control, the control tower, or departure control, something I’d never done before. A green light from the Udorn Control Tower would be Apple 1’s signal to taxi. We all would follow him and line up for takeoff. No talking. Six helicopters and three C-130s would be doing a silent departure from Udorn. Five A-1s would likewise make a silent departure at NKP.

Then I heard the C-130s running up. The JP-4 fumes were thicker. A member of General Manor's staff was in the Udorn Air Base control tower. Another staff officer was in the NKP control tower some one hundred miles east, where the A-1s would also soon depart. A little after 2305 hours we started both engines. I could just make out a C-130 rolling down the runway heading eastward. The mission was on.

The late night air was still and full of JP-4 exhaust fumes from the six helicopters that were still parked. The winds were calm. The great news was none of the assault helicopter crews required a spare helicopter. We waited for our green light for taxi/ takeoff. There it was, Green Light. It was 2315 hours. Like we were reading each other's mind, the three H-53s taxied behind each other and went to the end of the taxiway. Then it was time to add power and pull into a hover. Our interior lights weren't on, so I leaned forward to check the engine instrument readings, and they were all in the green. On our left, Apple 1 began his departure, followed by Apple 2 and then we were off. Departure time—11:17 PM. We flew directly across the active runway. Next stop, Son Tay POW Camp, North Vietnam. All internal and external lights were still off, and radios were quiet.

We slowly began to gain altitude. Our projected time to the POW camp was about three hours, which would get us there at 2:15 AM on November 21. That was way past my normal bedtime, but not tonight.

Suddenly, radio silence was broken. Someone called out a "Break," which was used only in case of a possible collision. We turned thirty degrees right and climbed five hundred feet as we had done during training. After thirty seconds, we returned to our original heading. I thought I saw some red/green light flash nearby just below the formation that had to come from an aircraft that was not part of our group. Who was flying that airplane? The CIA? The Thai Air Force? What a way to start. Then the intruder aircraft was gone. We got back into our proper positions and began to look for the HC-130, Lime 1.

The moon was rising, but it was still low on the horizon to the northeast. The moonlight would greatly improve our ability to see the HC-130, who was moving over from our left. He was level at three thousand feet. All five of the H-53 Apples and the Banana H-3 slid into their proper formation positions.

The HC-130, our “mother hen” now, had her six chicks on her wings, three on each side. I leaned forward so I could monitor the various readings on our instrument panel, including our fuel consumption. Marty was totally focused on the other two H-53s on our left and keeping us in position. Our flight plan took us directly north over TACAN Channel 108. Normally, this part of Laos was relatively safe. There were no MiG airfields or SAM sites to worry about, not yet, anyway.

After an hour and a half of flying, it was time to begin air refueling. Lime 1 was holding a steady platform. The refueling drogue hoses were extended on both sides of the HC-130. Each seventy-five-foot hose had a white chute- type device on its end, and they were normally stable unless you were in turbulence. I completed our pre-refueling checklist items, which included extending our refueling probe just outside the H-53 rotor plane. No external spotlight was used, as was the normal nighttime procedure. Apples 1 and 2 both took on their fuel. Then, we were next. Marty moved our H-53 toward the drogue. He moved in slightly, and we connected. I leaned forward to confirm fuel transfer from the HC-130, and in a few minutes, we filled our tanks.

We backed off and returned to our formation position. We had enough fuel to get us to the Son Tay POW camp and possibly all the way home. At least we could refuel in a safe area later if needed. If we did need more fuel before landing, it would be a cinch when we could talk to the C-130 tanker and use external lights if needed. Apples 4 and 5 and Banana refueled on the left side.

We were rapidly approaching the border of North Vietnam and enemy radar coverage. It was time to change our C-130 lead. Lime 1 climbed ahead and then turned to the west where he would orbit in case he was needed to provide more fuel to the helicopters. Sliding over from our left was the MC-130, Cherry 1. A sister ship, Cherry 2, was escorting the five A-1 “Peach” assault support aircraft. They were somewhere nearby and would meet us at Son Tay so the A-1s could provide close air support near the POW camp. Once again, our big brothers would be there to protect us.

We were less than an hour west of our objective. Our flight direction began to change—right and then left, dodging enemy radar-detection

patterns. Apple 3 was on the outside of the formation on the right side. We turned eastward and descended near a mountain range on our right. I looked at the trees, and our rotor blades were just clearing them.

"Marty," I said, "those trees are pretty damn close on the right side!"

"Roger that," he said. I thought we were making toothpicks.

The assault group descended into the Black River Valley west of Hanoi. I saw bright lights from Hanoi like no one there was asleep. Our Navy had launched their planned diversion attack jets out in the Gulf of Tonkin, but I couldn't see any activity from our altitude. The MC-130 turned to place us near the initial point, which was some eleven miles west of our target. All was still quiet.

We descended toward our planned breakup point, some three and a half miles west of Son Tay. I looked outside the window but saw no houses or buildings, just trees, bushes, and rice paddies. I could barely see the Red River. It flows through North Vietnam from the northwest to the southeast and goes through Hanoi and out to the Gulf of Tonkin. A small tributary comes off the main river and flows just west of the Son Tay POW camp. That small branch was what I was looking for since it was just in front of the target. US fighter pilots had created a group called the Red River Valley Fighter Pilots Organization. To belong you had to fly a mission over the Red River. Hell, we were almost in the damn thing. I suspect the fighter jocks never planned to fly at forty feet and twenty knots and then land and wait in a hostile area for another twenty minutes or so.

The time for Apple 3 to assume the lead position of the assault helicopter formation during the final track to the target came up fast. Cherry 1 gave a heading of zero-seven-two over the radio; the first time radio silence was broken. They began a climb to fifteen hundred feet and continued to the POW camp to drop their four flares over Barbara. Marty looked at me and said he was going left another five degrees to 067. That should place us just to the left of the camp, as we had discussed, and in a better attack mode. Apple 4 and 5 climbed and followed the MC-130. They would act as alternates to drop flares if needed. We slowed down to between seventy-five to eighty knots so Banana and Apples 1 and 2 could get into trail formation

behind us and slightly to our right side. Without external lights, the PJs couldn't see the helicopter from our rear ramp platform. Cyclone Patsy's projected high winds would be coming from our left, or north, and would cause us to drift further south.

I looked out my front and side window to make sure there were no unknown obstacles such as big trees or power poles. We were still descending. Before attacking the camp gun towers, we were to level at forty feet and fly at about twenty to twenty-five knots as we crossed the compound to take out the two gun towers. It was still dark and, even though the moon was higher, I couldn't see any significant features such as buildings or rivers. Then I heard on the radio, "Alpha, Alpha, Alpha," a transmission from Cherry 1. I looked at my watch, and it was 2:17 AM local. Suddenly the sky lit up and I could see. The flares from Cherry 1 provided an excellent vision of the immediate area. Marty and I scanned out front for key reference points like the river running in front of the camp. We both looked out front and saw a facility out there, but there was no river running from north to south just to the west of it.

"That is not it!" I yelled at Marty. "No river!"

I looked to our left and saw the target. "There it is," I said, pointing toward the left side or to the north. Marty saw it, gave a big "Roger that," and began a steep turn to the left. I looked out my right window and saw what I believed to be Banana. He appeared to be in a left turn as if he was following us. I told Marty what I saw and asked him if he wanted to break radio silence.

"No!" he said.

The extra drift correction we applied to our heading was still not enough to keep us from drifting to the right. Cyclone Patsy's winds were even stronger than the weather folks had projected for this area and altitude. The winds from our left were very strong. They pushed us a quarter mile right of course in three and a half miles of flying. If we had used the 072 heading that was given, we would be further to the south, somewhere below the secondary school. Marty's analysis was correct.

We were in a perfect position to continue our attack. Then, one of the

worst things that could happen in a helicopter happened. A yellow caution light illuminated just in front of me. It lit up the whole cockpit. Marty was still lining up for our minigun attack and I leaned forward and saw that the light was the main gear transmission warning light. It illuminated if a metal piece were floating around in our main transmission gearbox. It could be just a circuit malfunction. About six months ago, while flying at NKP on a training flight, we were on the ground and I saw a similar light come on. We taxied in and parked the helicopter. The crew chief climbed up and found many metal pieces. He told us it was good we were on the ground and had shut down the engine because the transmission was about to explode.

If the transmission warning light comes on during flight, the H-53 flight manual instructed the pilot to pull out the circuit breaker, wait, and reset it. If the caution light goes out, you can continue flight but should monitor it. However, if the warning light stays on, then you needed to land as soon as possible and have the transmission checked out. I reset the circuit breaker and the light stayed on.

Marty said, “Forget it. Leave the circuit breaker out.”

“We may be hitching a ride back ourselves,” I silently thought. I hoped one of the other H-53s had room for five more passengers. It was a long way back to friendly places and I didn’t want to become a new resident of North Vietnam. Marty continued to maneuver Apple 3, lining us up right on the centerline of the compound. So far, no one was shooting at us. We were not wearing our chest protectors since they were protecting Claymores. In just a few seconds our gunners would open fire at both gun towers. Adios, bad guys! The Yanks are here!

Our FE was on the minigun out the crew entry door on my side of the H-53. When our crew studied the camp mock-up, he told me that after he took out the enemy gun tower he was going to take out the buildings just outside the walls since North Vietnamese soldiers were probably in there. As our H-53 crossed the western compound wall our miniguns began to blaze away as advertised from the door and the window sides and, soon after, the rear ramp. Three miniguns were firing up to four thousand rounds per minute each. We were certainly leaving a lot of lead to clean up and a few fires were breaking out. Even though I was looking ahead for obstructions, I could see

buildings blazing away out my right window. We flew down the POW camp at forty feet and twenty-five knots. Then the PJ on the left window minigun position selected the intraplane frequency so Banana could hear and be alerted. “Man loose in the compound.” He said he saw a guy climbing down the tower ladder into the compound. He fired into the thatched roof of the tower to make sure the guy was out and wouldn’t be able to fire his machine gun from the tower. The second PJ didn’t have to fire his M-60 and was back on his ramp minigun opening fire.

Banana was behind us with his fourteen-man Blueboy element that also opened fire on the guard in the compound before they landed. Apple 3 cleared the end of the camp and I saw Hanoi about twenty-three miles out in front. I went on the interphone and asked Marty, “Are we going to visit Hanoi?”

“Oh, shit,” he said and quickly reversed our course about 180 degrees.

We flew back on the north side of the camp and found a landing spot less than a mile from the camp. My heart was still pumping, and the adrenaline machine was on maximum output when I heard on our radio, “Plan Green.” It was less than five minutes into the mission. What happened? “Plan Green” meant Apple 2 had landed at the POW camp landing zone, and there was no sign of the Greenleaf element from Apple 1. What happened to Apple 1? Where was he? I heard no distress call.

Marty and I looked out our windows, and couldn’t see any aircraft burning. There had been no emergency call made by Apple 1. Where were they? After the Army Redwine element disembarked from Apple 2, the H-53 took off again and landed about thirty feet to the right of us in the rice paddy. I could see them clearly.

Our two jet engines were set at flight idle to reduce our fuel consumption and lower our sound level. The wait began as Blueboy element began going cell to cell to free the prisoners using their bolt cutters to open each cell. They would lead the Items over to the south wall, which would be blown open soon. They were to wait there before being loaded onto Apple 4 and Apple 5 and, finally, on Apple 3. We were their ticket home, prepaid and ready. The next call should be for Apple 4 to corner in and load Items. When

they departed, Apple 5 would come in, load, and depart. Then we would go in and clear out whoever remained. We were ready.

Just then PJ Rogers came on our interphone. “Sir with our night-vision starlight scope I see a truck just to the north, parked along the road. I see a few guys walking around, and they seem to be looking our way.”

Marty looked at me and said, “Tom check it out.”

I unstrapped quickly, stepped down, and went over to the window behind Marty’s seat. I squatted down and peeked through the starlight scope. Damn, there was a truck parked there and I saw two guys walking around. I couldn’t tell if they had rifles. Could they see us? Did they hear our engine turning? They sure looked close. Then, the two guys climbed back into their truck and moved out. They were gone. Wow, that was close! The PJs continued to scan for other unwanted visitors, those with guns who might try to sneak up on us and start shooting.

Suddenly alI hell broke loose again. Marty and I saw many SAMs launched from the north and east. It began to look like the Fourth of July. A lot of friendly MIGCAP F-4s and the F-105s were flying high above us so there were plenty of targets for the SAMs. Even though many SAMs went up, no one had been hit so far. I had not heard any “Bandit” calls on our emergency frequency, which would announce MiG launches.

To our left and on the deck was a fast moving jet with his afterburner lit. Who the hell was that? Was it a MiG? Was it one of our F-105s? Guess we’ll never know.

Less than ten minutes into the mission, I heard a radio transmission from the Blueboy element inside the POW camp, “Wildroot, this is Blueboy —negative Items.”

I looked at Marty with a “What did he say?” look on my face. Then, a call came from another Army element. “Blueboy, repeat your transmission, over.”

“Roger, this is Blueboy. I say again, negative Items!”

Marty and I looked at each other with our stomach in our boots. “Did he say no one is there?” I asked.

Marty responded, “Sure sounds like it.”

“Damn,” I said. “We came all this way, and there is no one here? The plan worked, and we would have gotten them all out.”

“I don’t think the bad guys knew we were coming,” Marty said. “They would have blown us all right out of the sky.”

He was right. There were many sitting ducks for the North Vietnamese soldiers to shoot out of the sky, six helicopters, five A-1s and a couple of big C-130s all at low level and flying very slowly. That would have given them a big new film and perhaps even Hanoi Jane would show up.

In all this commotion, I suddenly saw Apple 1 land next to Apple 2. “Colonel Britton’s back,” I told Marty. Where had they been during the past ten minutes? They dropped off their Army Greenleaf element, but, since no POWs were at the camp, Apple 1 would get the call to load the twenty-two-man Greenleaf element and part of the Blueboy/ Banana crew.

About 0230 hours the Army unit called for Apple 1 to come into Barbara landing zone and load up. In addition to the Greenleaf element, there were now fourteen more soldiers, the Blueboy element, plus the three Air Force crewmen who had flown into the POW camp on Banana. All would be divided up for a ride home on Apple 1 or 2. Apple 1 was loaded and they left the area heading west.

Then Firebird 3, an F-105, was hit by a SAM and made a Mayday call. No one bailed out. Our radios were getting busy. Apple 2 was called in to get the remainder of the raiders. Where the hell were our prisoners? We came all this way to take them home and they had been moved? It was getting busy out there. We might have a search-and-rescue mission for the F-105 crew if they bailed out.

Apple 2 landed south of the camp and the remaining raiders began to get on board. Soon Apple 2 departed. Then Apple 1 and Apple 2 had to check how many souls were on board. If everyone was accounted for we could

depart. It was time to head west and haul our butts back to good guy land. On the FM frequency, I heard Apple 1 and Apple 2 talking about how many men were in their helicopter.

“Count is incorrect” was the response on the radio.

Marty called Apple 1. “Sir, Apple 3. Do you want us to go in and pick up anyone who was left behind?”

“Stand by, Apple 3” was the reply.

Confusion reigned. Did someone not correctly count fifty-six Army and three Air Force crewmen loaded on two H-53 helicopters? Meanwhile, all the other aircraft were leaving Dodge, all except us. We were still sitting there in the damn rice paddy with our engines set for takeoff power waiting to see if someone was left behind at the POW camp. If we needed to go back in to rescue someone, I would call the A-1s to come back and give us air cover. Marty and I had decided we were not going to leave anyone behind to be killed or captured.

Just then another “Mayday, Mayday” came over the radio Guard channel. “This is Firebird 5. We are hit and will continue westward.” Great, another F-105 was hit. Who would get them if they bailed out? Us, Apple 4 or 5?

After three minutes elapsed, it seemed like an hour, another radio message came, “Apple 3, the count is correct. You are cleared to depart the area.”

“Roger,” Marty replied as he pulled the collective lever up, and we began to rise from the rice paddy. Bye-bye, North Vietnam. We are out of here.

We lifted off, turned 180 degrees, and headed west. We flew down the rice paddy and stayed low as we built our airspeed. We hit 150 indicated and popped up to a higher altitude, fifteen hundred feet or so. A few minutes went by, and I heard our PJ on the rear ramp, “Sir, looks like Banana helicopter just exploded inside the compound!” Well, that went as planned.

I relieved Marty at the flight controls. Out our left side, I could see, down low and behind us, some aircraft getting rid of ammo, certainly shooting at something, but not us. One of the HC-130 aircraft, Lime 2, would be the rescue commander if Firebird 5's crew bailed out and a search-and-rescue effort was needed.

About thirty minutes later, I heard that Firebird 5's crew had bailed out and were near Channel 108. Lime 2 changed his call sign to King 2. The A-1s would change their call sign to Sandy Lead and 2, 3, 4, and 5 if needed. The Firebird rescue area was in a much better location than somewhere in North Vietnam. Since Apple 4 and Apple 5 were close to the rescue Iocation, they continued on to air refuel and take up positions to rescue the downed pilot and navigator. Meanwhile, more rescue Jolly Greens were launched from Udorn to serve as backup for the Firebird 5 mission.

We were cleared to return to Udorn. We were in a safer area of Laos so we turned on all our internal lights. The main-gear transmission warning light circuit breaker was still not engaged. Finally, I was able to talk to someone in the air-traffic-control business.

I pushed my UHF radio button. "Udorn Approach Control, this is Apple 3, thirty miles north of Udorn requesting direct approach for landing over."

"Apple 3, you are cleared present position direct to Udorn. Call on final. Change to tower frequency, over," came a friendly voice.

"Roger" I replied. On final I gave the tower our final gear down and locked call. The sky to the east was getting lighter, just like the song, "By the dawn's early light." We certainly had seen many rocket's red glare a bit earlier. Doesn't get any better, except we don't have our valuable cargo. I don't remember another time in my life when I was so totally disappointed. We did not bring back any of the American prisoners of war.

I made the landing and taxied to our parking spot adjacent to Apple 1 and Apple 2. I parked and shut down our engine. The mission was done.

I saw the various Army elements begin to load onto buses. Apple l and Apple 2 flight crews were sitting on the ramp in front of their helicopters. We

gathered our gear and left our H-53. Our crew chief came over, and Marty told him about the main gear transmission light coming on. He climbed up to check it out.

"Looks OK to me," he said. We dodged a big one!

I saw a medic from an ambulance treating someone. It appeared to be the flight engineer from Banana. His foot was wrapped. I didn't see anyone in the Army element or any other Air Force crewmen being treated by medics or being carried away. It looks like we entered the gates of hell and came back all in one piece. We were just missing our precious cargo, very special brothers-in-arms. Maybe next time, guys.

As I had taxied to our parking spot, I had seen a T-39, a small jet transport, parked nearby. I saw someone talking to Apple 1's crew and everyone was standing. Then he walked over to Apple 2 and they too stood up and saluted. Then in the dawn's early light, I could make out the figure. It was General Manor our overall mission commander. We stood when he approached and gave him a salute. He returned the salute and told us to relax. He shook each hand and told us how much he appreciated our heroic efforts and how he shared our disappointment in not bringing home our POWs. He was a busy man, and in a short time, he would head back to Washington to brief the Secretary of Defense and President Nixon. Yet, he took the time to greet each raider, one-by-one. Thank you, General Manor, for being a true leader.

To complete the mission, word came down that Apple 4 and Apple 5 rescued both of the downed crewmen from Firebird 5. No one was injured.

As I walked over to operations to turn in my weapon and other gear, I noticed two C-141 Medical Transport aircraft parked near us. They were to take our POWs back home, but not today. We were reminded by the general's staff that the details of our mission were still classified, and not to talk to our comrades about any mission detail. We debriefed and went back to Takhli Air Base on board the C-141s originally planned to transport the POWs.

On the ride back to Eglin AFB, I was sitting next to Technical Sergeant

Leroy Wright. He reached inside his flight suit and pulled out a small, black, rectangular piece of plastic. He turned it over, and I could see a serial number written on it. “I just couldn’t leave this behind on the H- 3 that was blown up,” he said.

Of course, there was always a chance that, in the future, someone could go back into North Vietnam and try once again to bring back our POWs. So we needed to keep the mission details secret. As we continued our flight home, I thought about a couple of questions that people might ask about our mission. One: Why did you guys not go to another camp? Answer: I guess the planner assumed that once the element of surprise was over you don’t get another chance. By then, all the bad guys in North Vietnam would know you were in their hen house. Two: Was there a security leak? Answer: I don’t think I would still be around to write anything. There were too many sitting ducks for the bad guys not to fire on. But our US Special Forces flat owned a few square miles of North Vietnam for about twenty minutes! God bless the Green Berets. Glad they are on our side. It was great being surrounded by all those heroes.

At home and after the Thanksgiving holiday, my phone kept ringing. There were dozens of phone calls from friend and relatives. “Gee, you know I can’t really talk about it” was my standard reply. I think my H-53 students and old Jolly Green crewmembers were the worst. What happened? Did SAMs shoot at you? Where were the prisoners? Many questions but no answers.

In December, the Son Tay Raid helicopter crews stationed at Eglin were told we were to go to Fort Bragg North Carolina, home of the Army Special Forces, for an Awards and Decorations ceremony. It was a Class A uniform event and families were invited. Since there were twenty of us plus wives and a few older kids, the USAF sent a C-130 to fly us from Eglin to Fort Bragg. Son David, now eight, even got to go into the cockpit and “fly” the airplane.

We formed up on a giant parade field with the Army and Air Force recipients in two sections. Our families were seated in reviewing stands to the west of the field. The VIPs arrived in a military van. Several high-ranking Army and Air Force officers and a gentleman in a dark blue suit got out of the van and walked toward the recipients. To my Ieft someone said, “Wow,

that’s Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird!”

The awards team consisted of Secretary Laird, General Manor, and several colonels. Another officer was at the mike and read the citation prior to the award. A few able men were carrying trays of medals. The award team came down the ranks and awarded each member, the higher awards first. Six Army members received a Distinguished Service Cross; only the Medal of Honor is higher. The other fifty Army officers and NCOs received Silver Stars, two notches below the Medal of Honor.

Next, the team came to the USAF Son Tay assault crew members. Lieutenant Colonels Britton and Allison, Major Donohue, Major Kalen, and Technical Sergeant Wright received the Air Force Cross. Receiving Silver Stars were the A-1 Peach pilots, the remaining Banana pilot, the remaining Apple crews, and several of the Cherry crew members. It was rare to stand among over ninety other men holding the Silver Star and another eleven holding an award just below the Medal of Honor. I don’t remember ever feeling as humbled as I did that day. Who were they? Why did they risk their lives for someone they didn’t know? Often in life there are no easy answers to tough questions. We tried, but still missing were our POWs. Would we go back to another camp? We were ready. Would we see these Army Special Forces soldiers from Fort Bragg again? Following lunch we gathered all the Eglin folks and headed back to Florida. It had been quite a day.

After returning to Eglin things got back to normal. The ARRTC unit was to move from Florida to Utah. Then, just before moving the family to Utah, I got a phone call from Wright-Patterson AFB.

The major on the other end of the phone asked, “Captain Waldron, where do you want to attend graduate school?” No one in personnel had informed me that I was an alternate to go to graduate school. My name came up, hence the phone call. A few hours later, my family and I were changing plans and heading to Columbia, Missouri, to attend civil engineering graduate school.

I was a Tiger again! All the younger students made fun of my slide rule. Computer? What are they, the “old dinosaur” asked? While in school I was presented a Congressional Award given to the Son Tay Raiders by the United

States Congress. After eighteen months and two football seasons I completed my master's degree, and went to MacDill AFB in Florida to be a civil engineer and fly the old T-33. We settled in, living on base at Mac Dill, home to many F-4 fighters. I was now "Major Waldron," thanks to being promoted prior to checking into my new base.

The peace talks in France started to produce results. Beginning in February 1973, some of our prisoners of war were being sent home. Before long all of them came home. On April 4, 1973, the last C-141 lifted off from Hanoi and flew to Hickam AFB in Hawaii. Over five hundred POWs were going to be reunited with their families, some after seven years or more in captivity. Thank God they were free. It will take them a while to adjust to showers, real food, kids, and, yes, a wife. All those daily things we take for granted had been nonexistent in their lives during the past few years, not to mention poor if any medical care.

Not long after someone knocked on the door of my small office in the Civil Engineering Squadron. It was Mrs. Johnson, my new boss's secretary.

"Major Waldron, do you know a Mr. Ross Perot?" she asked.

"No, ma'am, not personally," I replied. "Why?"

"Well, his secretary is on Colonel Fowler's phone, and she wishes to speak with you."

Ross Perot? I had heard several stories of how he had helped the families of those men listed as missing-in-action and those held as POWs. He was a real patriot. And he had a few bucks lying around.

"Major Tom Waldron, ma'am," I said into the phone.

"Major, Mr. Perot is inviting you and your wife to San Francisco on April 26 and 27 for a welcome home parade for our returning American prisoners of war. He would like for the Son Tay Raiders to attend and also be in the parade. Hotel reservations have been made at the Fairmont Hotel in the Knob Hill section of San Francisco. I am sending you a package that has all necessary information. Are there any questions?"

“No ma’am. Thank you very much” was my shocked reply.

That evening as I went through the mail, I saw a personal letter from Mr. Perot inviting us to San Francisco for the parade. Of all places, home of the hippies and Vietnam War protestors. I guess those who planned this figured none of that crowd would dare mess with Special Forces soldiers. I sure as hell wouldn’t. It was a long flight on a TWA Boeing 707.

Finally, I met some of the POWs. In the elevator a couple of the guys started talking about how they kept their minds going while being held captive. One said he built a house, including drawing plans all in his mind. Another said he memorized restaurants from the various towns the other POWs were from. Give him a category and city, and he could tell you the location and type of food—Italian, Mexican, whatever.

At times it was emotional. POWs would come up and give me a big hug and thank me for trying. I think that made everything OK. Many of the guys said that after our raid they were moved into Hanoi and allowed to have roommates, which helped them keep going. It had boosted their morale, knowing that their country still cared about them and tried to get them home.

Mr. Perot certainly did a lot for the families during this time. All of what went on was good, private, and not to be published. Our country is indeed fortunate to have a patriot like him.

I met a few of the Son Tay prisoners. One was Air Force Captain Dave Ford; another was Lieutenant Colonel Wes Schierman. They both had suffered many physical problems, and there were no doctor or clinics to help them heal injuries. I asked Captain Ford, “Where in the hell were you guys that early morning on November 2, 1970?”

He said, “A few months before the attack, the North Vietnamese guards told us that our well water supply was dry, and they moved us to another camp at night. Not sure how far away the new camp was from Son Tay, but the night of the raid, we heard the attack. We knew something big was going on. I think the prison guards were a bit rattled after that attack. Heck you guys might come back!”

After a large parade winding through San Francisco, the POWs, their families, and the Raiders came back to the hotel. That night we had a unique dinner and entertainment program. While I was standing there talking with some of the POWs nursing a gin and tonic, in walked one of the invited guests, none other than John Wayne, the Duke.

I remember looking up and then shaking his hand. He said he was proud of all the Raiders and POWs. John Wayne had always been Mr. Patriot in my world. Wow! Then, Mr. San Francisco himself, Clint Eastwood, along with his bride, came in. Our wives were now paying attention to the doorway. Red Skelton and the Andrews Sisters closed out the guest stars. Mr. Perot obviously knows the right people.

That was the first time both groups came together as one. Now, there have been several joint reunions held by the Vietnam Prisoner of War Association (NAMPOWs) and the Son Tay Raiders Association (STRA). The last joint reunion was in 2008, when Senator John McCain, a NAMPOW, was very busy running for resident and couldn't make the Dallas reunion. Mr. and Mr. Ross Perot hosted a great BBQ dinner outside on their ranch just west of Dallas. At that reunion I noticed that even more of the POWs and Raiders were no longer with us. Twelve of our twenty-eight helicopter crewmen had passed on by the fall of 2008. Several more were ill and couldn't travel.

When the war in Vietnam was over, many combat missions became declassified, including the Raid on Son Tay. In 1976, Benjamin F. Schemmer released a book called *The Raid* and suddenly the world knew what had happened to Apple 1 during the ten minutes that I had lost sight of them. They had landed at the "secondary school" with the Greenleaf group. A small war erupted and many enemy soldiers were killed. I was amazed that, for years, I didn't know what had happened; yet I worked next to some of these crewmen. They did their job in not talking.

A few conjectures came forward. One was that the strong winds blew Apple 1 further south off course and they didn't recognize they were at the wrong place. With the battle going on, they had to finish the job and then get back to the Son Tay POW camp. I still scratch my head about that. Apple 3, our helicopter had dropped down and moved forward so that Banana, and

Apple 1 and 2 could follow us in trail formation. There were still no external lights turned on and radio silence was still in effect.

I don’t know how Banana and Apple 2 found the POW camp flying behind us, and Apple 1 didn’t. He should have been in front of Apple 2. Both pilots from Apple 1 are now deceased and so is most of their crew. CoIonel Simons has also passed.

Our Son Tay group’s fortieth reunion of the raid was held in the Eglin AFB area in November 2010. On the agenda was a special memorial service led by Chaplain Gardner at a memorial park on Hurlburt Field, which is still home to USAF Special Operations.

The Son Tay Association President, Dan Turner, Redwine element, and several of the other Raiders, read the names of each of our fallen warriors, all sixty-six of them. This fortieth reunion was special since it was held at Eglin AFB, where much of our training before the raid had occurred.

I am often at odds on how to define a hero. The heroes I was honored to fly with were everyday people from small towns, farm, and big cities. The common thread I saw was when the situation demanded one to rise above what might be considered by an outsider to be dangerous. Yet, that person rose to do the job.

Note: This narrative was extracted from the book *I Flew With Heroes*, written by Tom Waldron.

BIG GUNS!
RUSS EVERTS

JANUARY 17, 1971, WOLF 06
8TH TFW, UBON RTAFB, SECOND TOUR

On January 17, 1971, Hank Baker and I (Wolf 06) were flying the last Wolf go. We overheard an impending SAR effort for an F-4 that had been hit over Laos, east of Tchepone, about ten miles or so (I think). As we were visual recceing (VR), a Nail came up and told us to look out for some BIG guns east of Tchepone. He had been working the F-4 flight on another target in the area, and one of them had been hit bad, the same F-4 that had declared Mayday. This was most likely an F-4 from the 421 TFS stationed at DaNang with the 366th TFW. The crew ejected feet wet east of DaNang, but only the GIB survived. The Nail gave us the general location and coordinates of the guns and then pointed them out to us, from altitude.

We returned to the tanker for our last refueling and plotted a return to the area to check out the guns. I wagged a short low level to the area from east of the guns' location. Toward the end of the last period, we made a very high speed, very low altitude pass over the guns. It was duskish, with the sun setting in the west as we made the pass. We found them! Holy shit; the entire area lit up with every caliber gun we had ever seen or heard of. Most of the tracers were almost level with the terrain and, fortunately, just a bit above us. Not only did we confirm four-into-four positions of 37mm sites but we also saw at least two large guns, either of the 85 or 100mm variety and confirmed

multiple ZPU/23mm sites by the rounds coming at us. The big guns were not shooting but also appeared to have some supporting vans with them, probably height finders or radar for control. We left the area a little lower and faster than we entered, got our hearts restarted, and RTB'd.

After landing we convinced Papa Wolf to let us have the first go the next day, scramble both Paveway alert flights, and go get those guns before they got anyone else. Papa was a bit hesitant at first; I had only been "Woofing" for about three weeks. However, he decided we had the best knowledge of the target area and gave the OK. Hank and I got with the Paveway (PW) flight leads that night and gave them a prebrief of the target area we intended to scramble them on. We also let them know that we were all going to get shot at a lot and to be alert and ready. A bit of an understatement, as it turned out!

We got up early, briefed, rebriefed the PW alert flights and took off just before dawn. We flew over the area and could easily confirm the location of the four 37mm sites and other larger guns. We had already decided to put the two Fat Al's, three-thousand-pound laser-guided bombs, on the 37mm sites to keep them quiet while we used the six two thousand pounders on the large guns/support equipment. We contacted Hillsboro and requested the scramble of both PW flights, which they did. We had called them and pre-coordinated this in the briefing. We hit the tanker and got back in the target area about the time the PW flights were arriving. They took a quick brief to validate what we had already briefed and we talked their eyes onto the 37mm sites as they orbited. One flight member was Captain Wilson "Butch" Reed and another was Captain Matt Boyle. Matt was to be the first down the chute with a Fat Al on the 37mm sites. I rolled in to put a WP marking rocket on the 37mm sites and all sixteen of them, plus a number of other calibers we had seen, but not located, opened up. I cleared the first fighter in. Matt rolled in but had to pull off before pickle because he was getting hosed too accurately and too much. As he set up again for a second pass, I tell them that I will make a marking pass across the circle just before he rolls in to help draw fire away. This works, and he is able to get the Fat Al off. There was a big boom and lots of vapor and smoke. I cleared the second flight's #2 in with the second Fat Al and did the same across the circle-marking pass to help draw fire. It works again. Another big boom and not as much AAA as I rolled in again to

mark the location of one of the big guns.

We continued this effort for thirty to forty minutes and managed to get all bombs off before we were all bingo. This was a very successful mission. We certainly damaged or destroyed two or three very large caliber guns and support equipment, definitely damaged/destroyed a number of the sixteen 37mm sites, probably some ZPU/23mm sites, and undoubtedly killed, wounded or deafened an untold number of ground personnel manning the guns. I can't remember how many rounds we took doing this, but the 37mm sites were nonstop shooting until after the second Fat Al, and they still managed to keep about half the lead coming for the subsequent passes. I do recall it being one of the hairiest Wolf missions I had flown. I believe the PW guys felt the same. They were impressed with our "Woofing" enough to submit us for DFCs that day, which we subsequently received, as did they!

It was certainly helpful that I was assigned to the 433rd TFS and had flown many PW missions before. Knowing their tactics and timing made it easier for me to figure out when best to roll in to take fire away from their bomb passes. Best of all, we got those SOBs that shot up the USAF F-4 the day before. As I recall, we never took any more fire from that area for the remainder of my tour. I am sure the Nails would have asked us back if they had/saw any.

Matt Boyle wrote the following addendum after he read the above and is intended as his perspective of the "day":

There was a guarded tension in the Intel briefing room. This morning you gents have been tasked to Tchepone to knock out a number of big guns—the same ones that shot down a bird and crew late the day before.

The aircraft were loaded with the standard Paveway configuration—one three-thousand-pound Fat Albert and one two thousand pounder. The weather was workable, and the tanker track was ready for our top off after takeoff from Ubon RTAFB. Once airborne, we contacted Hillsboro, the ABCCC controlling our strike into the Tchepone area of operation. We were assigned a discrete frequency and told to contact our Wolf FAC to work the target. I knew my good friend Russ Everts had the early-morning Wolf go, so I was anxious to get in the target area and start work with our two F-4D aircraft.

Russ greeted our flight with “I’ve got several gun emplacements in sight, and I’ll throw a smoke down as soon as you set up your orbit.”

Flying the Paveway mission was fun but orbiting a target area for five or ten minutes while our talented GIBs zeroed in their laser designators was not my favorite occupation. We could see the gun emplacements and they could see and hear us, quickly throwing the element of surprise out the door. Once we were established in the orbit with all switches hot, Russ threw a smoke in the area he wanted us to work. My GIB and I rolled in for our pass with my wingman designating the target with his laser gun. Down the chute we came, quickly followed by several radio calls from my number two advising me of what I already knew—“You’re taking heavy fire lead.” These gunners definitely had a bead on my aircraft, and discretion being the better part of valor, I decided to abort the run with some quick jinking to set back up the orbit.

I was pissed. Russ (bless his heart) threw a diversionary smoke down, drawing a good deal of fire his way and enabling us to make a second successful pass with a Fat Albert deposited on the bad guys’ heads.

Thanks to Russ’s outstanding work, we successfully dropped all our weapons on the guns who had knocked down our brothers the day before. It was a good feeling going home—a mixture of satisfaction and justified vengeance. This is what a combat flying team is all about. Well done, Wolf FAC!

DOUBLE PIPPERS
RUSS EVERTS

WOLF FAC (06)
UBON RTAFB 1971, SECOND TOUR

When Fast FACing in the F-4, it was not uncommon to hear an “Oh, shit” comment from the front seater while going down the chute on a marking pass. My GIBs almost always knew that meant I had a “double pipper.” The pipper, the aiming reference for dropping/shooting weapons, was a small filled-in circle, orange/red in color, close to identical in color and size to a tracer round from a 23/37/57mm round. It always seemed better if the tracer was above the pipper than below it, as an “above double pipper” gave a better chance to pull out without getting hit. Most tracer rounds were one of seven in a string of rounds shot. A “double pipper” meant a lot of lead was headed your direction, way too close for comfort!

I recall working a flight on some very active and accurate 37mm guns in the Dog’s Head area, Ban Karai Pass. On the second trip down the chute to mark for the strike flight, I somewhat excitedly said “Oh, shit,” followed by “now what” from my GIB. I said we not only had a double pipper, but this guy was also good, and pulling out might be a bit sporty. Not only could I see the tracers just above the pipper but we could also both see them just clearing the canopy as they missed slightly high. After I picked off the WP marking rocket, I continued down the chute until I just had enough room to pull out, did a quick roll to the left, and pulled like hell. The good news was we

missed the ground and none of the 37mm hit us. Fortunately, our strike flight was equipped with Paveway I laser-guided bombs (LGB), and they put the gun site out of commission with a Fat Al, a three-thousand-pound LGB, on their first pass.

C-130 TAILPIPE FIRE
TERRY SULLIVAN

We'd spent the last two and a half weeks or so flying C-130B models out of DaNang in support of Lam Son 719 hauling everything from bombs, bullets, Band-Aids, and beans plus a lot of JP-4 into Khe Sanh. After our last trip of the day into Khe Sanh, we picked up some gas and cargo, and instead of another night at DaNang we headed south for Cam Ranh Bay.

At Cam Ranh, we checked the schedule and saw we were going to fly the rotator back to Clark AB in the Philippines. We were scheduled to depart around 1900 hours the next evening with a stop en route at, of all places, DaNang! We caught the next available bus to Herky Hill and went to the club where they were serving the infamous hamburger no bun and something that approximated French fries. At least the beer was cold and the expiration date on the tonic was sometime next week.

The next night we did our bag drag, preflighted, and took off for Clark with the proverbial en route stop at DaNang. It was a perfect night—clear, no weather en route, and favorable winds for our trip across the "pond." We took off to the north out of Cam Ranh, contacted Portcall, did a slight left turn, and headed up the coast feet wet. Port call handed us off to Panama and as we neared Chu Lai, we terminated with the GCI controller and contacted DaNang tower. We were told that DaNang was landing to the north and asked us to report a base leg with gear. Don't know if you are familiar with the geography south of DaNang but most of it was a river delta that flowed

around and through town and emptied into the bay that was just north of the airfield. At night it was bad-guy country.

Approaching the coast, we turned off all the exterior lights, reduced the cockpit lighting, and started a long right base turn. Just before we cross the beach inbound, the engineer said, “We’re losing oil on number three!” Within seconds, the loadmaster confirms that we have an issue with number three and he reports that number three is trailing fire! In the cockpit we don’t have any fire indications, but there is an obvious glow coming from the right side of our trusty B Model Herk!

Almost immediately the dark jungle/river delta below us opened up and we found ourselves in the middle of a hailstorm of tracer fire! And, at one point, I remember seeing something the size of a basketball, sort of green in color, go spiraling by thinking that it looked like it was moving awfully slow! We were a prime target. A low, slow, and configured C-130 trailing a fireball out the number three engine!

We continued the approach and declared an emergency with DaNang tower. On short final the fire went out and we landed without further incident. Once we got parked, we started an inspection of the airplane. It turned out that the rear seal in number three had given up the ghost and oil was being dumped into the hot tailpipe section of the engine—hence the fire—a “tailpipe” fire! And, even though we’d flown through a pretty dramatic fireworks show, we didn’t have a single mark, scratch, hole, or dent!

All we could conclude was that enemy gunners didn’t know how to lead a tailpipe fire!

C-130 ASSAULT TAKEOFF
TERRY SULLIVAN

I wish I could remember the name of the field—I think it might have been Lai Khe. We were hauling stuff from the southern parts of South Vietnam up to the northern end in preparation for Lam Son 719 and we were fragged into an airfield that was basically a wide spot in a road that ran through a rubber plantation. The runway was about three thousand feet long, and we landed after dark with the only runway illumination being oil-soaked rags burning in tin cans marking the edges of the runway. We taxied clear, onto a small ramp, and did an engines running on load of our cargo—a truck with a water tank on the back, an ammo carrier with trailer, and a Mk 151 Jeep—all were empty, and we had a certified scale weight of twenty-four thousand (plus/minus) pounds, which put us right at the limit for an assault takeoff.

Once loaded, doors closed, we taxied out, lined up the ole Herk on the runway, shut off the bleeds and all the other stuff we did for assault takeoffs, and started the takeoff roll. It was darker than the inside of an unlit closet with no horizon visible, only those pots along the runway edge at irregular intervals. Everything feels OK, but all of a sudden, out of the dark at the departure end of the runway, appeared the one-hundred-foot touchdown line across the runway. All C-130 “assault certified” runways had a line across the end designating a touchdown point. We were rapidly approaching the line, and we were still below takeoff airspeed and had passed reject airspeed. Something was screwed up, and so the aircraft commander held the nose

down on the runway and then at the last second pulled our trash hauler airborne into, basically, ground effect. He called for gear up and then said, “Milk the flaps.” “Milk the flaps” was not a defined procedure, so I sat there with my hand on the flap lever and my eyes on the airspeed indicator. As we gained a little airspeed, I retracted the flaps a bit.

There we sat, in the dark, in ground effect, waiting for something to hit the front of the airplane! We knew there were trees all around, but in the total darkness, we couldn’t see anything but the reflection of instrument lighting on the windows. We slowly gained airspeed, and I continued to milk the flaps, and slowly we established a positive rate of climb. Eventually we were able to accelerate, remove the seat cushions from our somewhat tightened sphincters, and continued north. We elected to land at DaNang with its ten-thousand-foot runway and found that we had been overloaded by just over nine thousand pounds. That may not sound like too much to some, but when you’re doing assault procedures off a dirt strip, there isn’t a lot of margin for error.

Gotta tell you—that climb out was the quietest ever!

HIT MY BOMBS
JOHN STILES

The following describes how I met Major Dan Cherry and then realized how big his *cajones* really were. On October 14, 1971, Dan Cherry became my personal war hero.

By October 1971, I had been in country flying out of Udorn Royal Thai AFB in the Vietnam War for four months. Early in October, Colonel "Jerry" O'Malley, the Wing Director for Operations (DO), called three of us 14th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron (TRS) weapons system operators (WSOs) to the wing headquarters for a special mission planning session. One of the WSOs was Monty Cooper, my roommate. I don't recall who the third WSO was but believe it was a captain. Monty and I were brand new first lieutenants and all three of us were in the Fast Forward Air Control (FAC) recce program. Monty and I were Bullwhip WSOs flying missions in northern Laos, the Barrel Roll. The captain was an Atlanta WSO who flew in southern Laos, Steel Tiger. Monty and I had recently finished flying in the night program and moved into the Fast FAC program early. This was a distinct honor as we'd only been in country four months and most WSOs selected for this mission had to have six months on station and already be captains. I'd like to think it was because we were shit hot.

When we got to the DO's office, we were told that we would each be spending several days planning a special mission and not able to fly Fast FAC missions for the next week. Since Bullwhip missions were what we

lived for, Monty and I were initially not very excited. Then Colonel O'Malley explained we would be flying the first of what would be later known as the "Protective Reaction" (PR) missions back into North Vietnam.[1]

Each WSO was assigned one of three of the narrow mountain major passes that led out of the southern border of North Vietnam into Laos. I was assigned the most northern, Mu Gia Pass, Monty got the middle one, Ban Karai. The captain drew Ban Raving pass closest to the DMZ. All these passes were in Steel Tiger.

For the next week, the three of us worked out of the DO's office, sequestered from all other influences. We received intelligence briefs each day with the most recent reports, which we incorporated into our planning. Each afternoon, all our planning materials were cleaned up and secured in the DO's personal office safe. No one on base but the DO and 432nd Wing Commander, Colonel Charles Gabriel, knew the missions even existed. Colonel O'Malley had told us that we were not to talk to anyone about what we were doing, not even our Squadron Commander or his DO. The pilots had not yet been selected for our mission, so our only help with mission planning was Colonel O'Malley. As we finished our planning, weather set in over the target area with the start of the Northeast monsoon season, so we had several weather day delays. With each day's wait, we became more anxious, losing sleep by imagining the worst mission outcomes.

Only after several days of target study and planning for the final attack run were our pilots selected and brought into the mission preparation. I believe my pilot was Captain Woody Cox, a very experienced Bullwhip FAC. I briefed him on our mission, and he made a few minor suggestions but was pleased with my flight profile. I had us coming out of the west at 550 knots and five-hundred-feet, dropping down to two-hundred-feet ten miles prior to the target run. Woody suggested that at those speeds we would outrun our escorts and suggested we maintain 480 so they could keep up. Good call.

The run-in to the target area was from the west side of Mu Gia Pass heading east. A series of sharp-toothed limestone karst formations created mountains rising up to four thousand feet.

My profile had us popping up in a right-hand climbing turn to sixty-five-hundred-feet and flying down the valley to the south. Woody, and later the escort crew, would question my altitude selection, as this would put us in the heart of the envelope of any AAA or SAM activity. This wasn't my choice either, but we were driven by our new super secret camera's optimum capabilities. This meant we would be going from a very fast low altitude stealthy ingress to a climbing afterburner, ninety-degree right-hand turn, highlighting ourselves visually and audibly, as we flew into the jaws of death. Every Gomer on the ground would have a fantastic and accurate view of our ingress. The mission profile also called for us to fly straight and level down the length of the valley to the south for about a minute and a half. Our egress was simply to exit back west by descending to treetop level, accelerating out over the same karst formations where we had entered.

By the night of the thirteenth, weather had improved sufficiently to launch the mission the next day. We reported early to Wing HQ for an intelligence and weather update. The mission was a "go" even if the weather wasn't ideal. We would have a six-thousand-feet ceiling over the target, which would push the capabilities of the cameras, even if we slowed down to 420. Hurried re-planning gave us a revised mission plan for the lower, slower, and more dangerous profile.

When we got to the 14th TRS, the briefing room was already packed with all three recce and six escort crews as well as several wing pukes and Colonel O'Malley. Recce crews almost always fly single ship so our squadron didn't have big briefing rooms like the fighter squadrons, and our mass briefing room was similarly small. It was hot and crowded and beginning to reek. Right after the mass brief, one of the fighter flight leads suggested we go to their squadron to finish up the individual mission profile briefing. This is the first time I noticed Major Cherry as a no-nonsense, take-control kind of guy.

As the 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron (TFS), Dan's squadron, was literally right next door to ours, we were back to briefing the mission in a couple of minutes. This was when Major Cherry questioned my pop-up planning maneuver into the target area. I was momentarily intimidated as nervous sweat flushed to my face and neck. Then I remembered that it was

the camera capabilities that drove our plan, and if we were to get the photos needed, then our two choices were to pop to eight-thousand-feet and fly fast or stay lower and slow down. Woody saved my bacon by suggesting we see what the weather was in the target area and fly the mission accordingly. I remember leaving the fighter escort crew brief feeling ashamed—like I hadn't prepared for all the contingencies. For me this was a life-long lesson learned.

Pre-check through takeoff was normal as was the flight to the target area. We didn't hit a tanker because we wanted to maximize the element of surprise. Consequently, as we flew to the target area in North Vietnam, we stepped our altitude down en route in order to stay under NVA radar detection. As we approached the target area we descended from five hundred to two hundred-feet and accelerated to 480. Vapor trails were coming off the wing tips. Weather definitely was a factor with a twenty-five-hundred-feet overcast above the lush green mountains. Everything became ominous and gloomy. It was as if we'd just lost power in the late afternoon. The overcast gave us a forty-five-hundred-feet ceiling over the target, much less than ideal, and meant we would have to make the target run at the slower and more dangerous 420 knots. The only plus was that in our pop, we wouldn't have to use afterburner and thus alert the enemy of our presence quite as early. Unfortunately, the fighters would.

The target area was completely overcast, dark and dreary. As we rolled out and leveled off on target heading, south, I turned on the cameras and immediately checked out the left aft side of the aircraft to ensure the escorts were in their proper defensive position. They were. I was also checking that no unwanted enemy fighters were rolling in on us. As I turned back to the front, the sky lit up with what looked like a Fourth of July fireworks celebration on the Mall in Washington, DC. Elongated whips of multicolored AAA lashed and snapped through the sky all around us. There were red, green, white, and yellow lariats of lead lacing the sky. Each lash looked like it would snap us—missing by mere feet. The darkening overcast made this show more dramatic. It was equally beautiful and terrifying. I looked down at my camera-film countdown indicators only to find that none of them were decreasing. I immediately punched them all off and on again, looked up to see the whips getting closer, and back down at the counters. We had to be

getting all this on film. Still no response from the counters. Just then Woody heeled over hard right and descended, seeking the safety of the karst. Simultaneously, with total authority, Dan called to us, “Recce, break hard right” telling us to escape the enemy fire. We hadn’t even completed a quarter of our photo run.

As we dove for the protection of the karst, I checked six out the right side to see Dan rolling in on the multiple targets shooting at us. Very calmly he told his wingman to “hit my bombs” just as all hell broke loose. He had rolled in on the mother lode of ammunition and fuel-storage tanks. The whips flailing the air all around his aircraft looked like the tentacles of the Kraken in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie. Just then the sky lit up in huge explosions and a mushrooming POL firestorm. It looked like a mini-hydrogen-bomb explosion. His wingman continued the destruction as Dan and his wingman rolled in for a second pass. By now we were screaming through the air, weaving our way through the mountainous karst barely above the treetops. Checking my aft facing mirrors, I could see massive explosions continuously erupting in the valley behind us.

As Dan and his wingman finished their second pass, Dan calmly called for their rejoin and checked on our egress. By now we were cranking at over 550 knots and had to pull it back to idle power and start a weave so the fighters could catch up. We rejoined well away from the target area, checked each other over for battle damage, signed out with the controlling agency, and flew back to Udorn. It was amazing that with all the lead in the air over the target, none of us even received a scratch. Amazing!

Back on the ground, my first stop was the Photo Interpretation Facility (PIF) to review my film. I didn’t think we’d have any, as the counters never indicated a countdown. I never did find out. I wasn’t allowed to see the film even if there was any. My security clearance didn’t allow it.

It didn’t matter anyway. Mu Gia pass was where the NVA were storing up their supplies for their push south. We had proven that with our reception and Dan’s results. The other two missions received little to no reaction.

In the ensuing years, I lost track of Dan. It wasn’t until we were reunited through his *My Enemy, My Friend* and our *Double Full Circle*

stories and presentations, that I was able to remind him of that day's events. He did recall the mission; it was certainly memorable. We each received a Distinguished Flying Cross for our participation in this historic mission. This was just another notch in his belt of heroic missions of brave leadership. To this day he reflects humbly on his actions. Typical Dan.

NOTES

1. These PR missions were designed for reconnaissance missions to fly into the North with fighter escort. The US forces had been restricted from flying bombing missions into North Vietnam since the 1968 bombing halt directed by President Johnson after the 1968 Geneva peace accords. 7th Air Force Commander, General John D. Lavelle, decided to take advantage of one of the Rules of Engagement (ROE) that stipulated that only when fired upon could our aircraft strike back. However, armed fighters who were restricted from flying attack missions into North Vietnam could escort reconnaissance aircraft. Recce aircraft did not have any armament but were allowed under the ROE to fly photo-intelligence-gathering missions into the north. On these flights, two fighters escorted the RF-4s when they flew into North Vietnam as protection.

2. We would be carrying the Marine KY-32 (?) color vertical scan camera. We were told it could take a color picture from an altitude of ten-thousand-feet and you could count the spokes on a bicycle. It was a tactical version of cameras flown by the SR-71.

GET'N CHASED OUT OF CHINA: THE NEW ROAD

JOHN STILES

During the Vietnam War, recce birds were unarmed. They don't carry any, nada, zero, zip weapons aboard. Well, maybe that's not completely true as the crewmembers carried a handgun (thirty-eight 38 special with six rounds or a 9mm with seven to nine rounds) in an underarm holster (a son-of-a-bitch with all the survival gear on top of it) and of course an eight-inch K-Bar survival knife strapped to the left leg of our G-suit. Nevertheless, we didn't carry any offensive aircraft armament that we could use in an air-to-air engagement. Consequently, when we were engaged by an enemy aircraft, we would (quoting Monty Python) "run away, run away."

This happened twice during my yearlong tour. The first happened in the fall of 1971. It was toward the end of the monsoon season in the Plain of Jars (PDJ) in northern Laos, code-named the Barrel Roll, and the weather was socked in. We launched on a Bullwhip mission as a weather check for the wing to see if we could get any fighters off the ground to help out the Royal Lao and Hmong tribesmen fighting the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Army in northern Laos. The weather was a solid undercast as far as we could see. The cloud tops were over four thousand feet as none of the normal highest mountain peaks were visible. We passed the word that the area was unworkable through "Cricket" Airborne Command and Control Center (ABCCC) and proceeded on to our secondary mission to check out the progress on the "new road," a road out of China connecting China with Laos

and Burma. I had never seen this construction project before and expected it to resemble the roads in the PDJ or in Steel Tiger (the code name for the southern half of Laos) that made up the Ho Chi Minh trail. The Ho Chi Minh trail was a spider web of road networks through Laos that the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Pathet Lao used to transport troops, weapons, and supplies from North Viet Nam into South Viet Nam in abject violation of the Geneva Conventions. This road network was a mishmash of jungle trails circumventing the limestone karst formations in Laos. They were often quagmires caused by the incessant rains and bombing, many of them dropped from B-52s. Anyway, this is what I expected the new road to look like.

This was not what we found. The weather began to break up below us as we approached the Inertial Navigation System coordinates of where the "new road" was supposed to start. Other forms of navigation, TACAN and visual recce were unusable. The plan was to fly parallel to and south of the road, staying inside Laos, using our side looking cameras and radar mapping camera to photograph the new road. As the weather broke, we realized the new road was directly below us. I switched on the cameras as we flew along the road, which was partially covered by a low hanging broken overcast. The road was on the southeast side of the curving ridgeline of the mountainous terrain and was perfectly illuminated by the early-morning sun. The road was a dirt and gravel two-lane highway with well constructed but empty gun emplacements every five hundred meters. There were no bomb craters to be seen at any point along the road.

We had approached the area at about ten-thousand-feet MSL or six-thousand-feet AGL to give us reaction time if any AAA was shot or SAMs were launched at us. There was no doubt we were inside of China because the road was directly under us. At our altitude, we knew we could be picked up by Chinese air-defense radars but thought we would have time for a quick photo run before our presence caused too much interest. We descended to forty-five-hundred-feet AGL and accelerated as we started our photo run and noticed we were getting intermittent search radar strobes on our Radar Homing and Warning scope with an occasional corresponding bleep in our headsets. By now we were already heading southeast away from the border but decided to continue our photo run.

We were cruising at 480 knots (Mach .85) and heading about 150 when

the RHAW all of a sudden began to strobe violently with the corresponding rattlesnake buzzing in the headset of a Red Bandit, a MiG-17 radar lock on. When the RHAW scope first lit up, indicating that the threat was at our five o'clock, the strobe was barely to the first ring, and the rattle was almost indiscernible. However, we weren't stupid. We'd gotten the pictures, and it was time to *bilao* (Thai for "skedaddle") out of there. So my AC rolled on the right wing so I could check our six and hopefully acquire the target while he selected military power. No go; I saw nothing. Just then the strobe jumped to the middle ring, and the rattling went up along with my adrenaline. Up until this time, we had been fairly nonchalant about the whole encounter as we knew the bandit's top speed was about Mach .9, our current speed, and they only had 23mm and 37mm cannons to shoot at us. The cannon's max range was just inside of a mile, five thousand feet. As long as we kept them out of range, indicated the second ring of the RHAW, we would be fine, assuming the RHAW was working properly.

Without warning, the strobe jumped outside the third ring. The snake was about to bite. We had gone from a cautious departure to imminent danger. My AC stroked the burners and unloaded to zero-*g* for max acceleration. We hit the top of the cloud deck accelerating past Mach 1.3 heading for home while still doing small check turns. I never did get a visual on the bandits. As we accelerated, the strobe immediately began to disappear until what seemed an eternity, maybe twenty seconds, it was gone. It was then we realized we still had our external tanks aboard. We could have jettisoned the tanks for increased acceleration, but glad we didn't because we would probably have eaten them. At that speed they would probably bounce into the wings and belly of our aircraft, causing massive damage, as our speed was already over two hundred knots above external-tank jettison speed. Slowing down to jettison the tanks would not have been wise.

That's how MiGs chased us out of China.

MOTORCYCLE STORIES
JOHN STILES

The Udorn Royal Thai Air Base security forces were not known to be tolerant of challenges to their authority. Several times during the 1960s, communist forces trying to raise havoc with the flying operations by sabotaging aircraft or airfield operations had penetrated the base perimeter. These security forces were some of the best and toughest combat veterans in the Royal Thai Air Force. Nobody messed with them. This is all a prelude to what happened to my roommate and me one late afternoon in December 1971 while riding double on my beat-up, dilapidated Yamaha 75cc motorcycle.

Normally, lieutenants rode the Klong bus from the cantonment south side of the base where our hootch was located. The bus went around the west end of the runway to the north side flight operations facilities. The bus left from the O'Club every half hour and took thirty minutes minimum to make it to our squadron, the 14th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron. Ours was the last stop before the return trip. A total round trip lasted at least an hour. Anybody and everybody rode the bus including the locals who worked on the base causing numerous stops. We called it the Klong bus because it seemed to follow alongside all the smelly, open ditches that ran throughout the base. The main purpose of these ten feet wide and five feet deep ditches was to drain off the torrential downpours that deluged the base every day at 1:00 p.m., lasting twenty to thirty minutes. The klongs would nearly fill up in that time but drain out just as quickly. The secondary purpose was as an open sewer system, hence the smell.

I got tired of having to depend on the Klong bus, so I purchased an old, squadron abused motorcycle. It had long been an established military tradition for the outgoing squadron mates to pass along their well-used transportation to the new guys at a nominal fee. These vehicles never ran very well but weren't expected to. For the price, who could complain?

Monty Cooper, my roommate and fellow QRF WSO (Quick Reaction Force weapons system officer—or Fast Forward Air Control Navigator) often shared a ride to the squadron on the back of my bike, as we had similar work schedules. We much preferred the bike to the Klong bus as it allowed us to depart when we wanted to, and make it from one side of the base to the other in fifteen to twenty minutes. This was an improvement but still not enough.

This is where the Royal Thai Air Base security came in.

At the east end of the runway, there was a perimeter road. It was dirt and unimproved with ruts and many mud puddles. Even so, Monty and I calculated we could make it around in seven to ten minutes from our squadron to our hootch, shaving off even more transit time. When I purchased the bike, I had to get the Commander's approval by guaranteeing I'd never break any US or Thai laws. The east end of the runway was where recent incursions had taken place. Consequently, the Thais had beefed up security in elevated bunkers.

Monty and I had scouted the entrance to the perimeter road earlier and found there was no physical barrier. There was only some sort of skull and crossbones sign in Thai that, if caught, we could feign ignorance. So one evening at dusk, we decided to test our plan. We called it our own "Run for the Roses." I cranked up the bike and Monty hopped on behind me. We cautiously departed the squadron parking lot, ensuring no one was watching, and turned east. As we slowly approached the entrance to the perimeter road, we checked the north-side elevated bunker. No one was to be seen. I gunned the engine and headed up the road. Going wasn't that fast as we had to dodge the puddles and ruts. About the time we got halfway around at the end of the runway, we saw a Thai security jeep, with those blue lights on a pole, departing from the north bunker, headed in our direction.

I accelerated, searching for max speed as we jostled along dodging

potholes. I was more interested in making it to the safety of the road's hard surface just beyond the south bunker and the security of the main base than I was for Monty's or my safety. We were making good time but losing ground to the fast-approaching jeep. Monty kept encouraging me to go faster while laughing in my ear. By now I was splashing through the potholes as Monty and I spread out our legs. From behind we must have looked like either a prehistoric pterodactyl attempting takeoff or the flying nun. Monty seemed to think this was a grand adventure. I was more concerned with facing the Commander or worse.

Just as we approached the south bunker's turn off on the right, the jeep caught up with us, running us off the road, knocking us down, and running over my back tire. Fortunately, the rear foot pegs were down, rusted that way over the years. Only this prevented Monty and me from having our legs crushed and ending our flying careers. As the jeep screeched to a stop off the side of the road, we hopped back on the still-running bike and raced the last few yards to safety. The jeep didn't follow. The cop knew he didn't have jurisdiction there.

My heart was pounding as I swore Monty to secrecy. The next day I purchased a new tire. We never "Ran the Roses" on base again.

AND LIFE GOES ON
MIKE RIDNOUER

Arriving at any new assignment is not without anxiety. It's always a new place to live, meeting new people, new supervisors with maybe different expectations, the weather is different, and the new job may be totally different. Arriving at a combat assignment is all those things plus the locals speak a different language, have a different culture, and even use a different currency. The aircraft are loaded with real weapons that make a loud noise and make a big hole in the ground after release. There were usually five real missiles, and maybe a 20mm gun, on the aircraft that can't be pointed at other friendly aircraft. A jamming pod was on every aircraft. We never turned them on stateside because it screwed up FAA's radar, but the pod was used almost every flight in combat. In peacetime pilots bet on bombing and strafing accuracy—a quarter a bomb, a nickel a hole. In combat, bombs were graded by a FAC or by the number of secondary explosions. There was no betting.

The biggest change when on a combat assignment is, on every flight, and sometimes on the ground, someone with a funny hat, bad breath, and an ugly sister is shooting at you. It might be an AK-47 or 23mm, 37, 57, 85, or 105mm AAA. It might be SAMs and, if really unlucky, the occasional heat-seeking air-to-air missile or an aircraft-mounted 23, 30, or 37mm gun. A new skill set that becomes part of the job is making sure neither you nor Uncle Sam's jet are hit. Sometimes you get the bear; sometimes the bear gets you.

Otherwise, most things are just like the last assignment. Pilots are pilots, good ones and not so good ones (but each one is the *World's Best Fighter Pilot*), and bosses were bosses, just the priorities change as they scramble for that next promotion. Airplanes broke, and the experts in fatigues fixed them. The Officers Club served really cheap drinks and mediocre food. Cigarettes were almost free. Generally, where there were guys, there were girls. All it took was money and, for the unlucky, a friendly flight surgeon with a dull hypodermic needle to make it all right again. Yep, life goes on.

Some things were *samo, samo*. There was always some kind of training, new weapons to drop, new tactics to learn, and new avionics to study and use. The only difference was there were no fancy slides for briefings and very few score sheets. The IG and Stan/Eval didn't take a vacation when combat was going on. Some organization was always arriving on base to "help." They tested pilots and WSOs on aircraft system knowledge, but it was hard to take their testing seriously when you were getting shot at.

During a Safety Center inspection, a team came all the way from the States, and the Brigadier General Team Chief and his Colonel Deputy Dog wanted to fly. Both had flown the F-4 at some point in their career. What the captain meant was, with a seeing eye IP in the back seat they could get the jet started and pointed in generally the right direction. So, with IPs in the back, off they went as a two-ship to drop Snake and Nape in the relatively safe PDJ. The wing had been receiving some serious battle damage dropping Snake and Nape because the release parameters put the F-4 slow and "down among 'em." Fortunately, on this flight, the only things hit were the Snake and Nape hitting the ground. Both F-4s arrived back on station with no bullet holes, and since the FAC had prior knowledge of who the two pilots were, he was generous with the battle damage report. Everyone was happy.

The only write-up I remember from that inspection had nothing to do with the hazardous nature of the Snake and Nape mission. The Team Chief thought nothing about the hazards of two unqualified pilots dropping these weapons in combat. However, he thought it was much too hazardous for pilots and ground crew to use the back of pickup trucks for transportation to and from the barracks, quarters, and club side of the base to the flightline. Guess, just like stateside inspections, the Chief had to say something was wrong or dangerous in the combat zone or it wouldn't count as an inspection.

But after they left and headed back to their cozy jobs in the States, the back of pickup trucks remained full of pilots looking for a ride, and surprise, no one fell out. The wing lost an F-4 dropping Snake and Nape shortly after the inspection, and we stopped dropping those munitions. Life goes on.

With few exceptions, day-to-day fighter pilot life in combat went on. Annual proficiency and instrument checks were waived, but annual flight physicals were not. Aircrew testing continued, admin functioned as normal, flight publications and tech orders were maintained up-to-date, and pay continued. Air Force Regulation 35-10, Dress and Personal Appearance of Air Force Personnel, was generally relaxed, depending on the commander. The day of backseat pilots (PSOs) was winding down, and most backseaters, all new back-seat arrivals, were navigators (WSOs). The back-seat job didn't change except WSOs didn't have to maintain landing, refueling, and instrument currency.

The wing policy was a PSO would get two sorties in the front seat sometime during the tour. There was no doubt the PSO could fly the jet, they were fully qualified pilots. That wasn't the issue. The instruments and switches in the front were different than in the back. The back seat job and the front seat job were totally different. The world looked different in the back seat than it did in the front. The most significant difference was the front seater was the aircraft commander, the aircraft boss, regardless of the rank of the backseater, unless the backseater was an IP, then the IP was the boss. A different world.

The first PSO front seat sortie familiarized him with what the world looked like through a windscreen when hurling his pink body at the ground. Much different in the front than in the back. Much of the flight was spent practicing dive-bomb passes, getting the picture of how to establish the right dive angle, accelerate to the correct release airspeed, and arrive at release altitude with the sight on the target. Easier said than done but some learned quickly and others, well, others not so quickly. Back to the traffic pattern for a few touch and goes and then a full stop landing using the drag chute to slow the F-4 without dropping the chute on the runway or blowing a tire.

The second sortie was a full up combat sortie with Mk-82s to Laos against a target controlled by a FAC, usually a Raven. The PSOs had done

this many times from the back but now it was them managing the fuel, talking on the radio, directing the guy in the back when to change radios and nav equipment, and, most important, he was responsible for dropping the bombs where they'd do some good. There was no yo-yo four feet ahead of him on this flight. A different world but the world they had signed up for and worked for since pilot training. Again, most did well and didn't scare the IP (me) too badly. A side benefit for the PSO was with two flights under his belt his primary Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC) changed to from 1115R (F-4 Pilot, Rear Seat) to 1111F (F-4 Pilot Front Seat Entry Level). He now had a job description of Aircraft Commander in training, no longer a PSO. It was very good for PSO morale, but one incident with a PSO in the front seat on a combat mission and that program would have been toast, and probably everyone associated with it. I was a captain then and not expected to have lofty thoughts. From an IP viewpoint, I'll admit I was glad when we ran out of PSOs.

There always seemed to be a paper-pushing headquarter's colonel who was a friend of someone who thought that person should be flying. My squadron commander informed me one day that a colonel from 7/13th Air Force was going to fly with the squadron. Fine by me but made me wonder what my role as a lowly captain was. The "Oh, by the way" was, it seems Colonel Rogers had never flown the F-4. He had flown the P-51 in Korea and recently he had commanded the SR-71/F-12A unit at Edwards AFB. Rogers was a test pilot puke. Not only had he never flown the F-4, by the way, I was assigned the job of checking him out. Not only check him out in the F-4 in one sortie but to fly in his back seat on combat missions. I held my tongue like captains are supposed to, but I was not a happy camper. I thought flying PSOs in the front seat was risky, but this seemed to be over the top. I had never checked out anyone who had never flown the F-4 and the squadron, not being in that business, didn't have the resources to help. Oh, well, all in a day's work.

Not long passed before Colonel Joe Rogers showed up at the squadron looking for his IP. My first impression was skepticism. He was an old fart, forty-seven, eighteen years older than me, just two years younger than my mother. He seemed to be a nice enough guy but didn't fit the fighter pilot mold. Quiet, and quite honestly, a little frumpy looking. His flight suit didn't

fit well at all. And he hadn't flown in a year or so, and that flight was in an AT-37, a tinker toy by comparison, in my opinion. Real men flew F-4s or F-105s. But I had my orders. I introduced him to the Life Support NCO, and he fit him for a G-suit and F-4 harness and reviewed ejection procedures and the contents and operation of the survival kit. We scheduled a couple of hours the next day to cover the highlights of how to fly the F-4 and what I thought the checkout should look like. What the hell, I'll still get free postage. Wrong again. No free postage in Thailand

Colonel Rogers showed up early the next day and started by telling me that he understood that being his seeing-eye IP was not the dream of every fighter pilot but he appreciated my volunteering (?). He promised he'd do exactly what I wanted, when I wanted. Not the briefing a captain usually got from a colonel. I may like this guy. The quick review of the F-4 and the highlights of how to fly it went very well. He obviously had some F-4 manuals and had read them. Hmmm, so far, so good. We'd know the next day when we were scheduled to have the first flight.

The flight brief started right on time. The plan was I'd show him an aircraft preflight, the crew chief would strap him in, and then I'd come up the ladder and go through the number-two-engine start, and then I'd hop into the back seat and go through the rest of the checklist. Taxi and quick check would be just like every other fighter. We'd take off, cross into Laos, find a quiet area to demonstrate some of the F-4's flight characteristics, run through weapons-delivery techniques, come back to Udorn, fly one instrument approach, do some touch and go landings, and call it a day.

It wasn't long, and I began to wonder what I was doing in the back seat. Rogers had listened to every word and did everything by the book, even simulated weapons deliveries. He had a few questions, some comments comparing the F-4 to other aircraft he'd flown. His approaches and landings required minimum coaching from my cockpit. He got an A+ as far as I was concerned. We post-flighted the aircraft together to look for damage, filled out the forms, debriefed maintenance on the aircraft's condition, and headed to the squadron to sign in and debrief. I tried not to show how surprised I was at how well he'd done. After all, he had flown in the Korean War and had flown some pretty hot stuff. Maybe not all test pilots were douche bags. We were scheduled to fly with bombs the next day, so after we talked about the

flight he'd just completed, we discussed what would happen. We agreed to meet for a drink at the Club that evening. After Colonel Rogers left, I reported to the squadron commander how well the flight had gone. Then he told me the rest of the story. Colonel Joe Rogers was one of the few pilots in the world to have shot down a jet fighter, a MiG-15, with a piston engine equipped P-51. He set the world speed record for single-engine aircraft in the F-106, and it still stands. And he had ejected from an SR-71 when it experienced a catastrophic mechanical failure. Colonel Rogers had an impressive set of credentials.

I flew ten combat sorties with Colonel Rogers, always in rather benign conditions, except for one SAR we participated in. He was always a gentleman and flew the F-4 like he had a thousand hours in it. A real pleasure to fly with. He invited me to dinner a couple of times and he had lots of interesting stories. I was invited to his "Sawadee" farewell party when he left to go back to the States, and he presented me with a carved box with a set of silver wings and a note that read, "To Mike Ridnouer, My Seeing Eye Captain." I still cherish that gift. He asked me what I'd like to do when I left Udorn. Of course, I wanted to keep flying the F-4, the more the better. He offered to help any way he could and suggested moving to the SR-71. Not being a brilliant man, I declined.

When I returned to the States, Rogers and I talked once in a while. I never saw him again, but he always had time for me on the phone. Knowing him was not necessarily combat related, but it was a highlight of that assignment. Joe died in August 2005 at the age of eighty-one. One of my heroes.



Photo courtesy of an F-106 alumni.

TANK'S FIRST COUNTER
RUSS EVERTS

UBON, 433RD TFS, 1970, SECOND TOUR

November 20, 1970, sticks in many of our minds as a great day. As is now known, that was the time frame of the Son Tay raid, designed to rescue a group of our POWs. As a prelude to the actual rescue attempt, the 8th Wing was tasked for a max effort attack into Route Packs 1 and 2; I am sure as a diversionary attack to get the Vs focus down south, far away from the actual raid later that night.

Late afternoon/early evening of the nineteenth, many of us were in the "Inferno" (433rd TFS bar), tipping a few when word came to get in crew rest NOW and report to the TAOC about 3:00 a.m. We had no idea why or what but did as told. When we arrived for our early-morning brief, we were told we were on a mission to find and attack anything that moves or looks important in RPs 1 or 2. Yo, momma, what fun this was going to be!

As this was a max effort, every jet in every squadron that could fly was loaded out. That also meant that every available pilot and WSO were going to fly. The Ops O told me that I would be flying with a new guy WSO named Chuck Hood, who just arrived the day before! Chuck would soon become known as "Tank." The nickname fit his stature, not very tall but built like the proverbial brick shit house. Chuck hadn't been through "new guy" school or anything and barely knew the squadron designation or anyone's name. I introduced myself to Chuck, attended the mass brief and flight brief and gave

him another, cursory brief on what was about to happen. We step to our jets, and lo and behold, we have hit the mother lode! All the other jets are loaded with two 370 gallon external tanks and twelve MK-82s (five-hundred-pound) bombs. However, our jet had a centerline tank, no wing tanks, and sixteen MK-82 bombs. There was no way we weren't going on this mission with that load!

We get strapped in and start engines and discover that the intercom is not quite functioning right. He can hear me, but I can't hear him. No problem, I say; I'll talk, you listen, and all will be fine. Just let me know when to go "Prime/Sync" (part of the Inertial Navigation System alignment process) by cycling the rudders (didn't want him to "shake the stick" for fear of hurting a crew chief with an aileron). Not long later, the rudders cycle, I go "Prime/Sync," and off we go. After we are airborne and joined up with our flight, I start filling Chuck in on where we are, what and where we are flying over, and showing him major visual checkpoints in Laos as we overfly them en route to our target area in NVN. As this is a pretty one-sided conversation, I decide I best talk about some not-so-fun contingencies, like getting shot at, taking hits and maybe even having to jump out of our jet. I tell him the bad guys will probably not be too hospitable when we start dropping bombs on their "stuff" and we can expect a fair amount of reaction (i.e., AAA).

At the end of this dissertation, I added that in the event we did get hit and have to jump out and get captured by the bad guys, he had an advantage over all the rest of us. He truly didn't know hardly anything about where he came from or where he was going. He knew even less about our squadron's or wing's capabilities, tactics, and so on. So I said you could look them straight in the eye and probably be the only guy ever who was truthful in telling them you didn't know squat about anything. I added that that would make no difference whatsoever and that they would still beat the shit out of him. I can imagine how consoling that was to Tank.

Well, we found a bunch of targets, made a few passes, dropped all sixteen bombs, got shot at a bit, and got home safe and sound. Later in our tours, we would both become Wolf FACs and flew many times together. Fortunately, the intercom always worked on those sorties, but young Tank had some memories about the one time it didn't.

TWO MORE MOTORCYCLE STORIES
JOHN STILES

Dave Bolstead, another recce squadron WSO, and I had some time off and decided to ride out off base and take pictures in the local countryside. We'd been gone about an hour, driving north toward Vientiane, when we spotted a typical Thai village on stilts. We turned off the main highway onto a dusty road leading toward the village. From a distance we could see several little kids and several mangy dogs playing in the main road between the ten or so elevated shacks. As we got closer, the kids disappeared under the houses while the dogs approached us barking and snarling. As we slowed we noticed many men were headed our way. It didn't take long to realize they were all carrying machetes and didn't look happy. Turning the bike around was not a problem as we *bilaoed* (Thai for "skedaddled") out of there. When we got back to the base and related our story, we found out that just a week before two GIs on the same road to Vientiane were decapitated by a wire strung across the road. They never saw it coming.

Although the roads on base and the main highway leading to the base from Udorn were paved, most of the rest in the local community roads were dirt. The main road in downtown Udorn was also dirt. Most of the year, this road was a series of huge, truck-swallowing potholes. There was no logical traffic flow, either, as each driver decided which way to turn to avoid these craters. Speed and maneuverability were paramount with nose position over oncoming traffic critical to successfully navigating down the street. It was as if there was a giant aerial battle ongoing between the three-wheeled *jeepneys*,

broken-down lorries, and motorcycles loaded to the gills with every kind of human flotsam. The cacophony of honking and obscenities was deafening. One of these participants might find himself completely turned around to avoid a cavern or another vehicle only to jerk back into oncoming traffic and the continuing challenge to life. Although all the vehicles were heavily dented and damaged, one never saw an accident—just multiple near misses.

At the end of the rainy season, I decided to treat myself after ten months in country and only eating the same slop at the O'Club. I decided to go downtown to the Chai Pia Hotel in Udorn Tani for a good Kobe beef dinner.

Unbeknownst to me, the town repaved its streets at the beginning of the dry season. Repaving in Udorn was vastly different than in the United States and included spreading dirt in and over the craters, wetting it down, evening it out, and letting it dry. As I approached from a distance, it looked like a firmly packed hard surface. Unfortunately, ten yards into the new surface and buried to the axles, my motorcycle came to a sluggish halt. The locals poured out of their shops. They were not happy and let me know it. I had to manhandle my bike out of the muck and onto the sidewalk. Once again, I raced out of town and back to the base. So much for the Kobe beef.

DECEMBER 18, 1972
GREGG HANSON

I arrived at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base on November 6, 1971, a first lieutenant fresh out of RTU and three survival schools. Luckily, I was assigned to the 555 TFS—the famous Triple Nickel—known as the greatest distributor of MiG parts in Southeast Asia. The official greeting was another lieutenant who handed me a warm beer and gave a quick briefing on our mission at Udorn. He also stated it wasn't much of a war, but it was the only war we had, and you needed to get a combat tour if you wanted a career in the Air Force. He said we mostly flew to northern Laos and bombed Communist trees supporting the Free Royal Laotian forces lead by General Vang Pao in their fight against Communist insurgents. The northern area of Laos is called the Barrel Roll, so it followed that we typically dropped "bombs in the barrel." His final comment was that the average mission was about 1.3 hours, and they really didn't shoot at you much.

That all that ended December 18, 1971. My three orientation Aggie rides and ten Combat Qualification rides were completed on December 16. This training was accomplished with such notables as Mike Ridnouer, Bob Lodge, and Dick Swope. Mike is the "accomplished" author of the book *The Vietnam War—First Person*. Bob was the Wing Weapons Officer with three MiG victories before he was killed in action. Dick was the Nickel Weapons Officer and became a lieutenant general.

On the eighteenth, as squadron duty officer, I was sitting at the duty

desk when in walked Major Ken Johnson and his navigator (GIB), Captain Dickey Vaughn, with another major whose name eludes me. Ken said the other major needed to go work at wing headquarters. I was ordered to get an airman to sit the duty desk, find a GIB, and we would brief in ten minutes. The lucky GIB, who happened to be walking down the hall at the time, was Judd Dudley. The mission was a two-ship MiG Cap, Falcon 66 and 67; I'm 67, flying an adjacent orbit with a two-ship formation from the 13th TFS, Falcon 94 and 95. The Cap was to cover an Air America insertion in extreme Northern Laos near the North Vietnam border. The orbit point was just southeast of Sam Neua, Laos, at $20^{\circ}0$ $09'$ N, $104^{\circ}0$ $27''$ E. Ken's extensive briefing covered air combat maneuvers, air-to-air tactics, and missile launch parameters. Judd and I thought this was a little over the top as the Air Force had not had a MiG encounter since 1968. We were really shocked when Ken stated that if he got a MiG, we should hold north while he did his victory roll over the airfield.

Proceeding to the flight line, we found our F-4D had no weapons uploaded other than the three AIM-7E-2 Sparrow radar missiles that were always mounted on the aircraft. The AIM-4D radar/heat-seeking missiles were still in their boxes and the 20mm Gatling gun pod was on a transport cart. Finding Ken and explaining the problem, he directed us to leave the gun pod behind, upload the AIM-4s, and meet him on the prestrike tanker. After engine start, the master armament circuit breaker popped requiring a maintenance fix, which further delayed our takeoff. Now we were about twenty-five minutes behind Ken versus the original estimate of fifteen. Takeoff from Udorn was about 1330 local.

Airborne we contacted Brigham and requested a vector to join Ken on Orange Tanker. Brigham responded Falcon 66 was off the tanker and going to the orbit point. We canceled my prestrike fuel and headed directly to the planned orbit point. Judd now informed me our radar was inoperative, so we had no offensive weapons. About fifty miles southwest of the orbit point, we hear, "This is Brigham on Guard relaying for Red Crown (a Navy destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin with surveillance radar) Bandits, Bandits, Two Blue Bandits (MiG 21s) two two zero for eighty miles Bulls Eye (Hanoi) heading two one five" Shortly after this call was another call from Brigham on Guard relaying for Red Crown, "Bandits attacking coordinates xxx."

After a short delay, we heard Ken's emergency locator transmitter beeping followed by a voice transmission, "This is Falcon 66 on Guard. We're down, position unknown, we have two good chutes." We weren't to the orbit point, and my leader had already been shot down.

Reaching the orbit point, we changed to the tactical frequency and contacted Falcon 94 and 95. They had not heard Ken's distress call. Radio frequencies were changed again to contact Cricket, the Airborne Command and Control C-130, and King, the C-130 in charge of search and rescue (SAR).

Brigham and Red Crown continued calling MiGs in the area. Now I find myself unarmed, alone, and low on fuel. Judd and I cycled to Cherry tanker to refuel and then back to the orbit point area to search for smoke, fire, or any sign of Ken's wreckage.

A two-ship formation of F-4s from the 13th TFS was diverted from a bombing mission in Laos to assist in the SAR. The lead aircraft was Chief of Standardization, Major Bill Stanley, with Captain Les O'Brien in his back seat. The number-two aircraft was crewed by Lieutenant Ken Wells and Major Lee Hildebrand.

Wells and Hildebrand were new to the theater and on one of their initial combat qualification missions, which was supposed to be a low-threat bombing mission in Laos. Stanley and Wells were engaged by MiGs and Surface to Air Missiles (SAM) but were not able to disengage until running dangerously low on fuel. Wells tried to make it to the Gulf of Tonkin southeast of Hanoi but flamed out before reaching the coastline. Wells and Hildebrand were captured and became prisoners of war. Stanley and O'Brien made it to Laos before running out of gas and ejecting. Stanley was rescued late that afternoon and O'Brien spent the night in the jungle before his rescue the next morning.

As it was starting to get dark, and after spending another forty-five minutes looking for Ken and Dickey, Judd, and I decided with no radar and no offensive weapons we would be of little help in the search-and-rescue effort. We proceeded to Orange tanker to refuel and return to Udorn. Every colonel on the base met us with two questions. Where is Ken and what

happened? We had no answers.

The next day an F-4 from our squadron was shot down by antiaircraft in northern Laos. Major Leo Thomas and First Lieutenant Dan Poyner were killed. The two fighter squadrons at Udorn had now lost four aircraft in two days. Two crewmen rescued, four crewmen now POWs, and two crewmen killed in action.

The war had taken a turn for the worse and was now deadly serious, unlike a month earlier when I was told, “It’s not much of a war, but the only one we have and they really don’t shoot at you much.”

I talked with Dickey Vaughn in April of 1973 after his release from Hanoi. When asked what happened on December 18, he explained the reason we couldn’t find his wreckage. We were looking in the wrong country. After arriving at the orbit point, Ken flew an easterly heading and crossed the border into North Vietnam trying to troll up a MiG. And he did. Just fifteen miles inside North Vietnam, he made a 30-degree banked 180-degree turn. Rolling out, wings level, they were hit by an air-to-air, heat-seeking Atoll missile.

FAST FRIENDS
ANGEL PILATO

Captain Leo Tarlton Thomas Jr. was the quintessential Southern gentleman. He was a charming, good-looking fighter pilot with jet-black hair and hazel green eyes, a great sense of humor, and a Kentucky drawl to go with it. Women found him so attractive it was rumored they'd often trip him to get his attention. All these qualities, plus the fact that he was an Air Force Academy graduate put him in line to be one of the Air Force's rising stars.

This was Leo's second combat tour in Vietnam. His first tour was at Takhli Air Base in F-105s. He flew with the Triple Nickel squadron, but his primary duty was serving as the Wing Commander's Executive Officer. This put him up close and personal with the commander, which positioned him for a below-the-zone promotion and his pick of future assignments.

One of Leo's key functions was serving as a gatekeeper for the Old Man, a term the troops used to refer to the Wing Commander. If you wanted to see the "Old Man," you had to get past Leo. That was of no concern to me. Anytime I wanted to see the commander, I just came right in and said, "Hi, Leo, I need to see Colonel Gabriel," and he'd reply, "Go right in Angel. He always has time to see one of his good-looking WAF officers!"

Leo's affable, laid-back manner made it a pleasure to assist him whenever he came over to the officers club to plan an event for the

commander. One afternoon he came into my office looking for some wine that the commander wanted.

He said, “Hi, Angel. How’s my favorite club officer doing?”

“I’m doing everybody I can and the easy ones twice,” I said with a grin.

“And how’s my favorite Executive Officer?”

“Couldn’t be better,” he replied.

“What can I do for ya today, Leo?”

“Colonel Gabriel is having dinner on Friday for some brass, and he wants some white wine that sounds like puss—say!” he said, smiling and raising his eyebrows.

“Oh, he does, does he? I think you’re looking for Pouilly Fuisse, a white burgundy from France.”

“That’s it. Do you have any?”

We went over to the package store, and I perused the shelves and said, “Boy, Leo, this is your lucky day. I can’t believe it, but here it is, the last bottle of Pouilly Fuisse,” and I handed it to him.

Leo said, “Good on ya, Angel. You made it easy for me. After this event I’m goin’ on R&R and headed back to the good ol’ US of A to see that new baby boy of mine, Leo Tarlton Thomas the Third.”

“That’s great. So when are you taking off?”

“After this party for Gabriel, I’m flying one more combat sortie, and then I’m takin’ off,” he said enthusiastically.

“That’s coming right up. I know you’re excited about it. Does the little tyke have your green eyes?” I asked.

“No, the wife says they’re brown. I couldn’t get leave when Kay had the baby, and now he’s seven months old. I can’t wait to see him. I’ll be teaching

the kid how to fly soon."

Grinning, I said, "I'm sure you will. By the way, am I ever gonna ever see some pictures of the kid?"

"I'll take some when I get home. I had a couple when he was a newborn, but you know how they all look alike—sorta red and wrinkly. The little rascal is getting bigger now, and I'll probably be able to tell who he looks like when I see him."

"I'll bet the kid is a cutie, if he looks like his dad!"

"That remains to be seen, Angel. I've gotta say, you're a bigger BS'er than some of these fighter jocks you serve around here."

"Well, Leo, I've learned at the feet of masters!" I quipped.

"OK, kiddo. I'll see ya when I get back. Thanks for taking care of me with the special wine for the Old Man. Charge this to Gabriel's account."

"No problem, anything for you and Gabriel. Have a good trip. Give that kid a hug from me. And don't forget the pictures, Leo. See ya."

That was the last time I saw Leo. On Sunday, December 19, 1971, we got word that we'd lost another aircrew. It was Leo Thomas and his WSO, First Lieutenant Daniel Poynor. They were downed by heavy artillery fire over Laos, about five miles north of the city of Ban Na Mai.

Dan Poynor had rotated in with the 523rd Tactical Fighter Squadron from Clark Air Base, Philippines to fly with the Triple Nickel. This was his first combat flight, and he had to sign a waiver to fly combat missions because his older brother, David, had been killed in 1965 in an F-105 training accident. Just a week before Dan was shot down, he was excited to learn that he'd been selected for pilot training. Matching him with Leo was going to be an excellent pre-training opportunity.

Dan, twenty-five, was born in Enid, Oklahoma. His dad died when he was twelve and his mom, Paula, an English teacher, raised her two boys on her own. He excelled in high school both academically and in extracurricular

activities. He focused his studies on math and science to prepare him to fulfill his dream to be a fighter pilot like his older brother. He was inducted into the National Honor Society, earned a varsity letter for football, and sang in the Boys Glee Club. He missed admission into the Air Force Academy by one vote and went to the University of Oklahoma. When he entered the Air Force, he was disappointed not to be selected for pilot training but was chosen for Navigator Training at Mather, AFB in Sacramento. Later he was trained as a WSO, which prepared him to fly in the back seat of the F-4.

Laos is a landlocked, mountainous, and thickly forested country about twice the size of Pennsylvania. For practical and political reasons, the US military denied being in Laos. It had been declared “neutral” by a Geneva Accord in 1962, which stated no foreign personnel were to operate in Laotian territory.

However, the United States violated that rule, as did China, Thailand, and North Vietnam. The CIA operated a “secret war” in Laos, with the unofficial approval of the Royal Lao Government. Air America pilots regularly bombed North Vietnamese forces that came across the border into Laos. I heard that Air America pilots wore gold bracelets when they flew over Laos. If they were shot down and survived the crash, they could use them as barter. Another, more ominous rumor was, if a pilot survived a crash, they took no prisoners; they executed him on the spot.

The Pathet Lao insurgent forces were allied with North Vietnamese communists and supported by the Chinese. They were in a constant struggle with Hmong tribesmen over who should rule Laos. They continued to fight to overthrow the Royal Lao Government, which was aligned with the United States. The Lao Government supported the recruiting and training of some thirty thousand indigenous tribesmen in an attempt to strengthen anticommunist strongholds. The United States committed hundreds of millions of dollars to the war effort in Laos against the Pathet Lao, which was unsuccessful. In 1975, the Pathet Lao took control of the country, ending a six-century old monarchy. Estimates are that the tonnage of bombs dropped by US bombers between 1964 and 1973 exceeded the entire tonnage dropped over Europe during WWII. Today, evidence of the bombing remains in the form of huge land craters, undetonated bombs, and ordinance embedded in the landscape.

Information about Leo's crash was intermittent. All we were able to find out was that he was flying the lead aircraft on a strike mission over a heavily fortified artillery site. His plane had been struck down in an area called the Plain of Jars, which got its name from the hundreds of huge, ancient, gray stone jars that dot the landscape. This diamond-shaped region in northern Laos spans about five hundred square miles and is covered with rolling hills, high ridges, and tall elephant grass on the flatlands.

The forward air controller (FAC), Eddie Pickrel, had given Leo the coordinates for the target. Apparently, he didn't have a good fix on the target and his wingman, Major Roger Carroll, heard him ask for a clarification. As the aircrews flew overhead, heavy artillery fire kept blasting at them from all directions. Suddenly, the transmission ended, and Leo's aircraft exploded. His wingman looked for evidence of parachutes, but none were seen. Radio calls were sent out, but none were heard.

After we heard the news, several of us sat around my tiny BOQ room drinking Mateus Rosè wine. Our conversation revolved around our collective disbelief that this could have happened to Leo. He was a seasoned combat pilot and after all, he was one of the good guys. Yes, all the guys who got killed in this war were good guys, but we didn't know them as well as we knew Leo. We were hopeful that we'd hear good news of Leo and Dan's survival and rescue.

Even though the FAC reported that Leo took a direct hit through the cockpit from a 37mm AAA round, Colonel Gabriel was optimistic and declared the crew MIA. For nine days, rescue crews flew over the crash site hoping to pick up a radio signal from the aircrew and looked for any evidence that they might have survived. Their efforts yielded no results, and on December 28, at the urging of Leo's Squadron Commander, Joe Kittinger, Colonel Gabriel pronounced Leo and Dan KIA.

When I heard this news, I was distressed and went directly to the commander's office and said, "Colonel Gabriel, why did we stop looking for Leo? He could still be out there. How can you just declare him KIA?"

"Angel, it's been ten days and there's been no sign of them. We've done all we can. You know I thought the world of Leo and I'd like to think he's

still alive, but it doesn't look that way. Besides, Angel, it's better for the family this way."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"MIA keeps the family from moving on. KIA closes the door on any hope that they're still alive. It's the best thing to do."

"I see. So what you're saying is that odds are he's dead, and we're not going to find him—right?" I said.

"Yes," he said with a somber look.

My eyes welled up as I quickly turned and exited his office. A cold chill ran through my bones. Until now, the war seemed to be taking place somewhere else, but it had just become personal. There wasn't anything fair about this war, or any war for that matter. A pilot could get shot down on his first mission, his hundredth, or maybe never. The whole thing was a crapshoot.

As I drove back to the O'Club, I thought of Leo's wife, Kay. At first, when she received the news that he was MIA, she must have remained optimistic. Now, instead of meeting Leo at the airport with his new baby boy in her arms, she'd be getting a "regret to inform you" visit. A dark blue staff car would drive up to her house. She'd be holding the baby in her arms, and her body would stiffen with the realization of why the car was there. She wouldn't want to open the door, even though she knew she must. The Chaplain and the Personal Affairs Officer would deliver the dreaded news and leave her with a report that stated her husband "could not have survived."

That was the thing about plane crashes. The crew went down with the aircraft. For Kay, there would be no flag-draped coffin returning home, no twenty-one-gun salute, no burial, and no real closure. His body was God knows where in Laos, in commie territory, with no prospect of recovery. With no grieving rituals, the loss process seemed incomplete, almost like the loved one wasn't dead, but merely permanently out of touch.

When you watch a war movie, it's easy to fantasize about the glories of war, but it's different when it becomes a reality. With this new awareness, I

wasn't sure I could make it to the end of my tour. A little part of me had gone down with Leo's F-4. No, I hadn't known him for that long, but we had become fast friends. That's the way it was in the Air Force. You got to know people quickly, and you either liked them, or you didn't.

Colonel Gabriel scheduled a memorial service at the base chapel, maybe because Leo was his Executive Officer, or maybe because I kept bugging him. I can't remember if we had any other memorials on base that year. If there were, the chaplain would have been pretty busy. Or, maybe I just didn't go to any of them. For me, most of my memorial services were held in the bar.

Twenty-three years later, in 1994, with the cooperation of the Laotian government, evidence of Leo and Dan's remains were unearthed at the crash site. Found there were the ejection seat harness buckles, parachute riser release fittings, oxygen masks, bayonets, and a dog tag. A statement by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (POW/MIA Affairs) James W. Wold, to a Congressional Subcommittee on June 28, 1995, read, "All the evidence indicated that the crew members were in the aircraft at the time of impact."

Leo's remains, and those of his crewmate, Dan's were returned to the United States and buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery. Assembled there were many of Leo's fellow Academy graduates, officers who had been stationed with Leo and Dan, Leo's mother, Liz Thomas Grant, his sister, Susan Hebel, and his widow, Kay McKinney, who had remarried. Leo Tarlton Thomas III, stood by the casket with tears in his eyes mourning the father he had never known. The only person missing was Leo's father, who had died on Leo's birthday eleven years earlier. The crew was awarded the Silver Star and each family was handed a folded American flag.

Five hundred seventy-three Americans were lost in Laos, and as of May 11, 2017, 297 are still unaccounted for.

Note: Taken from a chapter in *Angel's Truck Stop: A Woman's Love, Laughter, and Loss during the Vietnam War*." www.angelstruckstop.com. Captain Pilato was manager of the Udorn Officers Club and knew most of the fighter crews who ate, drank, and relaxed there. A female officer in a nearly

all-male setting was a challenge she handled with poise and charm.

"EJECT! EJECT! EJECT!" ROBERT MOCK (AS TOLD TO MICHAEL R. DACIEK)

On January 20, 1972, a reconnaissance Phantom was shot down fifteen miles south of the Ban Ban Valley in Northern Laos during a Barrel Roll mission. This began a day in the life of Major Robert K. Mock, World's Greatest Fighter Pilot, and occasional hero.

In June of 1971, I arrived at Udorn, Thailand, my third combat tour of duty. I was assigned to the 432nd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing, 14th Tac Recon Squadron, World's Greatest Fighter Pilot in my mind. At that time I wasn't a hero yet. The recce motto was "Alone, Unarmed, and Unafraid." At times you could substitute "Unafraid" with "Scared Shitless!"

The monsoon season had just started, and there was nothing more exciting than "scud running" at about 480 knots below five hundred feet. We carried no protective armament, missiles, or bombs. Speed, surprise, and evasive maneuvers kept us alive. We were doing visual reconnaissance with the RF-4Cs called the Sports Model, because it was a sleeker, faster Phantom than the F-4 Fighter.

We operated in Northern Laos, an area designated "Barrel Roll." I had my own secret call sign, Bullwhip 26. Lieutenant John Stiles was my WSO, also called Back Seater or GIB—Guy In Back. Frequently we encountered a large number of 37mm AAA sites firing rounds the size of golf balls. The rate of fire was tremendous, and if one hit you, bye-bye birdie! Most were

seven to nine level gunners with experience going back to 1964, so they were very good.

A typical visual reconnaissance mission would require flying low at high speed over mountainous terrain, slipping through a mountain pass, and then dropping down into the jungle, a rain forest, where the normal trees are triple canopy, a canopy at one hundred feet, at two hundred feet another canopy, and at three hundred feet the top canopy.

Generally, after departing Udorn, we would proceed directly to the tankers, KC-135s, orbiting in the Orange Anchor area located near the border between Thailand and Laos. Six thousand pounds of fuel would allow us twenty-five to thirty minutes of high-speed patrol. The RF-4 was very low drag without external stores. Not so the F-4 with external fuel tanks and ordnance. It similar to flying an RF with the gear down.

After working my day job as Chief of the Command Post, I went down to the 14th Squadron Operations room to brief with my WSO, Lieutenant John Stiles.

John asked, “Sir, did you get the latest Intel Frag?”

A B-52 cell operating in the Fish’s Mouth area had a missile launched against them. The Fish’s Mouth was a section of the border between Laos and North Vietnam on a navigation chart that when highlighted looked like the mouth of a fish. After a missile was launched from there, SAC immediately ceased all operations, announcing their bombers wouldn’t fly until the SAM site was neutralized.

I said, “Yes, I had been briefed on it.”

Captain “Peppermint Patty,” our Intel Officer, and John Stiles exchanged glances.

John said, “We don’t think that missile site is in Laos.”

Peppermint Patty chimed in, “I agree with John. That’s a low threat area.”

I remember thinking at that moment, “Maybe there’s nothing in Laos, but chances were good that the site was across the border.”

It was time to move on. “John, let’s make a run up the new road, and then we’ll hit the tanker. After that we’ll photo some targets of opportunity, all visual.”

Once underneath the clouds, we had to go visual because you couldn’t fly instruments at five hundred feet cruising between 480 and 600 knots. We let down right on the deck and started rolling along the road. We weaved at 4 *g*, which would cause the experienced enemy gunners difficulty.

If level with or below the first tree canopy, we were OK, but if higher, the second and third canopy could block us out. The guns and missiles are all under the trees. It’s not like going down a freeway.

When we started our run, we went about three “clicks,” kilometers, and saw a white object, a transporter erector for a surface-to-air missile. It was an SA-2. John turned his side looking camera on.

I turned my head, looking back. “John, we’ve surprised them.”

There wasn’t a round fired, so we proceeded on about seven clicks to make them think that we had departed.

“Brace yourself, John,” I called out and entered a “wifferdill” maneuver. Recce guys can do it and some of the bomber guys can also but with a load of bombs it’s difficult to do. I lit the burners. If I didn’t, by the time I loaded up the airplane to 4 *g*, my airspeed would decay. I pulled up like I was going to do a loop, did a half roll, pulled some *g*, and ruddered it right back down.

This is when we took our first hit. As soon as my nose went through the horizon we started accelerating. At this point the aircraft shuddered and yawed violently. Suddenly, everything in front of me flashed white. The AAA gunners protecting the site had begun firing at us! When we came in from the west, we surprised them. When we came back from the east, they surprised us!

For a few microseconds, I glanced in my rearview mirror, and there ain't no tail anymore! *Damn! Why didn't I go to Canada!* The rounds were coming up, and they hit the fuel tanks between the cockpit and the tail. The fire erupted out the piccolo tubes, air-conditioning vents on the side of the cockpit. This meant the engines were sucking in flames and the fuel tanks were on fire. When a fighter starts to go, it doesn't take very long. The whole airplane will explode very violently. I yelled, "Prepare to eject!"

"I can't," shouted John. "I'm jammed up against the canopy." In order to perform his work, it required loosening his seat belt. The *g*-forces from the sudden shuddering and yawing had slammed him violently against the right side of the cockpit and upward numbing his shoulder and arm. "I can't reach the handle!"

The Phantom had rolled inverted, which would have caused a downward ejection into the ground. "Not yet," I called. "Let me try something." Somehow I rolled her over. I grabbed the ejection lever and yelled, "Eject, eject, eject!"

If I pulled the ejection handle, we both would eject. Pulling the handle automatically caused John's seat attachment straps to jerk him into his seat, securing him for ejection. We didn't have much altitude because the aircraft was sinking. The ejection sequence is—back canopy, front canopy, back seat, front seat, so the back seater doesn't get scorched.

We went out in that order. John was gone, and I quickly followed. The last thing I remember is that there wasn't much airplane left. I closed my eyes because I figured we were goners. There was no way that we were going to live through this. If the exploding rounds didn't get us, the crash surely would. I closed my eyes and said the magic words, "Oh, crap!" two words all pilots say just before they die.

I could hear, but I had my eyes closed and my jaws were torqued. I felt and heard the cracking sound of tree limbs breaking—crack, crack, crack—as I battered my way through the trees. I must admit it jarred me a bit. All of a sudden—swoosh! I'm no longer in the air. I opened my eyes and I'd come down around a piece of karst, limestone outcropping.

It looked like we had come down in a grove of aspens, except the trees were stripped, and they looked like an antenna farm, straight buggy whips, forty or fifty feet high. That's what we went into, almost supersonic, which gradually slowed us down.

As you come out of the aircraft, the seat rotates because of the rocket motors. The rocket propelled me just far enough to clear the tail, which in this case didn't matter because the tail was gone. I didn't hear the aircraft explode or crash. I sat stunned for a couple of seconds and finally got my wits about me. I looked around, and son-of-a-gun, I'm sitting there in my seat with the lower ejection handle in my hand! The rocket motors had gone off otherwise I would not have cleared the airplane.

The parachute is encased in a kidney shaped affair above your shoulders, a plastic mounted arrangement attached to you and to the seat. The first thing that should happen is a little drogue chute about twelve to eighteen inches wide blossoms out to stabilize the seat and after *x* number of seconds an initiator fires and a bigger chute comes out to extract the twenty-eight foot canopy, a sequence of three. These shotgun like initiators are built into the side of the seat, which you check on every prefight to make sure you have them.

Suddenly I heard banging! "Damn, the Gomers are shooting at me!" It was the initiator for my lap belt letting go so I could separate from the seat, which had never happened! Now the next initiator can fire releasing the twenty-eight foot parachute. Two of these shotguns sounded and I struggled to find my 9mm Browning automatic weapon so I could get even.

I was happy to be alive, but my coccyx really, really hurt because I smacked the ground very hard. My first thought was to check my limbs. They are OK. My forehead was bleeding from the shrapnel. I figure that's no big deal. It's not a gusher. My carotid arteries and the groin arteries were OK. I looked for my survival radio and my 9mm weapon.

I called John, "Bullwhip 26 Bravo; this is Alpha, how do you read?"

He immediately responded, "Five by!"

“I don’t know where you are because of the velocity during our crash,” I said. “I’m OK, are you OK?”

“Well, yeah, but I’m in a tree.”

I learned later that John ejected almost horizontally. He had a streamer. It helped him to slow down even though it never fully blossomed. His parachute caught a limb and stopped him, where he dangled about one hundred feet above the ground.

I couldn’t stay in my present position because there wasn’t much cover within the “Antenna Farm.” The slope was pretty steep. I crawled on my hands and knees dragging my survival Kit. Suddenly it became increasingly hard to move. I looked back and saw that my parachute had deployed. Just what I didn’t need, a drag chute! I used my survival knife to cut the parachute loose and left it.

The one thing I remember besides the buggy whips were the vines that had thorns like hypodermic needles. They broke off from the limbs and stuck into my entire body, which hurt like hell and soon began to burn. Now I thought about the ants and the snakes. *What else could go wrong today?*

Thirty minutes had passed, so I checked in with John. “What’s going on?”

“Well,” he said calmly, “I’m not up in the tree anymore. The lowering rope got me down close to the ground and I dropped the rest of the way to the ground. I’m OK.”

Many years later I learned that he had parachuted into the center of the exploding and burning aircraft. He had descended down a chimney forged by his ejection seat falling through the trees, escaping birds, debris, and heavy smoke. Getting down from the tree he hooked up his tree-lowering device backward, and instead of coming down slowly in chunks of ten feet he did a very fast freefall. Along the way his thumb got caught in the cord, which he managed to extract without injury.

On the ground he became aware that one leg of his flight suit had melted from the flames and was stuck to his leg. The enemy soldiers were

spraying his area with AK-47s and shotguns and he could hear the pellets falling through the leaves before striking the ground.

“I don’t know what’s going on here.” I scanned the area. “John, you maintain your route. We don’t want to get together until nightfall.” It was now about 1430.

We kept evading and I made a broadcast in the blind, “Mayday, Mayday, Mayday. This is Bullwhip Two Six Alpha. Bravo is OK.” I gave the UT coordinates in the clear. “Anyone hearing this message acknowledge.”

A couple of hours had elapsed, and every thirty minutes I transmitted. John’s doing OK. I’m awfully tired and the thorns are really a drag. They’ve torn my G-suit and vest but to guard against an infection I didn’t want to pull the darn things out.

I called John again. “So far, no radio contact, how about you?”

“Not a thing.”

John would listen for about fifteen minutes and shut his radio off. That’s what we had briefed to conserve battery power.

Back at the Command Post, one of the GIBs from the Triple Nickel Squadron, Roger Locher, called the SAC Command Post and checked the status of Bullwhip 26. “Oh yes,” they said, “he took on six thousand pounds and departed.”

Another hour passed and Bullwhip 26 should have returned to Udorn. However, no one had heard from Bullwhip. Roger started checking. SAC was wrong. The “Whip” had not checked in!

At Mu Gia Pass an OV-10 from Naked Fanny was operating at ten thousand feet. On board was a navigator, Gary” Moon” Mullins. Gary had flown with me many times and was the first one to call me “Uncle Bobby” (I was ancient, a thirty-eight-year-old major). He heard my familiar voice call out Mayday.

“My God, that’s Uncle Bobby!” He used his HF radio to call Naked

Fanny and said, “The Whip is down. If the coordinates are right, he’s in the Fish’s Mouth area.”

The command post at NKP used a secure phone to initiate a search and rescue, coordinating with Roger Locher.

Roger reported to Colonel Gabriel, the Wing Commander, and shared his find. “I know where there are two Air America choppers that can handle the job. I’ve been checking with the command post next door and I discovered that there are two Slick Hueys northwest of the downed aircraft. They can attempt the rescue.” A Huey was a Bell UH-1H Iroquois Utility Helicopter.

“Set it up!” Colonel Gabriel ordered.

Roger again called the Air America Command Post. “Our Hueys are about one hour away from the downed airmen,” they replied.

Roger was elated. He gave the coordinates, the call sign, and the survival codes along with a description of John and me. Air America had assigned the rescue mission to two Huey crews flown by pilot Nikki Fillipi, copilot Lee Andrews, and crew chief Ron Anderson. The second crew was pilot John Fonberg, copilot William Phillips, and crew chief, Bob Noble.

At about 1600 hours, the enemy soldiers had begun spraying the jungle with their AK-47s. Between bursts of fire, I could hear their voices and the clanking of their tin cans, mess kits, and helmets, a practice meant to flush us out. I mumbled, “OK, you retards, John has a .38 caliber handgun, and I’m going to be the biggest surprise you have ever seen because I am a master of the 9mm with fourteen rounds and I’m going to take down fourteen Gomers.”

I made another radio call in the blind. “There are enemy soldiers in contact.” I gave out my coordinates in the clear. I had hoped there was someone from the 13th Fighter Squadron or anyone from Udorn flying in the Barrel. It was very frustrating that several aircraft had passed over but none responded to our calls.

I called John again whose voice had changed just a bit. I told him, “We need to evade up a little bit higher. We’ll go north, using our survival

compasses. They'll be expecting us to go low, down toward the highway." Then I said something to bolster John's spirit, "I'm sure help is on the way."

John responded, "Right!" which made me laugh.

The OV-10 had flown north about one hundred miles, and when I came up on the radio I heard Moon Mullins say, "Help is on the way. I have their call sign. Are you ready to copy, over?"

And that was it. I immediately informed John.

The soldiers were getting closer. I didn't know it at the time, but there was a barracks of NVRs nearby, which housed enemy infantry that had moved into our area. They're taking their time, very leisurely spraying the area as they approached our position. The guns kept going off and the sounds became closer. There were hundreds of rounds and they were hoping to accidentally hit us with their random shooting.

I called John. "Let's conserve our bodies and our radios." I didn't know what kind of choppers were coming. "Let me do the talking. You just monitor because your receiver doesn't use as much power as a transmitter does. If my radio quits, you take over."

The rescue choppers checked in. "We know where you are but we have to refuel. We'll pick you up in about one hour." I was breathing a little better, and my hopes soared.

When they returned I reported to them. "My GIB is in the deep jungle below a three-hundred-foot canopy. He's on a three-sixty-degree heading, climbing up a karst. I guess we're about one and a half clicks from the road. Pick up John first." That was the toughest decision I had made in my whole life. "He's more exposed than I am."

"Roger that, but it's not necessary. We're in two Hueys, so we'll make individual pickups, but we can only make one attempt." There were a couple of minutes of silence followed by an excited call. "We have a parachute in sight!"

Now the rounds are getting rather close. Minutes passed before I heard

one of the choppers say, “We’ve got Bravo in sight.”

“I’m under your prop wash!” yelled John, quickly jamming his gun and radio into his flying suit. They dropped the penetrator above his head, and at that very moment, John spotted a figure in black clothing ten to fifteen feet away. His AK-47 was strapped across his chest, and he had a wide grin, seemingly unconcerned about the situation.

John shouted at Bob Noble in the helicopter door. “There’s an armed soldier down here!”

“Shall I spray the area?” called Bob.

“No!” John grabbed the penetrator. “You’ll hit me.”

The pilot gunned his engine, and off they went.

“We got Bravo!” reported the Huey.

The second Huey barked, “We don’t have Alpha yet!”

“OK,” I answered, as I searched for a flare. “I’m firing a flare right now.”

The flare went off, traveled twenty feet, hit the canopy trees, and fell back down, setting the area on fire “Oh, crap!” I stomped around trying to put out the fire. They quickly did a ninety-degree turn, and another ninety-degree turn. I could hear them and I felt a downwash!

I looked up and yelled, “You’re right over me!”

Suddenly a rope fell down through the trees. I could hear the engine starting to race, which meant it was moving out!

“Damn!” I lunged for the rope and captured it with both hands as the helicopter began to pick up speed, and off we went. We weren’t more than twenty feet above the ground as the bullets zinged by. The 37mm guns were firing, and the only way a helicopter can survive is to stay right on the treetops.

Coming out felt just like my arrival coming in—pow, snap, crack, pop. I hit the tops of the antenna farm, ricocheting like a pinball, spinning left, then right, hanging on for dear life. I don't know how I hung on, but I did.

As I was being pulled up into the helicopter, a crewmember scooped me up and sat me down inside the chopper and offered me a cigarette. I didn't smoke, but I was happy as hell to be rescued. I lit up, took a good deep drag, and started coughing and wheezing.

My newfound friend stared at me. "Are you OK? You look like a porcupine."

I nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine." Actually, I was in shock and one tired puppy.

We finally came to a bend in the river, which had to be the Mekong. We spotted an Air America C-123J Provider, a STOL aircraft, made for short takeoffs and landings, and configured with two props and two jet engines. It waited anxiously on a short dirt strip along the riverbank with the engines running.

We landed next to it, and John and I sprinted from the Hueys and ran up the ramp of the waiting Provider. Before the ramp was closed the C-123s engines were at full power, and we were quickly airborne.

Now it was 2000 hours, and we were back in Udorn—we were home. When our C-123 taxied into the parking area, John and I bolted out of the plane's rear end, down the ramp into Colonel Gabriel's arms and bottles of champagne. The men of the 13th Fighter Squadron came down to greet us.

We drank up a storm, shook hands, and laughed until my squadron commander, Lieutenant Colonel Harry Brown said, "Well, Bob, I guess we better take you two guys to the hospital."

Two days later John and I were back flying again. How lucky can we be? Someday, John and I will look back on this, laugh nervously and change the subject. It was quite a day.

Note: Dan Cherry authored the book *My Enemy, My Friend*. The book

is based on Dan's MiG-21 engagement and subsequent shoot down of North Vietnamese pilot Lieutenant Nguyen Hong My. Dan became friends with Hong My after the war and visited him in Viet Nam. Hong My asked Dan how he had conducted the research that had brought them together. Hong My's curiosity was based on the fact that he was credited with the shootdown of an F-4 January 19, 1972. Dan told Hong My to give him all the details he could recall about date, time, place, and circumstances. When Dan returned to the States, he began attempts to verify Hong My's recall with records kept at Maxwell AFB, Alabama. The date of an F-4 shoot down that stood out was the RF-4 loss on January 20, 1972. During a visit to the States, Hong My met with Stiles, and after an exchange of details determined, they had met before in the skies of Southeast Asia.

This determination coincides with this North Vietnamese reference to a MiG-21 victory against an F-4 on January 19, 1972:

> *At a range of 4,000 meters he (Lt Hong My) got a good radar lock. My, continued to close the range, and when the range was down to 1,800–2,000 meters, speed Mach 1.4, and altitude over 13,000 meters, when he had a stable sight picture he pressed the firing button to fire his second missile. He saw his missile fly straight into the contrail behind the American aircraft's tail. He quickly broke off by turning to the right and then rolled his aircraft upside down to watch the missile warhead explode. It is very possible that because of the time zone differences, the records maintained by the two sides give different days for the date of this air battle.*[1]

NOTE

1. Nguyen Sy Hung, Nguyen Nam Lien, and a team of other authors, Air Engagements In the Skies Over Vietnam (1965-–1975), Aas Viewed From Both Sides" (Hanoi: People's Army Publishing House, Hanoi, 2013).

GET'N CHASED: ATOLL OVER THE WING
JOHN STILES

The second chase caused the hair on the back of my neck to stand up, giving me the willies; I gasped for what I thought would be my last breath. I was on a Visual Reconnaissance mission flying with Bob Mock, call sign Bullwhip 26, about two months after he and I were shot down in northern Laos in late January. Not much was happening in the PDJ as the monsoon season was coming to a close. When the weather was bad in Laos it was often better in North Vietnam, and vice versa. During March the flying conditions were improving daily in the PDJ just as the weather in North Vietnam got worse.

The PDJ was a vast, sprawling valley in northern Laos surrounded by mountains with dirt road networks entering it from the east and north from North Vietnam. One of the main enemy supply lines that the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Pathet Lao used to infiltrate the PDJ was Route 7. This major conduit entered Laos in the mountainous east at Barthelemy Pass, commonly called the Fish's Mouth because on the map the border resembles a large-mouth bass about to swallow a minnow. Many of our landmarks did physically resemble something when viewed from the air. Examples include Road Runner Lake, the Submarine, and Snoop's Head.

The end of the monsoon season was a time of transition between the belligerents fighting in northern Laos. The communists (NVA and Pathet Lao) generally pushed south and west into the PDJ during the dry season

(April to October) while the friendly forces (Royal Lao and indigenous natives led by General Vang Pao) pushed north and east during the rainy season (November thru March). The year 1972 was not a particularly good year for the friendly forces, as they had not pushed the communists out of the PDJ as in previous years.

Bob and I had not been assigned any particular targets so decided we would make a run flying over enemy-held territory beginning at the northeastern end of the PDJ. We started our run west of Ban Ban valley, over the valley, and then straight east to the Fish's Mouth. Flying straight is a euphemism as the road network was anything but straight as it twists and turns continuously snaking its way through the mountains. We turned on our ground-mapping cameras as we started the target run in the PDJ and left them on for the entire forty minutes it took to make the run. If we were to fly direct from our start point to the border it would have taken about fifteen minutes at 480 knots. Our plan was to capture imagery of the entire route. Bob had to pull many high-*g* jinks along the way and we flew very low when passing the known caves and rolled up on our side so the cameras could capture images of anything inside.

As we approached the Fish's Mouth from the west, Red Crown, an Airborne Early Warning system, announced on Guard frequency that there were Blue Bandits (MiG-21s) twenty miles north of the Fish's Mouth heading south. We were almost at the Fish's Mouth. Since Red Crown was notoriously off on their range estimates by calling enemy aircraft much closer than they were, we decided to continue to the border then head southwest and home to Udorn. It would take another thirty seconds to finish our run and then I could turn off our cameras. (At that time during the war, the Rules of Engagement (ROE) did not authorize US forces to fly in North Viet Nam). We had just started our turn toward home when Red Crown broadcast again, "Blue Bandits, ten miles north of Fish's Mouth, heading south." It was time to quit anyway as the clouds abruptly turned to a total undercast as we passed over the border and I turned off the cameras.

Light bulbs turned on in both of our heads as we realized the MiGs were after us. Bob smoothly advanced power to mil (military, full power but without afterburner) as we climbed to six thousand feet and accelerated to 550 knots. (Yes, the RF-4 can climb and accelerate simultaneously.) We were

feeling invincible as we thought nothing could catch us. After all recce birds were faster than snot and could outrun anybody.

Bob started a gentle weave back and forth so I could check our six o'clock. We knew the MiGs would have to get within a mile to shoot their missiles at us. I couldn't see a thing and just settled back into my seat to check the RHAW gear. Nothing. Red Crown hadn't said anything further either. Just then as I started to recheck our rear visually, an Atoll heat-seeking missile streaked across the right wing. It was about two feet above the wing surface and inside the wing tip. Frantically, I called, "*Missile, right wing*, take it down!"

Bob snapped rolled inverted pulling seven-plus gs toward the ground and plugged in the burners (afterburner). Now I was more concerned about plowing into the mountains, as I couldn't see anything except a complete undercast below us. I asked Bob if he had it. His cool response was that he had a hole in the clouds and was going through it. He snapped rolled 180 degrees again as we entered the clouds pulling max *g* leveling off under the clouds at treetop level with less than one hundred feet cloud clearance above us. By now we were cranking along at Mach 1.3 and accelerating. Bob said, "Let's see if they can follow us thru that."

Bob never saw the missile, and we never saw the Blue Bandits. They didn't turn on their radars, which explains why we didn't get any RHAW warning. And yes, we were in North Viet Nam when they shot at us. Years later Hong My, a former North Vietnamese pilot, told me that a very successful tactic used by the NVA was for the MiGs to do an afterburner climb after takeoff to fifteen thousand feet, check in with their ground control intercept (GCI) controller for directions, then ramp down to our altitude while accelerating to Mach 1.4. So much for thinking we recces could outrun any threat.

"SAM, RIGHT THREE O'CLOCK, LOW"
JOHN STILES

I had seen SAM launches before and after this episode but had never actually been the targeted aircraft of the SAM until April 7, 1972. This was toward the end of my one-year tour and the day after the start of Operation Linebacker I, which started on April 6, 1972, and ran into the following October. Although its big brother, Operation Linebacker II, gets most of the glory for ending the war in Southeast Asia, Linebacker I was the first time since the bombing halt of 1968 and the end of Operation Rolling Thunder that US Air Force was allowed to fly bombing missions into North Vietnam. This was a big deal.

Our squadron was tasked to fly an unescorted two-ship Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) overflight looking for active SA-2 SAM launch sites. We were flying unescorted because all the fighters were on bombing missions of their own or escorting B-52s on their attacks further north. We were flying as a two-ship of RF-4Cs to give us some semblance of protection from the SAM and AAA threat.

I was a seasoned WSO by now and was crewed with a senior pilot whom I really respected for this mission. He and I had flown several combat sorties together and had built up a great bond between us. We knew each other instinctively and had a great deal of trust in our aviation abilities, and on this mission, we had the opportunity to demonstrate that trust.

Mission planning dictated that the least amount of exposure would be for our two-ship to fly east over South Viet Nam and out into the Gulf of Tonkin, to pitch-back left to the north and make our run heading west toward Udorn. We would make only one pass at six thousand feet and five hundred knots. This put North Viet Nam on our right as we flew west from the Gulf of Tonkin toward the mountains. Since we were in the lead aircraft, our wingman would be off to our right at five-thousand-feet line abreast.

Shortly after we crossed the beach, the RHAW lit up indicating a missile lock-on at our three o'clock. The NVA weren't just tracking us as I saw the SAM coming off the ground and immediately called it out to the flight. "SAM. Right three o'clock, low." I could see the smoke and dust it kicked up at lift-off. The missile exhaust plumb wasn't moving on my canopy. Not a good sign. This meant it was tracking our Rhino.

I tried to talk my pilot's eyes onto the SAM so he could perform the proven defensive maneuver, which was to bunt over thus committing the SAM to follow our flight path, then pulling up hard and into the SAM to cause it to overshoot. (No, we didn't carry chaff and flares and the electronic countermeasure jammers were notoriously ineffective at that time.) But my pilot couldn't acquire it.

As we sped along accelerating past five hundred knots, the SAM kept closing on us. My AC kept rocking the aircraft slightly to the left causing me to momentarily lose sight of the SAM under the canopy bow. When he rolled out wings level again, I reacquired the missile, which was getting really close. I told him to take it down in a bunting maneuver, which he did. I probably sounded frantic by now, as my voice was several octaves higher. The SAM was getting bigger and closer. I could distinctly see the missile now. It looked like a shiny spear with its ass-end on fire aimed right at us!

I yelled at him to pull up aggressively and into the SAM to cause it to overshoot. He pulled up but left. I instinctively yanked the stick hard right and stomped on the right rudder. The SAM exploded less than two hundred feet underneath us. We felt the concussion, a huge jolt, but received no hits as the explosion carried the shrapnel off to our left. After we recovered to home base, he thanked me for taking the aircraft and explained he had been looking out the left side of the aircraft the whole time. My bad. I should have

recognized he was looking left.

AIR WAR VIETNAM: REMEMBRANCE AT FORTY YEARS— ALL DAYS COME FROM ONE DAY

ED "BORIS" BEAKLEY

On April 10, 1972, *Midway* steamed under the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco on a seventy-eight-hundred-mile voyage to the Vietnam War Zone. What made this cruise different from proceeding ones in the ship's history was that *Midway* was deploying over seven weeks in advance of the scheduled departure date with less than one week's notice, with a vastly abbreviated training period, and with the additional handicap of a short, three day load out.

On April 29, exactly nineteen days after departure, the aircraft of Carrier Air Wing Five were winging their way off USS *Midway* toward the Republic of Vietnam. Their mission, as part of the ship's overall mission, was twofold. One, they were to provide aerial support for the South Vietnamese forces in their efforts to turn back the tide of the Communist invasion from the north. Two, they were to protect the remaining Americans present in Vietnam as the withdrawal of US ground forces continued.



Opening pages, USS *Midway* 1972–73 Cruise Book.
Courtesy Ed Beakley.

"All days come from one day," as the writer, the poet, the singer says. Without attempting to channel Ernest Hemingway, this reflects the basic remembrance of the day I and a lot of young men went off to war. For me, it meant I would spend April 11, my one month wedding anniversary, at sea. I left a beautiful young woman crying on the pier. She drove from Alameda to the Golden Gate Bridge to watch Midway change her life in ways completely unexpected a month earlier in the chapel at Point Mugu. We weren't following closely the day-day of the war nor privy to the back channel information of the impending crisis in the war in Vietnam. Things had been rather quiet there since the bombing halt up North in 1968 called by President Johnson after the Tet Offensive.

We had decided to get married, thinking I was going to be at NAS Lemoore for at least a year before going on cruise. By the end of May, she

and the other squadron wives would be bringing comfort to the wife of one Champ pilot as a confirmed resident in the Hanoi Hilton, and by end of summer Airwing Five wives would be dealing with four aircrew missing in action and six POWs. The aircrew fatalities would rise to eight before Midway came back to Alameda. Not what she bargained for, at least not that quickly.

The offensive, Operation Nguyen Hue, better known as the Easter Offensive began at noon on March 30, 1972, when an intense artillery barrage rained down on the northernmost ARVN outposts in Quang Tri Province just below the Demilitarized Zone. By this time Vietnamization was the US policy focus along with American troop withdrawal from South Vietnam, which was well underway. But the old men, the hard-core Communist revolutionaries, wanted no half-loaf victory handed out on a tray of negotiations. They wanted a military victory.

The “Easter Offensive,” dropped all pretense of guerrilla war. Instead, it was a three-pronged multi-division NVA, cross-border invasion, well supported by tanks and heavy artillery. General Giap committed six NVA divisions to the attack in the northern portion of South Vietnam. Another three NVA divisions were ordered to strike in central South Vietnam, and a NVA/VC three-division force would attack north of Saigon.



Courtesy Ed Beakley.

With his reputation and his policy of Vietnamization at stake, Nixon implemented a massive buildup of air power in Southeast Asia and a broadening of the eligible targets. On April 6, US fighter-bombers raided

military targets one hundred kilometers north of the demilitarized zone. As the available air assets made their strikes both in support of the beleaguered ARVN units and against targets in North Vietnam, squadrons of US military aircraft redeployed from their bases in Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and the US mainland. Simultaneously, more aircraft carriers steamed toward Vietnam to join the two already on station there, until by late spring there were six aircraft carriers, each with approximately ninety aircraft, operating off the coast.

For the CAG five guys on Midway who had walked aboard for the three-week "mini-cruise" final preparation training event and examination prior to departing on a WESTPAC cruise to the Gulf of Tonkin, we received the good news/bad news story on the night of April 5 as Midway steamed south to the operating area off San Diego. Bad news—we're going west early. Good news—we're not going directly from here, we go back to Alameda for the weekend and leave on Monday. The air wing flew aboard the next day landing in gale force winds as Schoolboy literally raced north.

As for "training," I hot-seated into the commander's plane and launched for two arrested landings. Forty-plus knots of wind is a bit of unusual operating conditions, and Skipper Harvey got out of the a/c as I walked up with a very puzzled look on his face. He had no idea what we'd been told the night before.

Anchors aweigh, my boy, anchors aweigh. No passing Go, straight to war, nod to South Vietnam and head for the Red River Valley. The first combat mission was April 30, support the full-on conventional war defense of An Loc—tanks and all (Tanks? This is not France in '44, what…the?) for a few days, then right to the heart of it up North on May 10, first Alpha strike on May 13 to a little spot adjacent to the Than Hoa Bridge and first sighting of Cyrillic. Cyrillic-Russian—the writing on the side of that big son-of-a-bitch Surface to Air Missile (SAM) that welcomed my best bud Floo and I to air war North Vietnam. Dearest love Paulette, your new husband is a combat pilot now.

Over on the East Coast, on April 7, "All those thinking you're heading for fun and sun in the Mediterranean step right on up, not so fast USS *Saratoga* and air wing!" "Sara" had just completed her mini-cruise and was

intended to deploy in three weeks. Instead, she left a day after Midway, going around the Horn of Africa.

In May 1972, Nixon went on national television to tell the American people that to bring the North Vietnam government to the peace table, the United States would take the appropriate steps to terminate the North's ability to continue the war. Major among these steps included mining all North Vietnamese ports, interdicting supplies to the North by US forces, cutting rail and communication lines and resuming bombing in the North.

Operation Pocket Money, the mining of North Vietnam's ports, commenced on May 9. US Navy A-6 bombers sowed the waters with sophisticated mines set to activate on May 11, giving the many ships in Vietnamese harbors, including sixteen from the Soviet Union, time to vacate. Only five actually left, and several ships, including Soviet ones, were subsequently damaged. During the previous year up to 85 percent of imports to the North, including oil, had arrived through the port of Haiphong. This was a devastatingly effective blockade.

Responding to the Easter Offensive led to a full-on re-assault on North Vietnam—Operation Linebacker that would continue until October 22. Nixon took off the gloves. Restrictions from the '65–'68 Rolling Thunder attacks were mostly removed. Planning was no longer in Lyndon Johnson's office and Defense Secretary McNamara's "stick-and-carrot" was now just a stick. Indeed, President Nixon consistently went against his SECDEF to take the fight right to Hanoi's front doorstep. He believed he and America were being tested. Air power—Air Force and Navy—was the answer.

The invasion of 1972 saw the first enemy use of massed armor coordinated with infantry and artillery in a fashion that American generals trained in European-style mechanized warfare would be quite familiar with. In fact, the overt invasion by the North proved to be the opportunity that American military and planners had long dreamed of: to lure the elusive Communists into the open in a conventional, set-piece battle. Only in this type of conflict could the United States' huge advantage in firepower and mobility be effectively exploited.

Cutting rail and communication lines and interdicting land-based

supplies were accomplished to much greater effect than during attempts earlier in the war. Precision-guided munitions were introduced. B-52s were heavy players as were the AC-130 gunships down south. The army of South Vietnam (ARVN), even with uneven leadership, stood tall in the saddle. Giap's logistics flow was reduced to a trickle. Finally, with proper use of air power, the victor from Dien Bien Phu and Tet got his ass handed to him.

There's lots of writing on the Vietnam War and on use/misuse of air power. Rolling Thunder gets lots of words on ineffectiveness. But what is clear in historical analysis by people with credentials significant enough to understand is how truly effective air power was in staving off a major effort by the NVN politburo to win the war outright while Nixon was still President and America was still involved. Stripped of the fuzz of who, why, why not, to exactly how the air war was fought in this period is a different picture, a unique story of our eleven-month deployment.

After the Easter Offensive, North Vietnamese generals commented it would be three to five years before they could mount another offensive. After the Christmas bombings of Hanoi and Haiphong, North Vietnam had nothing left. The war delivered by Air- Force and Navy pilots had served its purpose. On a personal level for many of the aircrew, mission number *one* was complete: our prisoners of war came home!

That "deep story" we earned, we own.

EPILOGUE

Al Nichols was that first combat loss, shot down, and captured May 19. Al was a combat experienced A-1 Sky Raider "Spad" guy. Sobering. There would be more and worse.

In successfully carrying out her mission, *Midway* was, at the same time, helping to achieve the more long-range objectives: the eventual release of American prisoners of war held captive in North Vietnam and the end of Communist aggression in the free world.



Courtesy Ed Beakley.

It is perhaps fitting that *Midway* could demonstrate her fulfillment of the Navy Creed during this cruise, for 1972 saw the thirtieth anniversary of the battle from which she takes her name; the Battle of Midway. It was during this battle that the aircraft carriers proved their importance in naval warfare and effectiveness as a mobile weapon system.

"HECK OF A WAY TO GO"
TOM OWENS

I have a total of 316 combat missions in South Vietnam, North Vietnam, and Laos in 1967 and 1972 and have had my share of close calls from AAA, SAMs, and MiGs. But the closest I came to "buying the farm" during that crazy Asian war was an unlikely event that very few have ever heard of and what should have been the most benign milk run ever.

I was halfway through my second tour at Korat AB, Thailand, in June 1972 during the height of Linebacker when I was able to hop on the Freedom Bird for a little R&R back in California. Had a wonderful time in San Diego with my wife and two kids, then six and three years old.

Seems just a blink of the eye, and I was on my way back to Thailand. I have no recollection of the flight, other than we landed in Saigon late in the evening of July 4. From there I had to find my own way back to Korat. I immediately called base operations to check on flight availability.

The good news was there was the C-47 Klong departing early the next morning for Bangkok—the bad news, the manifest was full.

I had a restless night but awoke early and decided to go to the terminal anyway to see if there were perhaps some "no-shows." Luckily I got the last seat available. The Klong was configured with canvas troop carrier seats along each side of the fuselage. There were seventeen souls on board only one of whom I recognized—my ''65 Academy classmate, Harry

Engebretson.

It was a gorgeous clear blue-sky morning—not a cloud to be seen. The flight was only an hour or so, smooth, and otherwise unremarkable. I had a window seat and was able to see that we were obviously on short final into Don Muang International Airport about five hundred feet above the ground with gear and flaps down.

Suddenly I felt a horrendous impact and immediately said to myself, “We’ve had a midair collision.” Bummer!





I looked out the window and noticed two things. One, the aircraft was in a ninety-degree bank and rapidly approaching the ground, and two, much of

the left wing was gone, perhaps half to one-third. I remember thinking, after three hundred missions at that time, “This is a heck of a way to go.”

But within just a few seconds, the aircraft stopped rolling and struggled to get back to level flight. It did, and within a matter of a few more seconds, we touched down on the numbers—whew!



Mid-air crash over Don Muang

AN American transport plane had several feet of one wing knocked off in a mid-air collision with a Thai trainer aircraft over Don Muang Airport yesterday.

The accident, which could have been a major disaster, occurred when a DC 3 transport with 17 persons on board was hit on a wing tip by a RTAF T33 trainer practising formation flying.

There were no injuries and both aircraft landed safely.

An airport official revealed that the Thai pilot "did not even know there had been a collision until he had landed and noticed some damage to the wing of his plane."

He said an investigation was under way "not so much to place the fault on anyone but to find ways of preventing a repetition of the incident."

He commented that great care has to be taken at Don Muang as a large number of planes are constantly landing and taking off.

Photos courtesy of Tom Owens.

We taxied off the runway, deplaned, and looked in awe at this marvelous flying machine with one-third of the wing missing—sliced off by a Thai T-33 whose pilot did not see us as he was belly-up in his turn to final. We later learned he landed safely in front of us and had not realized what happened. I kissed the ground and thanked the crew, took a couple of pictures, and hitched a ride to the terminal.

I hailed a taxi for the long ride back to Korat. I told the driver to take it easy.

I was in no mood to press my luck again.

It was early evening when I got back to my hootch—it was just getting dark. I walked into my room and the phone rang almost immediately. It was

my operations officer in the 469TFS, Lieutenant Colonel Fred Smith. He said I needed to get to the squadron ASAP as we had just lost two F-4s and four crew members in Route Pack 6 and that we were going a launch a SAR (search-and-rescue mission). I thought, “This is going to be a long day!”

But in my head, I pretty much knew that we were not going to conduct a SAR in an area east of Hanoi, at *night*. Sure enough, the mission was soon canceled. It was just too risky and the chance of success very low.

Bill Elander and Don Logan in one aircraft and Bill Spencer and Brian Seek in the other—lost to MiGs as I recall. All bailed out safely, were captured and served the duration as POWs. They all made it home OK.

I often think of that day and realize how lucky I was to survive. I have told this story many times but never wrote about it until now.

THERE I WAS, TWO VERSUS SIX
VIC ANDREWS

The following events took place during the summer of 1972, while deployed with the 58th Tactical Fighter Squadron from Eglin AFB, Florida, to Udorn RTAFB, Thailand.

We deployed with twenty-four brand-new "556" equipped F-4Es, the latest model. Deployed we flew both F-4Es and older F-4Ds and flew both air-to-air and air-to-ground missions. It was a highly experienced squadron. All the front seaters, except one, had already completed two tours in SEA, and all the back seaters had completed one tour. I was a four-ship flight lead, instructor pilot, standardization evaluation flight examiner, and mission commander, and had accumulated over 325 combat missions and 600 combat hours.

At the time of this mission, we had been in theater two or three months, and sometimes there would be lots of MiG activity, and other times there would be no MiG activity for days or weeks. On this particular day, there had been little or no MiG activity for several weeks.

The mission was a very early morning, two ship, weather recce flying F-4Es with three tanks, two AIM-4s. (The MiG killers in the Triple Nickel got all the AIM-9s.) and 20mm. The target was on the northwest railroad, northwest of Hanoi. We were scheduled for prestrike and post strike refueling with more fuel available, if needed. The best laid plans.

We were scheduled to take off prior to dawn to be over the target at sunrise. Briefing, preflight, and takeoff all went as planned. Then things started to slowly unravel. After join up, while on the way to the tanker over Laos, we were informed by our controlling agency, Hillsborough, that our tanker was delayed and would be a little late for the rendezvous. We decided we could still make our TOT.

We were then informed that our tanker would be more than a little late, which would cause us to miss our TOT. We discussed our options and decided that, given the lack of recent MiG activity, we had enough fuel to get to the target and make it back to our poststrike tanker. This, as it turned out, was not my best decision.

We pressed on for the northwest railroad at medium altitude. As we crossed into North Vietnam, Red Crown advised us two Blue Bandits, MiG-21s, had taken off from Gia Lam, near Hanoi, and were headed east out over the Gulf of Tonkin. We assumed an early-morning training flight, no threat. Shortly thereafter we were informed that two more Blue Bandits had taken off from Kep, west of Hanoi, and were also headed east out over the Gulf of Tonkin. We pressed on to our target. A few minutes later we were informed by Red Crown that two more Blue Bandits had taken off from Phuc Yen, north of Hanoi, and were also headed feet wet. We still, naïvely, perceived no threat and pressed on for our target. Red Crown agreed. At the time we were the only friendly aircraft airborne over North Vietnam.

When we arrived in our target area at sunrise, it was completely socked in, and the Alpha Strike would have to be delayed. We relayed that information to Blue Chip and were directed to go back to the tanker, which was now on station in Laos, and take another look at the weather in an hour.

Then it really started to get interesting, and it became obvious why flights shouldn’t go into “bad-guy country” short on gas.

As we headed southwest to the tanker, Red Crown advised that all six Blue Bandits were being vectored in our direction. Our assessment was that we did not have enough gas to engage six MiG 21s with any hope of success, so our only option was to try and spoil their intercept and get back into “Friendly Airspace” and find our tanker.

Our center-line tanks were empty, so we quickly jettisoned them to reduce drag. We had to slow down to jettison the tanks, not exactly what we wanted to do at the time. We vectored more toward the west away from the threat and pushed it up. As soon as our wing tanks were empty, we jettisoned them, again having to slow down. Continuing to vector west, we pushed it up and started a descent, pushing our speed through the Mach. We knew/hoped the MiGs would shortly run out of gas and have to go home. As we went through about ten thousand feet, Red Crown lost contact with us due to altitude. That made them nervous, but we could still hear them on the radio.

We were at about eight thousand feet and Mach 1.25 when Red Crown informed us the MiGs had stopped closing and turned for home. Red Crown later told us that they closed to within about two miles and may have fired an Atoll. We never saw it.

We turned south, traded airspeed for altitude, picked max-range airspeed and altitude, and headed for the tanker. Needless to say, it took a while to get our heart rates down.

We were both really short on gas. The good news is that both Hillsborough and our tanker realized our plight. With Hillsborough's help the tanker came into North Vietnam to get us, which probably kept us from bailing out in Northern Laos. I am sure their bosses did not appreciate their bravery as much as we did. After a quick rendezvous, my wingman got on first. He had about five hundred pounds, about five minutes, of fuel. After he took a drink, I got on with about one thousand pounds. Another Ho Hum day.

After we refueled, we called Blue Chip. They directed us to stay with the tanker and go back to check the weather in about an hour. I patiently explained that we had jettisoned our tanks and could not comply. They didn't understand why we couldn't go back. I "patiently" explained to the controller that we had about as much fun as we could stand for one early morning and were going to RTB to Udorn.

The RTB was uneventful, and we went straight to the bar, after debriefing of course.

All's well that ends well.

SUPERSONIC GUN KILL
PHIL "HANDS" HANDLEY

The events of an afternoon in June forty-five years ago, including the smallest details of a one minute, forty-two second engagement remains indelibly burned into my memory.

On May 10, 1972, Oyster 01, an F-4D from the Triple Nickel, the 555th Tactical Fighter Squadron, was shot down by a MiG-19 near Thud Ridge northwest of Hanoi. Only the WSO, Captain Roger Locher survived, and for twenty-three days he successfully evaded capture by NVA troops. When on June 1, a flight of Triple Nickel F-4s made positive voice contact with him and pinpointed his location. 7th Air Force immediately ordered a SAR mission launched the next day to bring him home. Since the pickup would occur on the very doorsteps of Hanoi, a large diversionary raid on multiple rail yards, airfields, and other targets was planned to hopefully give the slow-moving HH-53 Jolly Green Giant and the A-1 Sandy escorts some degree of cover. On this day I was the leader of the four F-4Es, Brenda Flight, a MIGCAP anchored northeast of Hanoi between the enemy airfields, Gia Lam and Kep.

Brenda 02 was Captain Buddy Green with First Lieutenant Doug Eden in the rear cockpit. The element leader, Brenda 03, was my Squadron Commander, Lieutenant Colonel John Downey with Captain John Leach in the pit (back seat), and Brenda 04 was flown by Captain Bob Ellis with First Lieutenant Ed White as his GIB. Captain Ron VanMeter with Captain Ron

Sacre in the pit manned our spare aircraft in the pit.

For some time I had become increasingly concerned about the viability of the USAF "Fluid Four" tactical formation because of the excessive time required to turn the formation and "welded wingman" were being eaten alive by attacking MiGs. My theory was, although Fluid Four had been well suited for F-86 Sabres at high altitude in the skies of Korea, it was simply not viable in the medium-altitude, high-*g*, high-calibrated airspeed environment of Route Pack 6. I believed formations were most vulnerable during turns when wingmen were forced to spend valuable time flying formation instead of looking in earnest into the block of airspace from which an attacking MiG would appear. With this in mind I had drawn some simple tactical formations allowing the four-ship flight to change course 90 degrees left or right and cross turn and in-place turn to reverse course 180 degrees, all at very high turn rates upward of 4 *g*. Freelance thinking was heresy at the time but I briefed these tactics, which I named the "Called Turn," as those to be used by Brenda Flight on this mission.

We stepped to the aircraft for the preflight inspection and found I had the only bird in our four-ship flight carrying three external fuel tanks. Unlike my jet, which had two outboard 370-gallon tanks and a centerline 600-gallon tank, the other members of my flight had only the outboard tanks. In addition, none of the birds carried the full complement of missiles. My jet had only two AIM-7 Sparrow missiles in the aft fuselage cavities and one AIM-4 Falcon IR missile on each of the inboard armament pylons. A check of the aircraft's log showed however that my bird had a full load of 640 rounds of 20mm ammunition. Start and taxi were uneventful and we took off on schedule at 1105 hours.

Everything proceeded smoothly through the rendezvous and refueling with Tan 104, our designated KC-135 tanker. We departed Tan Anchor on schedule, heading north up the eastern coastline of South Vietnam to a point near the island of Hon Gay. I jettisoned the 600-gallon centerline tank as it fed out just prior to reaching our turn point. Since the other members of my flight had been feeding from their 370-gallon tanks, a quick fuel check at this point predictably showed my jet had almost four thousand more pounds of fuel than the rest of the flight. We turned left and proceeded to our CAP just northwest of "The City on the River." As normal, the Radar Homing and

Warning (RHAW) set became increasingly active with various strobes on the scope and tones in the headset indicating the energy and direction of enemy threat radar "painting" our flight.

We arrived at our CAP point on schedule and contacted Red Crown, the US Navy cruiser operating in the Gulf of Tonkin with radar monitoring the MiG activity in the Route Packs 5 and 6 areas. The UHF connection was loud and clear and we were advised that the controller who would monitor our flight had the call sign Worm. We set up a ten-mile leg racetrack orbit with one axis pointing our nose directly at the Gia Lam Airport in downtown Hanoi on the inbound leg and the Kep Airfield to the northwest on the outbound leg. Using the "Called Turn" tactical formation, everything proceeded with neither SAM nor MiG activity throughout the first two orbits. At the southeast end of the third orbit, things changed drastically.

After calling for a cross turn back to the northwest, just as our elements passed each other at the midpoint of the 4-*g* reversal, the RHAW scopes came alive in all four of the flight's cockpits and I transmitted to the flight, "Brenda Lead has an E-SAM HI" and continued the reversal turn, hoping to regain a line abreast formation with Brenda 03. However, before reaching that goal, the red light on the console illuminated, indicating a SAM launch, accompanied by a piercing 1,000 Hz tone. I transmitted "OK, we've got a launch light. Brenda let's turn into it." Neither Smallwood nor I could visually acquire the missile, which led me to believe it could be a false launch signal to distract our attention while MiGs attacked.

Time 0+30: A Red Crown controller with the call sign Bing advises Fletch, another F-4 MIGCAP, that they have a possible bandit on a bearing of zero-five-eight degrees from Bullseye at fifteen miles.

Time 0+35: I call for all members of Brenda flight to turn on their radar jamming pods. At the same time, Brenda 03 advises, "Brenda 03's going to turn eastbound. I lost you in that break."

I acknowledged and immediately transmitted, "OK Brenda, let's reverse course back to the east."

Time 0+57: Worm's voice cracks over the UHF, "Brenda, Worm,

Bandit will be at your one-six-seven at eight" meaning bearing of one hundred sixty-seven degrees at eight miles from us. I acknowledged Worm's call and brought our now two-ship element to a heading of one-six-seven with Brenda 02 flying tactical formation, line abreast and six thousand feet off my left wing. With Buddy Green and I straining to visually acquire the MiGs visually, Jack Smallwood in my pit and Doug Eden in Buddy's pit were having no better success with radar acquisition.

Time 1+20: Red Crown transmits, "Brenda, you're in the dark." They had lost radar contact. "Bandit is zero-four-seven Bullseye, fourteen."

Time 1+38: I transmitted, "Red Crown, Brenda 01, where's the bandit?"

Before Red Crown could reply, Brenda 02 declared, "Bingo, fuel," the fuel level required for him to reach the refueling anchor safely. It was time to "get out of Dodge." This was precisely what I didn't want to hear, but said to Smallwood, "OK, give me egress heading," as I continued to look as hard as my 20:10 eyes could muster for the MiGs, I was certain were being vectored for an attack on our element.

Time 1+48: Red Crown once again attempted to advise me of the MiG's position but was cut out by Brenda 02's repeated transmission, "Brenda 02 is Bingo." Reluctantly, I transmitted, "OK, Brenda, let's bug out—bug out," disengaged, and exited the area. Smallwood gave me an egress heading of one-zero-zero degrees as I brought the element to that heading with a modified "90 left" Called Turn. Brenda 02 was now off my right wing, approximately four thousand line abreast as we proceeded to "feet wet" at 450 knots indicated airspeed. All eight eyeballs inside the cockpits of Brenda 01 and 02 were scanning the hemisphere behind our element for the yet to be seen MiGs we knew must be near.

We continued on this easterly course amid numerous RHAW warning signals for AAA and SAMs, as well as UHF transmissions between friendly flights in the area. I advised Fletch Flight, the egress CAP, which would give us cover as we exited the area, that we were coming out, to which Fletch 01 replied, "Roger, we're on station."

Time 3+15: The strong "rattlesnake" tone of a Fansong tracking radar in

high PRF (pulse recurring frequency) focused our attention immediately on the RHAW scope. Jack Smallwood called, “E-SAM Hi at five o’clock” as I looked immediately into the airspace at the formation’s right rear quadrant.

Time 3+19: As my eyes swept behind Brenda 02, I saw a reflected glint of sunlight beneath the scattered cloud layer at ten thousand feet. Knowing most of the MiGs were polished aluminum, I strongly suspected I had finally achieved a “tallyho” on the bandits and transmitted, “OK, I’ve got a MiG-21 at our three o’clock low. Brenda 02, cross to the other wing, he may try to pop up on us.” I don’t know why I called the bandit out as a MiG-21 other than they were usually more numerous in Route Pack 6 than the MiG-17s or MiG-19s.

Buddy Green replied, “Roger.” and immediately turned left as I turned right in a weave placing him off my left wing in tactical formation.

I checked our fuel and said on the intercom to Smallwood, “We’ve got ninety-five fuel [ninety-five hundred pounds]” as I mentally noted that while I was fully thirty-five hundred pounds above Bingo fuel, Brenda 02 had none to spare. With my eyeballs almost sticking out of the cockpit to scan the position where I had seen the flash of light, I became aware of the faint tone of a “golf band” radar and noted a short, one-ring strobe on my RHAW at the five o’clock position. Somewhere in the recesses of my mind, I recalled that some of the older MiGs used the golf band for radar ranging and twisted around to look further aft of our flight. There they were, plain as day, low, just right of our six o’clock position, at a range of about eight thousand feet. A two-ship formation of silver MiG-19s flying a Russian-style “sharp bearing” tactical formation was in a pursuit curve, which would shortly have brought them into firing position at our six o’clock low position.

THE KILL

Time—the final 1+42: Punching the mike button, I transmitted, “OK, I’m going to take one quick run at him. Two, you continue on out.”

To his undying credit, Captain Buddy Green replied in an almost casual voice from the cockpit of Brenda 02, “I’ll stay with you.” He then immediately pulled sharply up in a steep climb to conserve fuel and to be in a

position to come to my aid if required. In retrospect, Buddy's sudden move probably set the stage for the kill.

As I released the mike button, I broke hard right into a 135-degree bank slice turn as I slammed both throttles of the General Electric J-79s into fourth stage afterburner and snapped just over 9 *g* on the F-4. The telltale needle in both the front and rear cockpit recorded this over-*g* condition, but the bird was so strong it only popped about one-half dozen rivets on the upper surface of both wings where they joined the fuselage. At this point, I was so full of adrenaline I simply don't recall feeling any *g*-forces. In contrast, Smallwood in the rear cockpit later told me he went to instant blackout and was able to retain consciousness until I slacked off on the *g* a few seconds later.

Aided by radial *g*, I passed the ninety-degree point of the slice turn in seconds and noted from the characteristic "Mach tuck" of the F-4 as it went supersonic. We had indeed slipped through the Mach at that point and were accelerating at a rapid rate. Looking intently at the two MiGs now at my right two o'clock low position, I expected them to pull up and pass me "close aboard" denying me turning room, which would have placed them in a position above me with their nose up and mine buried. Had this been the case, I would have had no choice but to extend out of the fight as the MiG leader would have had radial *g* working in his favor with endless options, none of which I liked.

As I continued in an approximately 7-*g* slice turn, I was dismayed to see the MiGs turn left to a southerly heading and level off before beginning a right turn at an altitude of approximately five thousand feet. I believe the MiG leader had been focused on Brenda 02, and seeing Buddy zoom sharply up, turned left to position himself for a six o'clock pursuit curve. Although at no time during the slice turn did I take my eyes off the MiGs, by the three-hundred-degree point of the turn I found myself exactly tail-on to the tiny MiGs at a range of approximately two miles, at which point they simply disappeared before my eyes.

I let off the *g* to lag to the outside of the perceived turn circle and almost immediately visually reacquired the MiGs as they began to show some planform view due to their continuing right turn. Pulling the nose to pure pursuit, I asked for a "five-mile boresight" to get a radar lock. Now able to

see once again, Smallwood replied in a voice strained by the heavy *g* load, "You've got it." Placing the pipper on the trailing MiG, I punched the auto acquisition button on the right throttle and was instantly rewarded by a radar lock-on indicated by the analog bar, which appeared on the pipper indicating a slant range of just over forty-five hundred feet.

After four seconds of settling time to allow the aircraft's fire control system to input data to the radar missiles, I squeezed the trigger twice and then held it down to ripple fire my two AIM-7 Sparrow missiles. The first missile's rocket motor apparently did not ignite after it blew from its fuselage cavity, and the second failed to guide, arching harmlessly straight ahead of the aircraft. Brenda 02 transmitted, "It went ballistic, Lead!" as I did a lag pursuit roll to the left to reduce angle off and slapped the four-inch piece of plastic tube attached to the missile select switch on the weapons' select panel down to the "heat" position to select my IR missiles. The heat missiles we carried that day were the notoriously ineffective AIM-4D Falcon. They were commonly referred to as the "Hughes Arrow in the Heart" missile because of its tiny warhead, lack of a proximity fuse, and the "Rube Goldberg" procedures required to launch them within ideal parameters.

As soon as I knocked the weapons switch to heat, the familiar Norelco razor tone of the AIM-4D buzzed in my headset indicating the missile was indeed online and looking forward, but its cryogenically cooled seeker head was seeing nothing beyond background IR. As I pulled the F-4's nose into pure pursuit and placed the pipper on the trailing MiG-19's twin afterburner plumes, I was rewarded by a change of missile tone from the Norelco razor to the sizzle tone indicating the missile's IR tracking heads were looking directly at the heat source. I punched the missile uncage button on the stick allowing the missile heads to continue to track the heat source, regardless my nose position. I then pulled approximately twenty degrees of lead on the trailing MiG to give the missiles a lead-turn advantage after they began to guide at safe separation clearance, then pulled the trigger twice and held it down to ripple fire the missiles.

The first missile went ballistic and the second never left the launcher rail. The MiG leader, apparently seeing the smoke trail from the first AIM-4 broke hard right, turning both MiGs into balls of condensation in the humid SEA air. By now the fight was descending rapidly through approximately

two-thousand-feet AGL. The slant range to the MiGs was shrinking quickly from about three thousand feet, with angle off increasing dramatically as the low wing loaded MiGs turned into me at maximum G. Knowing there was absolutely no way I could maintain nose-tail separation, my only option at this point would be a very high angle deflection shot.

Without looking in the cockpit, I selected guns, pulled the nose into lead pursuit, putting the trailing MiG in the left quarter panel of the windscreen to keep him in sight just above the F-4E's long nose. Although I was now pulling 7 *g* to hold the MiG in lead pursuit, while traveling at a rate of three football fields per second with the slant range closing at an alarming rate, I felt no *g* whatsoever. Additionally, everything seemed to be moving in slow motion. At a point where it appeared my flight path would pass just ahead that of the trailing MiG, I rolled slightly left then back right and down into the perceived plane of motion to align the axis of my aircraft with that of the target.

With the long nose of the F-4E now obscuring my ability to see the MiG, I held down the trigger, and for just a fleeting moment as the General Electric M-61 Gatling gun wound up to its one hundred round per second rate, I had the dread feeling that I was too close and would run over the MiG. The thought passed quickly as the trailing MiG once again appeared directly above my nose and seemed to move no faster than a car traveling at a right angle through an intersection a half block away, at no more than seventy miles per hour. As the MiG flew through the 20mm bullet stream I observed multiple hits down its longitudinal axis, on the canopy, and right wing root. As I passed behind the MiG I rolled ninety degrees left and held the *g* to begin a quarter-roll-and-zoom maneuver while continuing to watch the MiG, now at my right four o'clock low position. It was now in heavy wing rock with fire, smoke, fluids, and pieces of the aircraft streaming from its right-wing root. Its nose continued to drop and it crashed into a green meadow, exploding in a huge orange ball of fire approximately ten seconds after I had fired my three hundred round burst.

The Egress: During those last three seconds before the MiG crashed, I inadvertently pushed the UHF transmit button as I shouted to Smallwood, "He's going down! You see 'em? I got him. I got him! He hit the ground!"

This was followed by immediate cheering on the UHF by what sounded like a dozen transmitters and ended with a voice I recognized as that of my squadron commander, John Downey saying, “Way to go!”

The next voice I heard, however, was Buddy Green in Brenda 02, who remarked in the same off-handed tone he had used two minutes earlier, “Let’s get out of here Brenda Lead. Right now, he’s closing at six,” referring to the leader of the MiG-19 formation. The lead MiG actually didn’t close an inch at my six for as I pulled down hard to an easterly heading at fifteen thousand feet, I looked into the cockpit and saw an indicated airspeed, which I can’t precisely recall, but remember noting it was still incredibly high and well above the speed that any pursuing MiG might achieve. Since Brenda 02 was still well above me and further to the east, I told him to continue on toward the coast, get into the clouds, and jink around in hopes of preserving precious, remaining fuel.

As we passed the coast, I directed everyone to climb and set course for our post strike refueling on Tan Anchor. Red Crown passed us a current UHF frequency for the Tan Anchor but had no reply until a lone tanker from the Purple Anchor advised us that everything had been screwed up with the refueling anchors and asked if he could help. After I told him my wingman was critically low on fuel, he advised that he would be waiting for us at the northern extreme of his orbit, just short of the twenty-degree-north-latitude limit set by command directives. After Smallwood’s radar painted the tanker at eighty nautical miles on the nose, I asked the Purple tanker to press on north an additional twenty-five miles. “If you’ve got an emergency, we’ll come” was his reply.

“We’ve got one,” I answered.

“We’re on the way” was his immediate transmission.

The rendezvous was successful with Brenda 02 the first to hit the boom with very little fuel remaining. After I topped off next, we proceeded back to Udorn RTAFB, where I executed the traditional “victory roll” I had dreamed of executing since I was a young boy drawing pictures of P-51s.

As a postscript, Captain Locher’s rescue was successful, making for a

good day at Udorn.

WHERE CAN WE PARK OUR TRUCK?
ANGEL PILATO

How a few MiG Killers from the 432nd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing, Udorn, Air Base, Thailand celebrated.

I was getting used to being awakened by early-morning phone calls informing me of a "problem" at the Officers Club. It usually had to do with a *clong* fight (guys running through the Club chasing people with huge banana leaves), the Air Police arriving to stop a drunken brawl, or the O'Club furniture being dismantled in preparation for a bonfire. This morning the call was from Pete Mendellson, Ops Officer, from the 13th Tactical Fighter Squadron.

"Hello, Captain Pilato speaking," I said in a groggy voice.

"Hey, Angel! We did it! We did it! We shot down a MiG-21! We blew the son of a bitch out of the sky! We got one of those Commies."

Hearing the news that the 13th Squadron had downed a MiG instantly got my attention. "Shit Hot, Pete! That's great. I'm glad to hear it. But, Pete, it's three o'clock," I said as I squinted at the clock on the end table.

"Jesus! Is it that late?" he slurred.

"Yes, it is." Then I asked, "Who got the kill?"

“Fred Olmsted and Gerry Volloy. It’s their first kill and our squadron’s first since 1968,” he said exuberantly. “Can you believe it?” The kill had happened earlier in the day on March 30, 1972, and they were still celebrating.

“Pete, this is great news, but I’m going back to sleep now. I’ll celebrate with you tomorrow. OK?”

“Wait a minute, Angel. Wait a minute. Remember, you told us we could park the truck in the club lobby if we shot down a MiG?”

This conversation was a result of the competition between the Triple Nickel Squadron (555 TFS) and the Panther Pack (13 TFS). The Nickel was the first squadron to shoot down a MiG since 1968 on February 21, 1972, by Bob Lodge and Roger Locher. Then the Nickel shot down another MiG on March 1, and the race was on with the 13th. In addition, the Nickel was the first to put their truck in the lobby of the O’Club. So, if the Nickel put their truck in the O’Club lobby, the Panthers were going to match it. I had told them sure, if you guys shoot down a MiG, you can drive your truck into the lobby too. Of course there was no way I could stop them, but I felt better thinking I had approved the action!

“Yeah, Pete, I did. If you want to park the truck in the lobby, go ahead. Just put a tarp underneath the engine to keep the oil from leaking on the rug, OK? I’m really happy to hear the news, but I’ve gotta get some sleep. Bye.”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute, don’t hang up. I’m sorry I woke you up, but I knew you’d wanna know. There’s one small problem.”

“And what’s the small problem, Pete?” I said now fully alert.

“Well…ah,” he continued, “when we started to drive the truck up the stairs, we couldn’t get it in the front door and now it’s stuck in the doorway.”

“It’s stuck in the doorway! Good grief. I can’t leave you guys alone for a minute. How did that happen, Pete?”

“Well, ah, we thought we could get it through the door. Fact is, Fred measured the front of the truck and the doorway and figured we had enough

clearance," Pete explained.

"How the hell did he measure it?" I asked rather sarcastically.

"Well, Christ, Angel, he eyeballed it. How d'ya think he measured it?" he said like it was a given.

"Pete, can't you guys just back it down the stairs?" I asked. At this point, exhausted, I hoped I'd be able to go back to sleep when I hung up.

"We can't," he said. "It's jammed, and besides, we have to get it into the lobby. It's our turn."

"Jammed? Good grief!" I could hear the guys yelling in the background,

"Tell her we wanna knock the wall down!"

"Look, Angel," Pete persisted, "it's pretty important we get this truck parked in the lobby tonight. Don't forget, Angel, you said we could park our truck in the lobby if we shot down a MiG. We're gonna get this truck into the lobby tonight, if we have to knock the wall down."

I realized the conversation was going nowhere fast. Besides, trying to negotiate with someone who was smashed was, as the pilots would say, "like pissing in the wind."

"OK, Pete. Listen up. You're right—You're totally right. I did say you could park your squadron truck in the lobby. What d'ya think about this idea? Leave the truck where it is. In the morning I'll call the guys over at Civil Engineers and have 'em knock the wall down for ya. OK?"

"But, Angel," he persisted, "we've got enough guys here. We could have that wall down in a few minutes. All we need is a couple of sledgehammers. It'd take no time at all, and then we could drive her right in," he insisted.

Then, before I could respond, I heard him shout out, "Hey guys, who's got some sledgehammers?"

“Pete, wait a minute—wait a minute,” I pleaded.

“Yeah, Angel. I hear ya. The guys are going for some sledgehammers.”

“Hold on a minute, Pete.”

I was thinking, “Oh my God, sledgehammers. They’re going to make a mess of the place.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary. I think it would be a good idea to wait until morning and then let CE do it,” I kept insisting.

The guys in the background were prodding Pete. “Tell her we’re driving this son of a bitch into the club tonight. Come on, Pete—, tell her we can do it.”

He snapped at them and said, “Shut up, you guys., Angel’s trying to say something.”

In as empathetic a voice as I could muster at that hour, I said, “I know you want to get that truck in the lobby tonight and show those Triple Nickel guys you scored a MiG kill. And I know you could probably knock out that wall in no time. But please, let me call CE in the morning, and I promise you, I’ll get it done. Just leave the truck where it is, and I’ll handle it tomorrow. Once CE gets there, you’ll be able to drive your truck right into the lobby. No need to mess with it tonight. OK? What d’ya say? You know you can count on me.”

All the time I was thinking, “I*f I can get them to just leave the truck right there until morning, they’ d sober up, come to their senses, and realize the knocking down the wall was a bad idea*.”

“Angel, CE will take forever to get this done. We want it in the lobby now,” he said as his band of brothers continued to egg him on.

“Pete, you know I’ve got connections over at CE. I can have them over at the club ASAP. They’ll bring the right tools for the job, and they’ll have it done in no time flat. Just let me handle it. Please?” I was envisioning the ramifications of this event. If they knocked down that wall, their MiG kill

might be minimized by a reprimand, or at the very least, some hand slapping. Who knew? Plus, the O'Club's front entrance would be a disaster.

With some reluctance Pete slurred, "OK, OK. Then you'll call CE in the morning and tell 'em to knock down this damn wall. Right?"

"Sure, Pete, sure, absolutely. No problem. I'll take care of it. Go back to celebrating, or better yet, go get some sleep. OK?"

Pete yelled back at the guys, "There's no problem guys. Angel's gonna call CE in the morning, and they're gonna knock out this damn wall for us. Then we'll drive this baby right into the lobby."

I heard their cheers through the phone. "Way t'go, Angel. Shit Hot!"

"Thanks, Angel, you're the best." Pete said. Then he whispered into the phone so no one could hear, "I love you."

"I love you, too, Pete. Now can I get some sleep? I'm going back to bed."

"Angel?" Pete hesitated, "Do you want some company?"

"No, Pete, not tonight."

With the few hours left until morning, I tried to go back to sleep, but to no avail. Shortly afterward, I heard some noise on the street below my BOQ window. It was Pete and the boys from the 13th calling my name out, "Angel, Angel, Pete's out here and wants to come up and play. Angel, Angel," they continued. That was it. I got up, went out on the balcony, and picked up a pail of water that had been collected from the dripping air conditioner and tossed it over the balcony three stories down. It landed square on top of Pete and the group. I yelled out, "Good night, boys!" and slammed the door and hopped back into bed.

The next morning the truck was still partly on the stairs, with the front end jammed in the doorway. Everyone had to go around to the back door to get into the club.

Some of the non-pilots grumbled. “Those jocks are at it again.”

“Why the hell do we have to use the back door?”

“What’s goin’ on around this place?”

“Those guys are out of control.”

In the morning, CE came over to the club, but it wasn’t to knock down the wall. They were there to fix a leak in the kitchen. I told the sergeants what had happened and why the truck was there, “I don’t know how I kept them from knocking down the wall. Maybe it was because they were all too drunk or because they couldn’t find any sledgehammers.”

Just then, I looked out the window and saw Pete coming toward the club heading for the back door. I turned to the CE crew and said, “Here comes Major Mendellson from the 13thThirteenth. He’s the one who called me at three a.m. Just go along with me on whatever I say, will ya?” They agreed.

As Pete walked into my office I said, “Hi, Pete, how’s it goin’? The troops from CE are here to knock down the wall. They said it wouldn’t take too long and then you can drive your truck right on into the lobby.”

He looked a little surprised, “Well, that’s what I came over to talk to ya about,” he said with a sheepish look.

Before he could continue, I said, “See, Pete, I told you not to worry. I knew if I called CE and told them what needed to be done, they’d come right over. Isn’t that right, Sergeant?” I said and turned to get his response.

“That’s right, Capt’n. We’ve got the equipment right outside in the truck, and we’re ready to go. It’ll probably take a half-day or so. After we knock down the wall, we’ll have to put up a new door jam and order some new double doors. We can put some canvas up over the entryway until the new doors get here. By the way, Captain, are we charging this work to the O’Club or the 13th Squadron?” This guy was going along with the ruse better than if I’d written a script for him.

Finally, Pete interrupted, “Wait a minute—hold on—Angel. That’s what

I came over here for. We've got a tow truck out front. They're gonna hitch it up to our truck and get it off the front steps."

"You mean you've changed your mind?" I asked with an innocent smile.

"Well yeah, I think it's best if we remove the truck, seeing that folks haven't been able to use the front door. I think we might have been a little overly enthusiastic last night."

"You mean this morning, don't you?" I retorted and then turned toward the CE guys.

"Well, sorry, guys. I guess you're not needed here after all. Sorry for the inconvenience. Thanks for coming over so quickly. You're the best." I gave them a wink and a smile. "Why don't you guys go back to the kitchen and have Sergeant White give you a case of cold beer for your trouble."

"Way da go, Capt'n. Thanks. Any time we can help out just call us," they said, eager to get their prize for a "good performance."

The tow truck hitched up the pickup truck, and a half hour later off it went. The front door was back in use and the pilots were on to their next MiG kill. The practice of driving the squadron's truck into the club became so routine that the pilots nicknamed the O'Club "Angel's Truck Stop."

I started calling the monthly newsletter the "Truck Stop News" and Pete even had a sign made that said, "Angel's Truck Stop." They hung it out front under the O'Club sign. Unfortunately, someone stole it. I never did get it back. Does anybody know who has it?

From February 21 to August 28, 1972, when I left Udorn, the Air Force had shot down twenty-nine MiGs with our 432nd TRW accounting for twenty-one:

555th TFS—Triple Nickel—eleven
13th TFS—Panther Pack—seven
TDY squadrons deployed at our wing—three (523rd TFS with one and 58th TFS with two)

During the time I was at Udorn (September 1971 to August 1972), our wing had fifteen MIA/KIAs, fifteen POWs and two killed in an aircraft accident. In the end, Communism would prevail in Vietnam, but while we were there, we hoped it wouldn't.

Note: Taken from a chapter in *Angel's Truck Stop: A Woman's Love, Laughter, and Loss during the Vietnam War*, www.angelstruckstop.com. Captain Pilato was manager of the Udorn Officers Club and knew most of the fighter crews who ate, drank, and relaxed there. A female officer in a nearly all male setting was a challenge she handled with poise and charm.

THEY ARE CALLED MISSILES
JIM MEANS

US aircrews downed about two hundred North Vietnam Air Force MiGs during the Vietnam War. Seventy percent of the MiGs were shot down by US fighters employing the AIM-9 Sidewinder, AIM-7 Sparrow, and AIM-4 Falcon guided missiles. All three were conceived in the post-WWII 1940s to defend against medium and high altitude Soviet nuclear-armed bombers. They were developed through the 1950s and were considered state of the art air-to-air weapon technology when first used in Vietnam.

The simple infrared (IR) seeking AIM-9 was the most deadly air-to-air missile in Vietnam with 18 percent of the 454 fired killing a total of 81 MiGs. Requiring skillful flying by the attacking pilot to aim and lock-on the seeker before launch, but requiring little information from the launch aircraft, the AIM-9 was well suited for the air-to-air rules of engagement enforced during the war. The pride and joy of Navy China Lake, the AIM-9 saw incremental improvements during the war. Shortcomings in the AIM-9B's target discrimination, launch range, launch G, tail-on aspect limits, maneuverability, proximity fuse and warhead lethality were improved in the Navy's AIM-9D and *g* variants. The USAF was slow to adopt the AIM-9, determined to get a return on their investment in the AIM-4. By the late 1950s it became clear the Sidewinder was superior to the Falcon resulting in a large USAF AIM-9B Sidewinder order. During the Vietnam War, USAF and contractor Philco-Ford chose to rework their large inventory of AIM-9Bs creating improved

AIM-9E and J variants. These variants diverged from the Navy's Sidewinders in key areas including how the seeker was cooled and scanned. Despite the hard work by government and contractor missile developers the basic shortcomings of the AIM-9 were not completely solved resulting in over 80 percent of the missiles launched either not guiding or even more frustrating, guiding to the MiG but not killing it. The AIM-9B accounted for two-thirds of the USAF's 35 MiG kills while the AIM-9D is credited with nearly one-half of the USN/USMC's 46 MiGs. The war ended before the improved USN AIM-9H and USAF AIM-9J "Dogfight Sidewinder" could make a significant impact.

Unlike the simple Sidewinder, the semi-active CW radar guided AIM-7 Sparrow demanded very complex and accurate prelaunch targeting and post-launch uninterrupted target illumination from the F-4. The burden on the aircrews to get everything right was second only to the herculean effort required of the maintainers.

There were many ways of guaranteeing a bad AIM-7 day; motor fire wire not plugged in, the leading cause of "no motor fires," firing without a radar lock, RIO/PSO/WSO in the rear cockpit selecting "Wide" speed-gate sweep, which usually caused the AIM-7 to lock onto ground clutter, or "Circ 2" radar polarization, reversed for the AIM-7's antennas. In the heat of the dogfight, the F-4's radar and analog computer needed a few seconds of "settling time" after lock-on to feed the missile the accurate prelaunch information it required. Most important was the requirement for the pilot to wait for the radar to derive the closure rate to properly preset the AIM-7's speedgate doppler search window before launch. Pilots were coached to count one Mississippi, two Mississippi to four after radar lock before firing the missile. In the heat of battle this requirement was hard to remember. Even with prefect execution by maintainers, aircraft, aircrews and the missile's seeker, the AIM-7's doppler proximity fuse and expanding continuous rod warhead too often would detonate early or fail to kill the MiG.

Over six hundred AIM-7s were fired during the war. Only 10 percent killed MiGs! The Vietnam War started with the AIM-7D (five kills) and the AIM-7E (twenty-four kills) variants, which were not well suited for short-range air combat maneuvering engagements. Once again, hard work by dedicated Navy, USAF, and contractor, Raytheon, engineers in an all-out

crash program created a much-improved version, the AIM-7E-2 “Dogfight Sparrow.” The AIM-7E-2 entered service in the late 1960s scoring thirty-one kills with its much shorter minimum range, greater maneuverability, and improved proximity fusing. USAF F-4s scored over 80 percent of the AIM-7 kills during the Vietnam War.

Initially, USAF F-4Ds were armed with AIM-7Es and the Hughes AIM-4D IR missiles. The AIM-4D Falcon was designed for internal carriage on Air Defense Command interceptors and intended to be employed in salvo firing tactics against non-maneuvering bombers. Externally carried under the F-4D’s wings, the AIM-4D’s airframe and electronics suffered in the Vietnam environment. Long IR seeker cool-down time, single use-limited cooling capacity, poor cockpit controls and displays, and a very small warhead with only a contact fuse resulted in the AIM-4s being replaced by AIM-9s in short order. Surprisingly, during Rolling Thunder, five F-4D aircrews scored MiG kills with the AIM-4 despite these limitations giving the much-derided Falcon the same 10 percent success rate as the Sparrow (5/54).

In my operational test and evaluation (OT&E) role at Pt. Mugu, it was not unusual to achieve 100 percent success rates with both Sidewinders and Sparrows. In this expert rich environment, well planned, instrumented, and rehearsed test flights using missiles sometimes still warm from the test set achieved very good results. In addition to supporting the parent OT&E squadron, VX-4, Guided Missile Unit 41 (GMU-41) provided AIM-9 and AIM-7 expertise and west coast training exercises for the USN and USMC F-8 Crusader and F-4 Phantom squadrons. The USAF F-4 Wing at George AFB also hired GMU-41 to provide similar services for aircrews transitioning to the F-4C and D. The priority was clearly on “qualifying” USN, USMC and USAF aircrews on the AIM-9 and AIM-7 missile by successfully getting one of each to leave the rail. In these benign training exercises the missiles remained reliable. The “training” included rudimentary half-day classroom “Theory of Operation” and “Switchology.” When it came to tactics we had nothing to offer, although I might have accidently left my copy of the latest VX-4 “Tactics Manual” behind every now and then.

Thankfully the limitations in air-to-air missiles, fighter aircraft, and training were recognized, documented, and largely corrected in our modern air-to- air guided weapons and the aircraft that employ them. Today aircrews

get realistic tactical training at the USN and USAF Fighter Weapons Schools and large scale “Red Flag” like exercises. However, I would still ripple fire a couple until the name is changed to “Hit-tile.”

EPITAPHS TO HANOI JANE
FRANK ALFTER

One of the more unusual experiences while working nights at Korat was the time at the arming end of the runway (EOR) sometime around August-September 1972. Linebacker was in full swing, and I was still assigned to the F-4 loading section as the four-man, which meant I was the jammer driver.

On this particular evening, I was the lead weapons guy on duty at the arm EOR. We did not use headset communications with the aircrews during the war, but rather hand signals to ensure the armament switches were “off, safe, normal.” After the war, we did use comm headsets at EOR.

A single F-4 came to the EOR. After the crew chief directed him to the spot where we were to pull pins and arm him up, I signaled to the pilot to ensure all armament switches were off/safe/normal. Then I directed my weapons guys to begin pulling pins and inspecting for anything that may be out of the ordinary for the weapons loaded. After I had sent them under the aircraft, I began my cursory inspection just off the left wing with my flashlight.

As my light beam touched the left leading edge, I noticed some grease pencil writings that were directly attributed to Hanoi Jane’s presence in theater. She had been famously and controversially photographed sitting on an antiaircraft gun during a 1972 visit to Hanoi. As I scanned beyond the

leading edge, I could see more writing all over the wing, and when I moved the beam up toward the fuselage, there were still more epitaphs. Then I scanned the whole topside of the aircraft, and it seemed to be completely covered in unsavory, but much deserved, words about Jane.

This aircraft, if memory serves me, was an F-4C from CCK, Taiwan. It was in transit, and my guess was that it was making the rounds from base to base in theater to collect the troops' feelings about Jane Fonda being in Hanoi. I knew it wasn't one of ours since it had many antennas on its spine. Our F-4s did not. Someone must have photos.

AN F-4 RESCUE STORY
HANK FANNIN

In 1971–1972 I was serving my fifth, and last, USAF tour of duty in Southeast Asia as a HH-53C helicopter Flight Engineer (FE)/Door unner assigned to the 21st Special Operations Squadron (SOS). We were based at Nakhon Phanom (NKP) in Northeast Thailand. NKP, aka Naked Fanny, was located just a few miles from the Mekong River separating Thailand from Laos and only sixty miles as a crow flies from the border of North Vietnam. It was a perfect air base for launching air support into Laos or Vietnam. For that reason, since the early days of the conflict, NKP had been home to one of several USAF helicopter Air Rescue Units, including the famed Jolly Green Giants.

Although I was assigned to the 21st SOS—because of my prior Air Rescue experience, three of my previous tours were with Air Rescue units—I filled in as necessary to fly missions with the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS). The 21st SOS (Dust Devils) and 40th ARRS (Jolly Greens) flight crews shared the same hooch facilities, drank beer in the same hooch bar, and when one bled—we all bled. Basically, we were one band of helicopter brothers.

This particular SAR mission started routinely. After a briefing from intel officers, our two HH-53s departed NKP before first light and headed north across the Mekong River into Laos to our designated orbit position just outside the border of North Vietnam, about a two-hundred-mile (1.5 hour)

flight. Our job was to fly in a holding pattern around eight thousand feet for as long as that day's air strikes inside North Vietnam were going on. That put us fairly close to any aircraft that were shot down during air strikes, and any fighter aircraft that were damaged knew to head straight for us.

Our rescue team consisted of our two HH-53s with the call sign Jolly, a specially equipped C-130 Hercules with the callsign Crown that acted as the rescue command post, plus two A-1E Sky Raiders with the callsign Sandy that acted as FACs and provided much needed fire power. Our two rescue choppers were assigned Low Bird and High Bird duties. Low Bird was the designated rescue pick-up crew, and High Bird provided support and cover fire.

Each HH-53 helicopter had a crew of five, pilot and copilot, flight engineer/door gunner and two para-rescue specialists (PJ's). On this mission we also had combat photographers flying with us, one on each chopper. The PJs manned two of our three miniguns, the aft ramp gun, and the left window gun while I manned the door gun.

Shortly after we crossed the border into Laos, we test fired our mini-guns and got ourselves, and gear, ready for the mission. Some missions were milk runs and other times hot and heavy—one never knew. As we got closer to our orbit position we found ourselves flying between two layers of clouds, one layer of morning fog and mist that blocked our view below and a higher layer of clouds that blocked the sky above. The sun was just rising in the East and when it reached the clear space in between the two layers, it was completely surreal- a red fireball sandwiched between two layers of white clouds.

Before we reached our designated orbit position, we heard a distress call, "May Day, May Day, I've got two chutes" along with the coordinates telling us where the two parachutes had been seen. A Marine F-4 had just been shot down by a MiG-21. The crew had bailed out and they were coming down in an area full of bad guys. The downed F-4's wingman was busy making sure there weren't any other MiGs on his tail and for a while things were more than just a little frantic with radio calls coming from all over.

Meanwhile, the Marine fighter pilot, Captain Sam Cordova, was on the

ground and talking to Crown with his survival radio. From the little we could hear it was obvious that he was in deep trouble with bad guys closing in fast. His last radio transmission stated that he'd fallen into a ravine and could hear the bad guys approaching. Then all attempts to raise Captain Cordova on his radio were unsuccessful and it was sort of a given that he had been captured or worse. I found out later that Captain Cordova's remains were returned for burial in 1988 and I still regret we couldn't get to him in time.

The downed F-4 navigator, Lieutenant Darrell Borders, came down on a small ridge and had high tailed it away from his parachute to shake the bad guys off his trail. By the time our two HH-53s got to his location the Sandys were in communication with him and were laying down cover fire as close to his position as possible to keep the bad guys away and buy us some time to get to him.

We were in the area shortly after the two fighter jocks hit the ground. As the A-1s trolled over the navigator's reported position, they started receiving small arms fire. The Low Bird pilot, Captain Thomas Laud, decided to give it a go, in spite of all the bad guys in the area. The Low Bird headed down and into a hover over the survivor only to be hit with extremely heavy small arms fire. The combat photographer, Technical Sergeant Don Looper, was wounded in the leg, the chopper was leaking fluid from several nicked hydraulic lines, and they were having flight control problems. They were forced to abandon the attempt. The FE, Master Sergeant David McLeod, a friend and mentor, later told me he didn't think they wouldn't make it out of there alive and couldn't believe only one crew member was wounded. Sadly, David was lost during a later mission over Cambodia. With one crewmember wounded and a badly damaged aircraft, Captain Laud headed his chopper back into Laos to find the closest, safe airstrip.

Our pilot, Captain Mike Swager, about as cool a pilot I've flown with, asked us if we wanted to give it a go, warned us it would probably be a little on the hairy side, and basically left it up to the crew to decide. I think he already knew the answer and a few seconds later he set our chopper up for a balls-to-the-walls run at treetop level toward the survivor. The Sandys had already zeroed in on the survivor's position and were making 20mm strafing runs to try and get the bad guys to back off and give us some room.

As we hovered just above the treetops, I directed the pilot into position directly over the survivor but just after we got into position and I'd started the tree penetrator down on the rescue hoist all hell broke loose. Small arms fire was hitting us from all directions. I felt a blow on the right side of my flight helmet and then lost intercom. A small arms round had hit my flight helmet boom mike and severed my communications wire. I signaled the combat photographer, Sergeant Jim Cockerill, who happened to be standing right behind me and he jumped up into the FE cockpit seat and relayed my hand signals to the pilot. The two PJs, Technical Sergeant Mike Walker on the ramp gun and Sergeant Charles McQuoid in the left window, were returning fire and giving directions to the pilot to keep us out of the trees while I kept giving directions to the pilot so he could keep the chopper over the survivor.

When the tree penetrator hit the ground, it became tangled in some bamboo and I had to spend a minute or so getting it free. Minutes seem like hours when someone is shooting at you. I could see the survivor on the ground directly under us fighting his way through the brush toward the rescue seat and I finally managed to place the tree penetrator right in his hands. Luckily he had the strength and resolve to get the seat on the penetrator pulled down, got himself on the seat and hung on for dear life, because, believe me, I was reeling that rescue hoist up at max speed. I think it took me all five seconds flat to get the survivor to the door, onto the chopper, and get my minigun swung out the door to start returning fire.

We were still taking lots of small arms fire as Captain Swager rolled the choppers nose over and started pulling up and out of there. As we were gaining altitude, I could see at least a half dozen bad guys armed with AK-47s in a small clearing in the trees at our two o'clock position. Lucky for us, one of the Sandys was making a run straight at them and they were ducking for cover instead of firing at us. I lost sight of them as we pulled up and away, but I doubt many were left standing after Sandy unloaded on them.

As soon as we were in the clear, we did a quick damage assessment and were truly surprised to find that not one of us had been wounded. Our chopper was riddled with holes. It looked like Swiss cheese around my door position and we were dripping hyd. fluid in several places plus streaming JP-4 from bullet holes in our fuel tanks. I tried to transfer fuel from the tank that was losing the most fuel into the undamaged tank, but that didn't work. We

contacted a C-130 tanker orbiting nearby, plugged in for an air-to-air refueling and took on enough fuel so we could pick up the other helicopter crew and make it home.

Captain Laud and his crew had landed safely on one of the many airstrips carved out of the jungles throughout Laos by Air America. LIMA sites, as they were known, were safe depending on who had control at the time. Sometimes the only way to find out was to fly over and see if anyone shot. As luck would have it, they had made it to a relatively safe and friendly LIMA site. Their chopper had so much battle damage that they barely made it to the landing site and we ended up having to leave the chopper there to be repaired and flown out later. I'm not sure that chopper was ever recovered. It might have been destroyed to keep it from falling into enemy hands.

The flight home to NKP was both happy and sad. We were happy as hell that none of us were killed or seriously wounded. Sergeant Looper's leg wound was minor, and he was back in action a week later. And, of course, we were happy that we'd saved a fellow airman. At the same time, we were saddened we were unable to rescue Captain Cordova. Leaving a fellow airman behind to be captured or killed always weighed heavily on us, and it's something that all Air Rescue crewmembers hope and pray they never have to experience.

All of the crewmembers were awarded the Silver Star for gallantry for this particular mission.



CITATION TO ACCOMPANY THE AWARD OF THE SILVER STAR

Staff Sergeant Hershel E. Fannin distinguished himself by gallantry in connection with military operations against an opposing armed force in Southeast Asia on August 26, 1972. On that date, Sergeant Fannin, a Flight Engineer on an HH-53C Rescue Helicopter, with full knowledge that a previous recovery attempt had been met with intense automatic weapon fire, courageously volunteered to attempt the rescue mission for a downed American airman. Although his aircraft was being riddled by bullets as it hovered within meters of the North Vietnamese gunners, he stood in the open and unprotected crew entry door while operating the rescue hoist to raise the downed airman to safety. By his gallantry and devotion to duty, Sergeant Fannin has reflected great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

BARF BAGS FULL
FRANK ALFTER

Our Thuds were returning from another sortie over Hanoi—moments of intense activity and then longer periods waiting for our jets to return. I was a brand new staff sergeant and had been reassigned to the F-105G as a weapons load crew chief. Not wanting to wait any longer, I was on the line to help a crew chief recover his jet. Being a weapons guy, it wasn't normal for me to help the aircraft crew chief catch his jet. But, we were going to be loading this jet as quickly as we could and this was a nice change and experience for me.

The jet arrived and the crew chief signaled the pilot to stop exactly on his spot. The canopies came open and the engine shut down. We placed chocks on the mains and proceeded to put the ladders up. The gents had expended both of their AGM-45s and the AGM-78. In fact, all weapons stations were clean, except for the AGM-45 launchers, which were not jettisonable. The AGM-78 launcher and pylon were gone, and the centerline and left inboard tanks were gone.

I put the aft ladder up for the EWO and as I went up the ladder to take his personal equipment, I noticed a strange smell. All the usual smells were there, the JP-4, hydraulics, oils, and so on, but this was a different smell. I got back down off the ladder and waited for Lieutenant Fischman to come down and the closer he got, the stronger the smell.

When I asked him what that smell was, he reached in his vest pocket and pulled out a fully loaded barf bag. He told me Bill (Kennedy) had the airplane all over the sky as there were no fewer than ten missiles coming at them at one time. One can only imagine what it must have been like for Lieutenant Fischman, trying to keep track of the beeps and squeaks, face down in the scope, while the airplane was anything but steady.

This was one of my vivid experiences that told me the guys who flew into the teeth of the tiger every day and night were not getting paid enough! There was always a bit of “us and them” between ops and maintenance, but this was proof to me that these gents were the true warriors we all wanted to be. A lesson that would do me well in my future as a maintenance officer.

WE'VE COME A LONG WAY, BABY
RUSS EVERTS

SEPTEMBER 1972, TAKHLI RTAFB, 434TH TFS, THIRD TOUR

Sometime in September 1972, we were fragged to support a mission from Ubon to attack the Thai Nguyen Steel Works north of Hanoi. The plan was for our four-ship of F-4Ds to join with a four-ship from Ubon's 25th TFS, who were fragged to hit the steel works with a LORAN assisted drop. I believe this was the first attempt to use LORAN to drop on a target that deep into North Vietnam. To achieve this, we were to fly in an eight-ship, line abreast formation at about ten-thousand-feet MSL and drop on the leader's signal. There was no MiGCAP or Wild Weasel support, so we were on our own. The weather was clear as a bell.

Our flight lead was Major Jack "Pops" Arnold; number two was Captain Don "Animal" Larson; number three was Captain Doug "Heckler" Henneman, and number four was yours truly. Pops briefed Doug and me to be looking for MiG's and if we saw any, we were cleared to jettison our bombs and engage. On takeoff Pops had a burner blowout and had to abort. Animal filled in as lead, as briefed, and another ground spare from Holloman filled in as number two. We got airborne, hit the tanker, joined up with the flight from the 25th, and started our ingress to the target. None of us were feeling very comfortable with CAVU weather and no CAP or Weasel support. Strangely enough, we were not engaged by any SAMs or even AAA

on our route in.

About ten miles short of the target, both my and Doug's backseater (can't remember who; halfheimers) spotted two silver glints flying by Yen Bai airfield just to the left of our route of flight. Doug and I immediately jettisoned our bombs and turned to engage. Both backseaters got radar locks on separate aircraft and were starting to drool, but we had to get close enough to visually ID friend or foe. Turns out they were friends; two USN A-7s dragging the airfield to see if anyone would come up to play. We disengaged and turned back to rejoin with the flight, which had just completed the drop.

If you recall my previous story from my first tour at Ubon in the 25th TFS, I mentioned the extensive "charting" we did of Laos to refine the accuracy of the LORAN system. None of that "charting" had ever been done in NVN. You can guess the results of the drop; so we heard from Animal afterwards, it was significantly short. Nice experiment, but a waste of ordinance and gas. We all returned to our respective bases, landed, de-armed, and taxied back.

After deplaning, we were individually met by the Holloman Wing Commander. He was very apologetic for not having a field grade spare available to fill in for Pops when he aborted. It was the policy of the 49th Wing that all flights to the RP 6/Hanoi area be led by a major or above. I asked the colonel if he had any idea of the experience that was in our flight. He said no, so I proceeded to give him a rundown. All four of us (including the Holloman captain who spared in for Pops) were on our third tours in SEA. We each had around four hundred combat missions, over one thousand hours of combat time in the F-4, and had flown into and over NVN, SVN, Laos, and Cambodia. There wasn't any place we hadn't been or anything we hadn't done. I mentioned that as number four, I just happened to be the high time guy, but not by much. He "thanked me" for my input and that was that. To his credit, about a week later, a new direction came down that said that any captain with over one thousand combat hours could start a RP 6 flight lead upgrade program. Although a few of us started that checkout, we were all rotated back to the States before it could be completed.

Fast-forward eighteen years to Desert Storm when captains leading flights to Baghdad and other bad places was the norm. Our Air Force actually

listened and learned and got the real war fighters leading the charge.

YGBSM
RUSS EVERTS

SEPTEMBER 17, 1972, TAKHLI RTAFB, THIRD TOUR

All fighter pilots reading this will understand the title and its meaning. Those non-fighter pilots will understand its significance after reading this. **"**YGBSM**"** stands for "You gotta be shittin' me."

On September 17, 1972, the 434th TFS, TDY from George AFB to the 49th TFW at Takhli, provided a flight of four, maybe more, in support of a 49th TFW large force, twenty-four aircraft, attack planned against a storage area/vehicle facility northwest of Hanoi. I was number four of our four-ship flight and Doug Henneman (with Ev Dyer in his pit) was number three. As the target area was a bit difficult to find, Doug and I, both being prior Fast FACs and used to making detailed target study, spent a lot of time in the intel shop reviewing photos of the target and memorizing significant landmarks along our ingress route to "walk our eyes" onto the target. In the event weather precluded attacking this target, the force was cleared to attack targets along either the northwest or northeast railways north of Hanoi.

Takhli is located in far west Thailand and is 450 miles from Hanoi, DaNang, and Saigon. Missions to RP 6 either went the "short" route up through Thailand and Laos or the "long" route east to DaNang and then north over the Gulf of Tonkin. This particular mission took the "long" route and

was to ingress north of the port of Haiphong with the target being located not too far from Kep airfield, one of many MiG bases in NVN. The “short” missions were only about three to four hours long—the “long” ones on the order of five to six hours. Briefing, start, taxi, takeoff, and join up were all uneventful.

As we turned north over the Gulf of Tonkin, the force joined up with our tankers on Purple anchor and started refueling. As Doug was on the boom, I was flying off his left wing, waiting for my turn. I noticed his cockpit was getting very smoky and asked if he had a problem. About that time he disconnected from the boom and said he had some kind of cockpit fire and needed to divert back to DaNang. I asked the force commander permission to escort him back. About the same time, one of the A/A escort spares said he could do the escort, so the commander told me to stay put and cleared Doug, and the escort spare off to DaNang.

As Doug proceeded south, the force left the tankers and started toward the ingress point. Weather was looking a bit iffy with lots of cumulus clouds around, but also with lots of space between them. Depending on where the clouds were would determine whether we could attack the primary target or not. They also made it difficult to navigate to the target, unless you did a *lot* of target/route study. We were about ten to fifteen miles out, and the weather was making it difficult, but not impossible, to find the target. Both the northwest and northeast railways were fairly well open in the event we needed to divert to them. As I was flying formation and walking my eyes along the landmarks to the target, it’s apparent to me that we could pull this off if we were a bit flexible in our attack plan. However, that was not to be today. As we overflew the target, just off to our left and attackable, the force commander directed a weather abort for the primary and alternate targets. That was the first YGBSM!

So we started this big sweeping left-hand turn with twenty-three fully loaded F-4s, twelve five-hundred-pound bombs each, at about fifteen thousand feet in full view of Kep. The only good news about this mission was that there were no SAM launches, no MiG activity, and hardly any AAA to deal with. Once the herd got moving east and crossed Haiphong feet wet, the force commander realized that none of us had enough gas to get to the tankers with all the bombs on. So second YGBSM! He directed we jettison

the bombs, safe, into the Gulf of Tonkin. We all did, as we had no choice at that point, and proceeded to the tankers for our post-strike refueling. There was smoke in a lot of cockpits at that moment, and not from any cockpit fires! About the time we were getting on the tanker, we heard Beepers on the Guard channel and heard that Doug and Ev just ejected over the gulf. Obviously, they never made it to DaNang. They better tell their rescue story, so I won't attempt to here. However, there is the third YGBSM in that the escort spare never found or joined up with Doug, so now we had two guys floating around in the Gulf of Tonkin, in very heavy seas, and no one knew positively where they were. Just about perfect!

The only really good news about this mission was that Doug and Ev were picked up by an Army chopper after an hour or two in the water, quite a story of its own. All the rest of us got back to Takhli, landed and debriefed. What a waste! We launched twenty-four F-4s, recovered twenty-three, didn't drop a live bomb on anything, burned up thousands of pounds of JP-4, added 5.5 hours to all our backsides and to the jets, and accomplished *nothing*! On a happier note, I don't believe that the L/C force commander was ever allowed to lead another one; a very good thing.

HAIPHONG HARBOR RESCUE 1972
GARY RETTERBUSH

We had been in the Hanoi area as part of a fairly large strike package and were on our way out to sea and home when I heard that an F-4 was hit and going down. When I heard the call sign, I knew it was one of the crews from my squadron. A quick check showed that we were not too far from them, so I got a gas and ammo check from my flight. On the basis of this info, I told number three and four to head for home, and my wingman and I turned back to the coastline. Then we got the downed crew on the radio, and they were just outside the mouth of Haiphong Harbor, floating around in their little rubber dinghies. What a great place to go boating!

It didn't take us long to get back to where they were and actually find them. We started to circle at low altitude and made a couple of low passes over them. I wanted them to feel that they weren't alone. Since we were getting a little low on fuel, we dropped our empty external tanks to reduce drag. I noticed a couple of enemy patrol boats leaving the shore and heading toward the crew. We climbed and started a turn in their direction as if we were going to attack them. They got the idea and very quickly turned back to shore. Little did they know that neither of us had any munitions left except for a couple of old Sidewinders! We had expended everything we had on the strike at Hanoi. Our maneuver was just a good old-fashion poker bluff, and it worked. I found out later that another flight had in fact attacked a boat going out toward the rafts. That was probably why the bluff worked.

While all this was going on, I had requested a tanker to come north as we were starting to get very low on gas. I had also alerted the rescue folks. The closest turned out to be a Navy ship in the Gulf of Tonkin. They launched a chopper in our direction.

I asked if any other aircraft were in the general area, and there was a flight of F-4s that responded. They were on their way home after a strike and had enough gas to high cap for about twenty to thirty minutes. They said they would cover them while we went for gas. After one more very low pass over the crew to once again give them a warm, cozy feeling and assure them that we'd be right back to get them out, we headed south to hit the tanker. Frankly, I was wondering if we would even get to the tanker as we were really low on gas, and it was a fair trip to where I expected the tanker to be. The tankers were only supposed to go so far north, and that was it. Well, the tanker had been listening to all this on the radio, and he and his crew said, "To hell with it—we're going North!" They were out over the Gulf of Tonkin. Now this is a single unarmed KC-135 with no escort, and he is really putting it on the line.

After about fifteen minutes, we spotted the tanker, and I told my wingman to go in first and get a couple thousand pounds of gas. Then I would go in and get some, and then he could go back and fill up. My wingman got his fifteen hundred pounds very quickly, and I slid into position to refuel, but the boom operator didn't hit me. I asked him what was going on as I was almost on fumes. He said I needed to open my refueling door! Great, the switch was in the open position! I cycled the switch a few times, but nothing happened. I tried the emergency method, and that also didn't work. I told the boomer to tap the door with the boom to help open it. He did so, but still nothing. By now I was expecting a flame out at any time. I cycled the switch again and told him to really hit the door hard. He said if he hit it any harder, he would probably punch a hole in the fuselage. I told him at this point it really didn't matter; just hit it as hard as he could! He did, and the door opened! I quickly filled up, and then my wingman topped off. We saluted the tanker and headed back toward Haiphong Harbor.

On the way back, I got in contact with the Navy chopper (from the USS *Long Beach*) that was on the way in, and I told him exactly where the crew was. He was obviously not overly pleased when he heard the coordinates, and

there was a long, pregnant pause while he thought about the situation. Then he asked if we could escort him in and out, and I said, “No sweat.”

He then said, “OK, we’ll give it a try.”

So we met him a few miles out to sea, and we headed into the harbor area with the chopper slightly behind us. I kept thinking, “I sure wish choppers flew faster!” We made a really low pass with the gear and flaps down, and I flashed the landing light to let Joe Lee and Mike know the chopper was on the way to get them. The chopper went in and grabbed the crew, and we headed back out to sea.

We escorted the chopper out to sea until he was safe and on his way home to the ship. Then we turned to hit the tanker as we needed a drink again. I called the tanker and requested his position, and he said check twelve o’clock. Hell, that was about where we left him after completing the last refueling! That turkey had been orbiting out there all by himself, waiting for us because he knew we’d need a drink pretty bad if we made it. Now that is a crew with the biggest brass balls I’ve ever seen! This time there was no problem with the refueling.

We hit the tank, refueled, and every one headed for home with a good feeling that a great teamwork effort had paid off.

When the crew got flown back to Korat the next day; they had a big smile on their faces! That made it all worthwhile.

I put the KC-135 crew and the chopper crew in for a Silver Star, and they deserved it.

TANKS A-GO-GO
RUSS EVERTS

THE 434TH TFS, TAKHLI, 1972

One of the most enjoyable and satisfying missions we flew out of Takhli were trip turns to either DaNang or Bien Hoa Air Bases in South Vietnam. Normally we would takeoff as a two or three ship, work with a FAC in SVN on either a troops-in-contact or other mission, recover at DaNang or Bien Hoa, refuel, rearm, and takeoff to work with another FAC—recover, refuel, rearm, and do it a third time, with a return to Takhli when done. In late August or early September, I was part of a three-ship "trip turn" mission to DaNang.

As all our 434th captains were flight leads, most all on their third tours, we would each lead one of the three missions. On this day, I led the first, with Captain Randy "Yogi" Royce in my pit; Marine Lieutenant Stan Foltz, an exchange officer with the 434th, led the second; and Captain Jon "Nighttime Nick" Nicholson led the third. The first two missions were uneventful. However, the third turned out to be absolutely fantastic!

Nick contacted the FAC we were to work with, and he said he had eighteen to twenty NVN tanks in the open, heading North in retreat. Our fangs came out, and we all started drooling in our masks! Nick said, "Let's select pairs"—we were each carrying twelve five-hundred-pound "slick" bombs—"and use a low-angle, low-drag delivery," a fifteen to twenty degree delivery. We agreed, and the fight was on. It was like the proverbial shooting

fish in a rain barrel. The tanks were in a staggered trail, box formation in four or five columns. They seemed oblivious to our attacks, which were all from their rear. Why they kept running in a straight line, we'll never know, but it sure made it easy. We just picked on the tail-end Charlie in each column and worked our way up each column on subsequent passes. We each made six passes dropping two bombs each pass.

At the end of our work, the FAC was ecstatic! The BDA he gave us was on the order of twelve to fourteen tanks destroyed or disabled. Some of the best bombing he'd ever seen, he said. We all felt pretty good about ourselves, thanked him, and started our return to Takhli. Approaching Ubon it was obvious there was a large thunderstorm line that looked like it stretched from Ubon through Korat and onto Takhli. In fact, it did, and all three of those bases were closed for the time being because of the storm's intensity. We were directed to land at Udorn along with a whole lot of other F-4s from all three of those bases.

After completing our Intel debrief, we got a message to call the 49th Wing Command Post. I called and was informed by the duty officer that we were "somebody" with 7th AF and the RVNAF. Now, being "somebody" can be a good thing or a bad thing, so I asked which it was. It seems there was a Vietnamese FAC in the aircraft with the USAF FAC we worked with. He was so impressed with what we did, that he called his HQ and asked that we all be awarded a medal right away. The duty officer said the six of us had just been awarded the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Silver Star. Yay, the good thing won for once!

After a number of celebratory cocktails and storytelling to our comrades in the bar at Udorn, we hit the sack and returned to Takhli first thing the next morning. About four months later, when we had all returned back to George AFB, we received the citations for the award. What was distinctive about them was that they all looked like they had been typed on a typewriter that had been damaged or nearly destroyed in some attack. They were a sight to behold, and we all had a good chuckle, looking at them. Ragged as they were, they were certainly a nice acknowledgment of the work we had done!

PHUC YEN
RUSS EVERTS

TAKHLI RTAFB, 433RD TFS
SEPTEMBER 1972, THIRD TOUR

Phuc Yen was an active MiG airfield northwest of Hanoi. In early September 1972, the 49th TFW, our host wing at Takhli, was tasked to attack the airfield with two four-ship flights of F-4s. The 434th provided at least two four ships for that strike force. Chappie Wasson, my GIB, and I filled the unenviable position as number twenty-four in this strike force. A truly memorable mission it was!

Our first stop of the day was the mass intel briefing. We were informed that the only known defenses around the airfield were two separate 23 or 37mm AAA sites. We all looked at each other and chuckled a bit. We expected a lot more and figured SAMs would also be active. NVN always seemed to get a new shipment of SA-2s the first and third weeks of the month.

Flight briefs, takeoff, and joinup with the tankers and support forces were normal. We were flying the short route this day, through Northern Laos and into RP 6 from the west. As we were within about ten miles of crossing the Black River, electronic activity and radio chatter started to pick up significantly. The APS-107 RHAW gear in the F-4D seemed to pick up every electron in the area and was constantly screeching at us. I picked up a visual

launch of two SA-2s off our right side, and they were not moving on the canopy—a bad thing, meaning they were aimed and tracking at us, not just the strike flight in general. Visual launches were not uncommon and were designed to make you break up the pod formation we flew and single out an aircraft for attack. While watching these two missiles progress on our the right side, we got launch warnings from both twelve o'clock and nine o'clock, and I picked those four missiles up visually, also guiding with no movement on the canopy. I figured this was not our day! Fortunately for us, they were all launched within seconds of each other, which *could* mean a properly executed SAM break would defeat all six at the same time. I figured the likelihood of that to be close to zero, but as no other options were available, I pushed the nose over, lit the burners, and started downhill, waiting for the missiles to start to apex above us. As that was occurring, I made a 5-*g*-or-so pull up into them and watched them all try to make the turn to intercept us. The good news was they all overshot, detonated, and damaged nothing but blue sky. The bad news was we were now about three miles or so behind the strike flight and figured our ECM pod was either not transmitting or transmitting so much that we were the target for the day. Chappie turned it off; we figured it couldn't get any worse than it had been.

We caught up with the strike force just as they crossed the Red and joined up in between our flight lead and number three. I am sure they were all asking themselves what the hell I was doing and had no idea of all the fun we had just had with those SAMs. I just wanted to get inside all their pod coverage! As we were nearing the target, the SAM activity decreased to zero, so I moved out to the left to my normal position as number four. About the same time, the strike force commander realized he was a bit too close to the target for a forty-five-degree bombing attack and checked the whole formation to the left to get more room. Being number twenty-four on the inside of that turn meant reducing power to maintain formation. By the time the strike lead rolled in, good ol' number twenty-four was down to 270 knots in full AB. It soon became obvious why the SAMs quit, as the entire sky became an overcast of 23, 37, 57, 85, and 100mm AAA bursts—, all, fortunately, about one thousand to two thousand feet above or below us. It was a pretty impressive and scary sight!

When it was time for us to roll in, we were so displaced from the

airfield that the best dive angle I was going to get was about thirty degrees. Not optimum for the last guy down the chute, but it was what it was. As I had been in AB the whole time attempting to regain lost airspeed, I sorta forgot to check it as we rolled in for our attack. Our four ships' target was the control tower, which was still visible through all the smoke and flying debris from the other F-4s bombs. Did I mention that just about all the guns were pointing and firing in our direction about now? As we neared our drop parameters, Chappie casually mentioned to check airspeed. Oops! We just transitioned through supersonic. This is not good when dropping bombs. Supersonic airflow under the wings is very erratic, and a bomb released can go just about anywhere it wants. If it doesn't go down and away from your jet, you're toast. Well, good news again; all twelve of the five hundred pounders separated cleanly, a new data point for the weapon testers!

I began to pull out and then abruptly stopped and continued diving. Chappie casually asked again what the hell I was doing. I said, "…Look left; that's a ZSU-23-4 and it just launched all two thousand rounds at us!" In a way, it was sorta' pretty, as those rounds looked like a large flock of birds arcing up to where we would have been had I continued to pull out. Don't know who the gunner was, but he was a ten (Olympic grading scale). So I continued the dive under the "flock" and leveled off at about one hundred feet, straight down the center of the runway, cruising at about six hundred knots or so. As we passed abreast of the control tower, I told Chappie to look right. We saw another "flock," this one of our bombs, as they start to impact in and around the tower. Yeah team; at least we hit the target!

As we cleared the end of the runway and airfield, still at one hundred feet and six hundred knots, I was doing my best Fast FAC visual recce technique of 5-*g* turns every three to five seconds to destroy any gunner's aim. We got a couple of SAM launch calls from Red Crown but figured the intercept would have to be better than perfect to nail us at this altitude and airspeed. After a few minutes, we finally caught up with a three ship of F-4s, which I figured was my flight, and flew right by them. Another casual comment from Chappie about, "What the hell are we doing."

I said, "I don't know about you, but I'm tired of being tail end Charlie, and the target, in this gaggle." A bit later, as our heart rates returned semi-close to normal and the cotton mouth started to ebb, we joined up with

another flight of F-4s and went with them to the post strike tankers for a bit of gas. Once done refueling, I rejoined with my original four ship and RTBed.

So this whole mission took about 3–3.5 hours, 20 minutes of which was pretty much pure terror for us (not that it wasn't for the other twenty-three!). Those two gun emplacements that intel briefed sure grew and reproduced a lot overnight! The SAMs were pretty impressive too! That was, by the way, the first real SAM break I had ever done; I sure am glad it worked! You remember a lot of images from combat; a SAM break for six missiles, flying under a flock of 23mm, and watching trees, bushes, and tracers rush by at one hundred feet and six hundred knots are a few that are permanently ingrained with me. Just glad we survived this one; sure didn't look good for a while.

DOWN TO THE LAST DROP
PHIL "HANDS" HANDLEY

Buick Flight was the ingress CAP for a Linebacker raid against targets in the vicinity of Hanoi on the morning of October 6, 1972. I was the leader of that flight, Buick 1.

The primary target was the steelworks at Thai-Nguyen, located about forty miles north-northwest of Hanoi. The integrated strike package was typical of the "eight-hundred-pound Gorilla" approach used in both the Rolling Thunder and Linebacker bombing campaigns. The Frag had the package ingressing and egressing from the west side, with participants coming from many of the major fighter bases in Thailand and South Vietnam. Typically this meant there would be F-4 MiG cappers and RF-4C recce out of Udorn, F-4 chaffers, and bombers out of Ubon, F-105 bombers and F-4 MiG cappers out of Korat, EB-66 jammers, EC-121 radar control platforms, dozens of KC-135 tankers, and HH-54 Jolly Green rescue choppers with A-1E "Sandy" escorts, and so on. The sheer magnitude of this armada was never more apparent than at the mass rendezvous for prestrike refueling. As far as the eye could see, there would be cell after cell of tankers, each with several sets of fighters on their wings, and one on the boom.

Since Buick was the ingress CAP, we would be flying directly ahead of the strike package, the bombers, and their accompanying escorts. This was a prized mission because of the increased probability of MiG reaction. I felt particularly good about our chances on this day because I had a great bunch

of guys in my flight. Every man was on, at least, his second combat tour; our F-4s all carried three tanks, four AIM-7Es, four AIM-9Js, and three of the four birds had an internal gun. I was flying an F-4D, hence no gun. However, I felt it was worth it because this was one of the few birds equipped with a "Combat Tree" in the rear cockpit. The Tree equipment could interrogate a MiG's IFF transponder, providing a positive ID for BVR missile shots.

We took five aircraft to the tanker to have an airborne spare in the event one of the four primary aircraft air aborted. On this day, if the spare was not needed, he was to accompany the flight to the vicinity of the Gorilla's Head at the Laos/ North Vietnam border, where he would climb to high altitude and set up orbit to act as a radio relay if necessary. Our rendezvous with the White 55 tanker was uneventful, and after confirming with the strike package leader that they would be on time, we began our ingress along the designated route with three full bags of gas, feeding the centerline.

The wing's policy concerning the jettisoning of external tanks stated, if you didn't need to get rid of them, bring them home as they cost money and were sometimes in short supply. The F-4 carried a 600-gallon tank on the centerline and two 370-gallon tanks on the outboard wing pylons. We always fed out the centerline tank first because of the tank's drag and the maneuvering limitations it imposed. Also, unlike the 370-gallon outboard tanks, which could be jettisoned cleanly under almost all flight conditions, the 600-gallon "bathtub" on the center line had a nasty habit of rolling along the bottom of the aircraft and striking the stabilator as it departed. The recommended jettison parameters for the centerline tank were straight and level 1-*g* flight at three hundred knots, but we were still getting aircraft strikes using these criteria. Through trial and error, we found that if it was jettisoned during a steady 4-*g* pull-up from level flight with the ball centered, it always came off cleanly.

Our route of flight took us from the tanker drop-off point, past the Gorilla's Head, over the southwestern tip of Thud Ridge, to our designated CAP orbit, which was about thirty miles north of the Phuc Yen Airfield. The radios were strangely silent until we reached our designated orbit point (2149N, 10556E) and did a "ninety right" to take a look at Phuc Yen with the Tree. During that turn, the UHF command frequency and Guard channel sprang to life when Red Crown, Disco 3, and Tea Ball all "stepped on each

other" as they announced that MiGs were airborne out of Phuc Yen and headed our way. As we rolled out of the turn, we blew the centerline tanks on my call and went to "min-burner" to kill the telltale smoke trails from our eight J-79 engines.

Almost immediately my WSO, First Lieutenant Jack "Karst" Smallwood, got a single sweep paint on a MiG-21 before the bandits killed their IFF transponder. They had figured out how a Combat Tree worked. Jack held the MiGs sixty degrees left for sixty miles. In a continuing barrage of radio transmissions over both UHF and Guard channels, Red Crown, Disco 3, and Tea Ball issued updates confirming we were on a head-on collision course with the MiGs. I was most interested in what Tea Ball had to say, since his information was derived directly from the radio transmissions between the MiG flight leader and his control agency. Just as Tea Ball was transmitting to me, somewhere in the war zone a SAR for a Wolf FAC who had been shot down kicked off with the SAR forces transmitting on Guard for the downed aircrew to "come up voice." As the range decreased to seven miles at a combined closing velocity of about twelve hundred knots, Tea Ball came through loud and clear with an announcement that the MiG's altitude was unknown, but the leader had us in sight and was attacking.

Red Crown called our flight paths merged just as the Master Caution Light illuminated when the left generator dropped off the line. I had no sooner reset the generator when the RHAW scope lit up with a classic E-SAM Lo and Hi activity, flashing Launch Light and tone. Calling "pods on," Buick flight "took it down" in full burner with a two-ring strobe at eleven o'clock. I was almost dead certain this was a rouse designed to divert our attention while the attacking MiG-21s lined us up for an unobserved Atoll shot, but ignoring it entirely was simply not a viable option.

Seeing nothing by the time we descended through ninety-five hundred feet, we "took it up" in a 500+ knot left climbing turn. I called Buick 3 to "split the plane" and continued the turn in an attempt to pick up the MiGs. After approximately 360 degrees of turn Red Crown and Disco "stepped on each other" on the UHF just as Guard transmissions announced the outset of a SAR for an F-4, which had been shot down somewhere in the area. Disco 3 retransmitted his message, saying the MiGs had "blown through" the merge and were now 360 degrees at eighteen miles and headed for the strike

package. I rolled Buick out on a northerly heading, unloaded the aircraft in fourth stage afterburner to pick up Mach 1.2, and the race was on. Tea Ball announced that the MiGs were going to try for the trailing elements of the F-105 strike flight, which would be crossing our flight paths from left to right en route to their roll-in point for bomb release on the Thai Nguyen Steel Works. Since the MiGs had to come left to a westerly heading to "lag" the Thud flight, it gave us an opening to intercept them before they reached firing position for the Atoll shots.

At this time, there were numerous transmissions on the command channel. I became vaguely aware another control agency was vectoring Chevy Flight, an F-4 MiG CAP near Yen Bai, to intercept a different set of MiGs, and they seemed to be in the same general vicinity as the ones we were chasing. Tea Ball transmitted that the MiGs were at twenty-six thousand feet (we were at twenty-four thousand, which gave us a lookup angle for radar acquisition). Just as Disco 3 advised the MiGs were still seven miles away, Buick 2 called, "MiG at one o'clock glinting in the sun, quarter of a mile, slicing left."

As hard as I looked, I simply could not pick him up. Seconds later Buick 2 transmitted, "Slicing left at ten o'clock."

At this point I punched the UHF transmit button and said, "Buick 2, take the lead."

The Buick 3 element had not seen the MiG and was flying low on our left side about three thousand feet out. When I passed the lead to Buick 2, he was flying line abreast on my right side, about five hundred feet out. As he broke hard left and began a roll over the top of me, I rolled sharply left and stomped hard bottom rudder to stay on the inside of his turn in a left fighting-wing position. I then called for Buick to jettison the now empty, outboard tanks. The sudden change of flight path of my element put us on a collision course with Buick 3's element. However, Buick 3 was led by Captain Geoff Egge, a great, experienced fighter pilot, who apparently pulled up and did an unloaded right-hand roll over the top of us as he and Buick 4 blew their tanks.

Under normal circumstances his maneuver would have rolled his

element out in perfect supporting position, but on this day, Chevy 1 (with Chevy 2 in left fighting wing) apparently passed squarely between our flight paths in pursuit of a different set of MiGs heading east. As Buick 3 completed his roll, he visually acquired and joined the Chevy 1 element as they raced toward Phantom Ridge in full afterburner.

From my left fighting wing position, I finally picked up the silver MiG-21, who by now was in an unloaded twenty-five degree dive in full afterburner, with Buick 2 looking straight up his tailpipe from approximately three thousand feet back. Expecting at any moment to see multiple AIM-9s ripple from Buick 2's missile rails, I asked for and got five-mile boresight from Smallwood, put the pipper on the MiG, and hit the radar auto-acquisition button. The radar immediately locked up with the pipper's range analog bar in the four- to five-o'clock position, four to five thousand feet. However, before the four-second speed-gate settling time had expired, it broke lock.

Swearing to myself, I told Jack to lock him up, which he did immediately. Once again the radar broke lock after about three seconds. There was now no doubt that the MiG was flat-ass opening the gap between us and was rapidly moving beyond the AIM-9 employment envelope, although we were in fourth stage afterburner, unloaded and going supersonic downhill.

I could not understand why Buick 2 was not shooting and assumed something had to be wrong with his weapons system. In hopes of either killing the MiG, or at least making him turn so we could arc him, I told Buick 2 that I was going to fire. Hearing this, Buick 3 thought I had said Buick 1 was on fire and asked, "Is that Buick 1 on fire?"

My plan was to try a boresight illumination AIM-7 shot. It was a last-ditch shot with very low Pk because it was not initiated with a full system lock-on and required the pilot to hold the 35 mil depressed pipper squarely on the target throughout the entire flight of the missile. I put my pipper on him, squeezed the trigger, and a moment later a single Sparrow blew vertically from the left-aft missile cavity, its rocket motor ignited, and it streaked directly toward the fleeting MiG-21. I thought it was going to score, but it passed just to the MiG's right, the proximity fuse didn't detonate, and the

MiG didn’t turn.

I was about to fire a second missile when Buick 2 transmitted, “Buick 2 wants to shoot.”

“Shoot, 2” was my immediate reply, at which time he ripple fired four Sparrows. The first blew up eight hundred feet in front of us as the minimum-safe separation fuse timed out. The second one came off, took a good lead pursuit cut at the MiG, appeared to guide perfectly, but in the end flew harmlessly past the bandit when its proximity fuse did not detonate. The third missile did a carbon copy imitation of the first, and the fourth and final AIM-7E2 simply fell into “the City on the River” when its rocket motor did not ignite.

Disgusted and disheartened because the MiG was now clearly out of range and walking away, I became painfully aware we were directly over downtown Hanoi and squarely in the heart of the AAA envelope. “That 85mm is really close,” Smallwood said from the rear cockpit, just as Buck 2 transmitted something similar.

I replied, “Roger that. Take it around to the left; Buick 1’s got the lead. Let’s bug out, bug out.” Coming out of afterburner to mil power, we began a 4-*g* left climbing turn that traded our supersonic speed for altitude. It was not wise to fly much above twenty thousand feet within the confines of the SAM rings since maneuverability was limited in the thinner air, while at those altitudes the SAMs really began to hum. Not seeing the element, I asked for their position to which Buick 3 replied he was off my left wing at one mile.

Still not seeing them, I said, “Buick, fuel check.”

“Buick 1 is Bingo.”

“Buick 2 is Bingo.”

“Buick 3 is Bingo minus three.

”Buick 4 is Bingo minus three.”

Almost immediately Buick 3 asked, “Buick 1, are you proceeding east

along Phantom Ridge?”

“Negative,” I replied, “Buick 1 is north of Bullseye heading west.”

“We’re not with you, Buick 1” came the reply. I told Buick 3 to turn west immediately and climb and then attempted to contact Disco to get the emergency tanker started north. When I got no reply, Buick 5, our relay, came on the air and repeated my request and received acknowledgment from Disco 3. I had briefed that, should we become separated, we would assume a “loose deuce” formation and proceed until we could get back together.

While Buick 2 and I were en route to the “H in the River” near Hanoi, we passed through a tremendous gaggle of F-4s, wing tanks, Thuds, and confusion. The flight above us had jettisoned their tanks, which were now falling through our altitude. Several F-4s began to parallel our southwesterly course, and I could no longer distinguish which one was Buick 2, so I started calling all heading changes. As it turned out, the F-4 I ended up flying with did a “split-S” away, so it was not Buick 2. I directed Buick Flight to climb as soon as the last SAM ring was passed, and we individually began climbs to thirty-six thousand feet.

At this time, Buick 5—flown by my friend and fellow flight commander, Major Bill Harris—turned toward us from his high orbit point at the Gorilla’s Head and interrogated our Mode III, Code 6100 squawk on his APX-76. He immediately picked up both elements, with the Buick 3 element in ten to fifteen-mile trail, and visually watched all four aircraft pass under him. Hearing this, I was heartened and took my element over to the emergency tanker frequency where Buick 3 and 4 were already up. At this point Disco 3 took charge of the rendezvous and started giving what sounded like good vectors for rendezvous with the Red 17 tanker. It also sounded good to Buick 5 who set course for Channel 70 (Udorn).

With Disco 3 telling me that Buick 2, 3, and 4 were within a ten-mile cone directly behind me, I got a visual on the Red 17 tanker who was in a left-hand orbit and slid onto the boom for a quick two thousand pounds of fuel. I directed the tanker to hold his left orbit and told Jack to pick up the rest of the flight visually as they approached. Disco 3’s vectors continued, and he called the remainder of Buick flight in trail with the tanker at two

miles. Neither Jack nor I could see them.

Both the tanker and I gave UHF hold-downs for a DF steer, but the element's equipment could not pick it up. Buick 2 called numerous tankers in sight, which turned out to be the normal Red Tanker Cell scheduled for post strike refueling. I told Buick 2 to get immediately on a boom and take fuel, which he did. I had Buick 3 "hold down," and I tried to DF him with no luck. I had the tanker dump fuel to provide a highly visible fuel cloud in the sky. Buick 3 squawked emergency for positive ID and told Disco emphatically there simply was no tanker there.

The situation was now becoming dire as Disco 3 issued a new vector to the tanker fourteen miles from their previous instruction. I asked Buick 3 for his fuel, and he replied he had one thousand pounds. At this point I told Disco 3 he had to get the element on the tanker immediately. Buick 3 asked for vectors and got no reply, nor could I. Disco 3 simply quit talking for what seemed an eternity. When he did come back up, he gave Buick 3 and 4 a vector of 112 degrees for twenty-three miles, which was twenty-three miles behind them! My heart sank, as I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Going up Guard channel, I contacted King 03 (the C-130 command and control bird) to get the SAR package headed toward our position. I then switched to the Air America common frequency, where I got immediate response from three Air America choppers who turned north to help us.

Four damn good men now sat in the cockpits of Buick 3 and 4 and stared squarely at the possibility they would soon "punch out" to an uncertain fate in the Barrel Roll combat sector of Laos. It was either try for the tanker, if Disco finally did have their act together, or establish an "L/D Max" glide at 250 KCAS after flaming out, and then hope to glide across the border into Thailand before ejecting.

As the Red 17 tanker turned toward the element, Captain Geoff Egge, a superb fighter pilot on this third combat tour, made a tough, heroic, and correct decision from the front cockpit of Buick 3 as the rest of us simply watched and listened.

"Say your fuel, Buick 4."

“Buick 4’s got four hundred pounds.”

“Buick 3’s got two hundred; I can’t make it.”

“Buick 4, you try for the tank; Buick 3 will go for the border.”

Buick 4, flown by Captain Bob Whitfield, a great fighter pilot on his second tour, came immediately on the air, “Red 17 this is Buick 4 heading one-one-two degrees; don’t miss me, babe! Say your altitude.”

“Red 17 is at flight level two-four-zero,” came the reply.

From the right wing of the Red 17 tanker Jack Smallwood and I strained our eyes to pick up Buick 4, whom we knew would be coming downhill from high altitude. Just as we both spotted him, Captain Whitfield in Buick 4 saw the tanker directly ahead, closer than expected. “Tallyho, turn the tanker and push it up” was his immediate transmission.

I watched the KC-135 begin to roll slowly left into a standard thirty-degree bank turn when Whit’s voice cracked, “No, goddamn it—turn!” At which point the pilot of Red 17 literally stood the tanker on its left wing, making the fastest turn I have ever seen by a tanker. As the tanker rolled out, Buick 4, now shed of all tanks, missiles, and armament pylons was coming downhill at idle power with its speed brake fully extended and skidding alternately left and right in a desperate attempt to slow down to the 325 knot tanker speed. Knowing Whit had only seconds of fuel remaining, I held my breath in hopes he would be able to dissipate his speed before reaching the refueling position. However, within moments I realized he would not, as he agonizingly overshot, finally stopping almost directly under the nose of the KC-135.

With Whit now looking straight up at the belly of the tanker to hold formation, he began to slide aft at an increasing rate that I knew would carry him beyond the boom envelope if he didn’t add some power. At this point, though, advice from the “cheap seats” was not what he needed, and I simply said to myself, “Power, Whit.” Recognizing the need for power too late, Buick 4 passed rapidly aft through the boom envelope, where I was certain flameout would occur within seconds.

At this moment, the boomer of Red 17, a man whom I had never met, lay on his stomach in the cramped refueling compartment of the KC-135 and observed the F-4E twenty feet beneath him sliding rapidly away. In a single swift motion, he lowered the boom slightly as he lined it up horizontally and then, extending it to the full outer limit of the "red extension," rammed it home into the open air refueling receptacle of Buick 4. As the over-center locking ring of the receptacle's cleaves slammed shut, the fifteen-ton F-4E stopped dead in its tracks. Bob Whitfield later told me, at the instant he felt the jolt, he looked into the cockpit to see the fuel counter click over to zero and then immediately begin to spin up as the Red 17 boomer pumped fuel at maximum pressure. Upon Buick 4's transmission, "Buick 1, I'm taking fuel." I departed the tanker to organize the SAR for Buick 3.

As it turned out, Buick 3 managed to make it just across the border in the vicinity of Vientiane where they "punched out" and were picked up by an Air America chopper and returned to Udorn. The aftermath was not a thing of beauty. There were the second-guessers, the blame assignors, the finger-pointers, the ass-kissers, and the CYA crowd. It is damn easy to sit around a conference table with a mug of coffee in your hand and tell eight guys what you would have done had you been in their shoes. It is an entirely different matter to be there when it is all happening.

Do I wish that the radio discipline had been better? Or that the radar on my plane had not continued to break lock? Or that the missiles had worked? Or that Disco had not blown the tanker rendezvous? Or that I had been smart enough to do something else, anything else, that might have avoided the loss of an aircraft? You bet I do. The facts are, however, that a whole host of damn good, highly trained professional warriors, with their asses on the line, made and acted on decisions that they believed in so strongly they were willing to bet their lives on them.

In my reflections upon thousands of flying hours and experiences such as this, I have come to realize the greatest satisfactions for a fighter pilot are not derived from events but instead stem from the daily association with the likes of Egge, Whitfield, Smallwood, and the unknown boomer of Red 17, whom I put in for the Distinguished Flying Cross. In my eyes they will always be America's best, and the epitome of the old fighter-pilot tribute to men of such stature.

“So here’s a nickel on the grass to you, my friend, and your spirit, enthusiasm, sacrifice, and courage—but most of all to your friendship. Yours’ is a dying breed, and when you are gone, the world will be a lesser place.”

MY FIRST TDY—RECOVERING AN F-105G FROM NKP

FRANK ALFTER

WW 2570

It was another cool night on the flight line at Korat, sometime after midnight on November 18, 1972. Recovering, reloading, and launching our Thuds during Linebacker had become routine during our twelve-hour shifts. Morning was creeping up on us, and at six o'clock, our usual shift briefing for both days and nights was about to begin. I was a weapons load crew chief on the F-105G, and not only did I supervise my own four-man crew but sometimes I was also asked to manage all the load crews on my shift. My crew consisted of A1C Dave Burnett, A1C Alan Wimer, A1C Wilbur Flood, and me.

All of the crews formed up for roll call, and one of the items briefed by our master sergeant was the need for one crew to go to Nakhon Phanom (NKP) to help recover one of our planes. The Thud had diverted to NKP with engine problems, and a weapons crew was needed to download the AGM-45s and replace the arresting gear explosive bolt. The pilot had used the tailhook on landing.

It sounded like a chance for some change of scenery, and I asked my guys if they would agree to the TDY. They agreed, and I volunteered my crew to go. Supervision said the C-130 was leaving at 10:00 a.m., in just a

little less than four hours, and we were nightshift guys and needed our rest. I told him we could sleep on the plane and still wanted to go. With more insistence, it seemed nobody else was volunteering, and the boss said OK.

So we rushed back to our hooches to pack for a short stay at NKP. We'd been told it was a one-day deal, and so we left with a couple of days of underwear and a set of civvies, plus the jungle fatigues on our backs. We got to the C-130 in time to watch them load the engine and trailers and our tools. We got aboard and were rolling down the Korat runway at 10:00 a.m. I might have slept a wink or two but wasn't tired, and flying had always been what I wanted to do. I had planned to get a commission and go to pilot training as soon as I graduated, but the draft board short-circuited my plans in my third year of college. So here I was on a C-130 bound for NKP with a crew chief, two engine mechanics, and my load crew with our equipment.

Once we landed, we were met by the local maintainers and taken to the end of the runway where our Thud had been deposited. There was no room on their ramp. On the way down to the plane, one of the locals told us it really did have an engine problem because, as he said, "The tail end looks like it exploded." As we got closer to our aircraft, we could see what he was talking about was just the speed brakes that opened and the bottom petal drooping with no hydraulic pressure. We laughed and told him that was normal.

After seeing the aircraft, we stowed our equipment with the local maintenance folks on the flight line, and left to get settled in quarters for our "short" visit. We had dinner at their USO, had a few beers, and then hit the sack. We would get back to our plane first thing in the morning, which was a Sunday.

My first task was to get an MJ-1 bomb-lift truck (jammer) on loan and drive it to the EOR where our plane was located. The jammers were all standard transmissions, with three forward and one reverse gear. In the interest of preventing weapon people from speeding, the locals at NKP had blocked out the third gear with a piece of metal. I had to drive it all the way down the taxiway, a little over a mile, and I wasn't willing to do it at 20 mph. So I bent the metal block out of the way and used all three gears.

The first order of business was to do an engine run to confirm the problem reported by the pilot, who by the way had already departed for Korat. All we had was the aircraft 781 forms. My crew had to safety all the weapons before anything could be done. The engine run made the problem apparent: she smoked like a freight train. So the decision was made to download the two missiles and replace the arresting hook explosive bolt, and once that was accomplished, the work of changing the engine could begin.

We spent Sunday morning getting the missiles down and onto a munitions trailer, removed the expended explosive bolt from the tailhook system, did the required system checks, and installed and secured the new bolt. We had the bomb dump guys come get our missiles for temporary storage and then helped the crew chief and engine troops prepare the airplane for engine removal.

The next couple of days were spent removing the tail section, disconnecting all engine systems from the aircraft, and removing the engine. At one point in all this activity, there was some excitement. We heard gunshots and machine-gun fire and observed armored personnel carriers moving across the runway toward the fence line, about half a mile away. We were on top of an airplane out in the open with the only visible protection being culverts under the taxiway, which were about fifty feet away. We started to get off the airplane, but then the shooting stopped, and the carriers were returning. We thought, gee, maybe we would get combat pay. But then we found out it was just an exercise for the security forces. Damn!

By Thursday afternoon, Thanksgiving Day, we had the new engine installed and were ready to do a test run. While at the USO for lunch, I noticed a couple of petit Thai gals stirring some pumpkin in pots. The pots were huge compared to the girls' tiny size, but it smelled good, so I wanted to be sure to have dinner there later.

Night had just settled in when we were ready to run the engine. I asked the crew chief if I could sit in the rear cockpit during the run, and he said that would be OK with him. I told him I'd never been in a Thud cockpit during an engine run. Been in the cockpit many times for weapons systems checks and loading operations, but not during an engine run.

So, with me in the back, the crew chief up front and the engine guys on the ground, we started the engine. Now, being the half-smart guys we were, we hadn't yet reinstalled the tail section. Better to run the engine first, just in case there might be a problem, and not to have to pull the tail again. Made sense to this load toad. So, as the crew chief put the engine through the functional check, I monitored the gauges and enjoyed the "ride." He told me he was going to put her in afterburner and to look outside when he did to confirm the light off. That was quite a scene—the AB lit up the whole area behind us. The engine did check out, and we called it quits for the night.

I went back to the USO and did indeed have some of that pumpkin pie. I was elated in having been part of the successful engine run and now was enjoying some of the best pumpkin pie I had ever tasted. Life was good!

Friday we finished getting the aircraft back together, and the pilot showed up to fly her home. I asked him when we could load the AGM-45s, and he said he wasn't going to take them. He was going to do an FCF (functional check flight) en route back to Korat and was not returning to NKP for the missiles. Well, OK then. He took off performing part of his FCF as he departed and headed straight back to Korat.

That afternoon the six of us headed for the terminal to hitch a ride on a Klong flight back to Korat. While we were at the service desk, I received a call from my captain back at base, who told me everyone could get on that flight, except me. He instructed me to work with the locals to get our missiles back to Korat. Remember, we had been gone on this "one-day" TDY for nearly seven days now. So I waved goodbye to my troops and went back to the hooch.

While I was changing into civvies for the evening, I threw my fatigues at the wall, and they stuck! I needed to find a house girl who might wash my clothes so I could continue my TDY without further offending others' sense of smell. Indeed, a very nice young woman took care of my clothing problem.

Back to the missile issue. While on the phone with the captain, I suggested they send another Thud my way to load the missiles on. I was told that was too expensive, or something to that effect, and that they would send

me a 388th MMS munitions trailer to put our missiles on. Then, incredulously, I was supposed to try to get the trailer and missiles on a Korat bound C-130 for transport home. I knew that was not going to work, as in those days, we didn't ship full up-round missiles. They were considered too hazardous, so I knew then this was going to be an even longer TDY.

Well, they did ship me a trailer via Thai truck—those trucks that had all the lights and glitter—and my next chore was to get the missiles transferred from the NKP trailer to our own trailer. This happened to be the very time when my uniform was undergoing a cleaning, so I wore my slacks, golf shirt, and sandals to the bomb dump. When I arrived at the gate, I presented my ID card, which specifically identified me as a staff sergeant, and the guy snapped to attention and "Sir'd" the shit out of me. I explained that I was just a staff sergeant and needed to transfer some 388th missiles to our trailer for shipping. He said, "Yes sir!" and made a phone call.

Pretty soon there was a master sergeant, who escorted me into the storage area, and he too "Sir'd" the shit out of me. He indicated that whatever I needed, he would take care of it. Being concerned about my missiles, I told him I would drive the jammer, if he would simply guide the missiles onto the chocks on the trailer. He said, "Yes, sir!"

As I knew beforehand, no C-130 crew was about to take a trailer with two up-round AGM-45s. I called the captain and informed him, and he told me he'd get back to me. I am now nine days into my "one-day" TDY.

On Monday I spoke with my good captain and was told a Colonel Veda was going to call me. A *colonel*? The Colonel said he was going to bring an F-4 to retrieve those errant missiles. He asked how much baggage I had, and I told him all I had was a small gym bag. He then told me he would try to come up solo and I could ride back with him. Now I was really ecstatic! He was to arrive early on the twenty-ninth. My captain spoke again and was concerned that I might not have certified weapons load guys, since mine had already returned to Korat. I told him I would find some guys in the local loading shop who had at least seen an F-4. OK, I was indeed certified on F-105Gs and F-4s, having transferred from F-4s in October, but I bent the rules a bit with the local guys.

So, as promised, an F-4 landed early Wednesday morning with Colonel Veda in the front seat—but unfortunately he had a seeing eye major in the back. Damn! I marshaled him into the area and chocked him. He got out of the airplane, warmly introduced himself, and apologized about the major. The major never did get out of the airplane. Three loaders and I began uploading the AGM-45s, starting on the left pylon. And when we began to slide the missile onto the right pylon, it just wouldn't slide on like it should. So, Colonel Veda pushed his sleeves up and grabbed the missile, and three of us managed to get it all the way back to the stop. I was impressed with this colonel.

Now it was time to crank her up and do the stray voltage checks before hooking up the jettison cartridges. If the pilot needed to jettison the missiles, these carts would push the missiles backward and off the rails. Colonel Veda started the engines, and I used a PSM-6 voltmeter to check the jettison connector on the left. Checked good! Then when I did the same on the right side, the needle pegged all the way to the right. I had never, ever seen stray voltage in all my three-plus years! I recalibrated the meter and tried again. Pegged again! I again recalibrated and got the same results. So at this point I stepped out from under the right wing and into Colonel Veda's view and hand signaled to him that there was stray voltage on his right missile. He hand signaled back not to connect the jettison cart. He would take the missiles without jettison capability. The risk factor of having to jettison those puppies on his way back to Korat was remote, at best.

The good colonel returned my salute and waved good-bye as he taxied out to the runway and blasted off to the north. The way he yanked her up at the end of the runway made me think those missiles would just rip right off. But they didn't, and he did deliver them back to Korat.

Now it was time for me to work my return trip to Korat. It was early afternoon, and I walked down to the terminal with my gym bag in hand. I spoke with a two-striper behind the services counter and explained I was TDY from Korat and needed to get back there as soon as practicable. I asked if there was a Klong flight that afternoon that I could ride on. He said there was, but I wasn't going to be on it. He said it was cargo only; the morning flights would take passengers. That seemed a bit stupid to me, and I asked to use his phone.

I called my captain back at Korat and explained the situation to him, and he asked to speak to the airman behind the counter. I gave the phone to the airman and watched his face twist and eyes glare. After the captain told him to put me on that afternoon Klong, he wrote my name on a blank manifest, threw it at me, and said good luck getting on that airplane. He had crossed out the rest of the manifest so no one else could be added and told me he didn't think the loadmaster would let me on.

So I went out to the plane and sat down against some cargo pallets, waiting for the crew to show. After about five minutes, the crew was walking by me when the pilot asked me if I needed a ride. When I told him I needed to get back to Korat, he instructed the loadmaster to make room for me in the cockpit, since I was the only passenger. My hopes suddenly rose, and I had finally met some folks who had some sense and common decency.

The pilot told me that we might have to go to Ubon to pick up cargo first and then onto Korat. We departed NKP at 1700 hours and, as it turned out, once we were airborne, he checked with Ubon and they had nothing for us to pick up. So we went VFR to Korat, and I was back on the ground by 6:00 p.m. Back in my hooch, back to the MMS Hooch Bar and among friends.

That "one-day" TDY taught me many things, but the most important is never pack as if it is ever a one-day trip. That was my very first TDY in the Air Force, the first of hundreds over my thirty-three years, and a good lesson in managing people and equipment while away from home station. The years to follow would give me experience with deploying a handful of airplanes to Cold Lake, Canada, and then eighteen aircraft to a German air base from Eglin. Then there were numerous TDYs while on the USAFE IG team in the 1980s, and more to places most Americans never heard of while with the NATO TacEval Team in the 1990s. The song "On the Road Again" comes to mind.

BOMBERS, B-52
RICK JONES

My crew and I were waiting in the Anderson AFB Base Ops to board a tanker for a return to Robins Georgia for a mid-tour R&R. The squadron ops officer came up and told me to take the crew back to the BOQ and go into crew rest for a mission the next day. We would brief in the base theater. We had no clue what was going on, but it had to be something big. Most of the previous BUFF missions out of Guam during ’72 had been milk runs, high altitude bombing in the South. It was not unusual, when going to base ops for the weather briefing, to be met by a rated staff officer going along on the mission in the IP seat for combat time/pay and an income tax exemption.

But December 18, 1972, it was different. We met in the Anderson Base Theater, over a hundred BUFF crewmembers, for the mission briefing. The colonel briefing officer said, “Gentlemen, your target for tonight is”—he flashed a map of North Vietnam on the big screen with the target triangle over Hanoi. Instant vacuum in the room as everyone sucked in their breath. Those of us flying the B-52G model were especially impressed, since we didn’t have the ECM suite the D models had.

The Colonel finished the briefing and asked for questions. My EWO raised his hand. “WTF,” I thought.

He asked, “Sir, I just wondered if there are going to be any staff officers

flying with us for pay tonight." Silence in the room until the colonel started laughing, and then the whole room joined him. Turned out that both the D and G model Wing Kings went along on the mission. Colonel "Iron Cross" McCarthy was in a D model, but his intercom position was inoperative, so he was unable to command anything. He got the Air Force Cross anyway, but crewmembers nicknamed him "Iron Cross."

My crew was scheduled to be one of the standby aircraft in case someone aborted. As luck would have it, we wound up leading a wave of eighteen BUFFs bombing the railroad-marshaling yard right outside Hanoi. Approaching NVN airspace, I could see the first waves fired on by AAA and SA-2s. I had never seen a SAM before but recognized it instantly. My young copilot asked me, "What is that?" I told him; I will never forget the look on his face.

Fortunately, the SAMs were badly degraded by all the ECM in the area. F-4 chaff droppers, Wild Weasels, Navy ECM—you name it—and our own ECM were so effective almost none of the SAMs were actually guiding on us. They were fired in shotgun volleys, three at a time from various sites. They flew mostly in straight lines in patterns, occasionally turning, since we were all flying in at the same, roughly northeast, ground track, like ducks in a shooting gallery. Halfway through the bomb run, on autopilot, altitude hold engaged, one SAM came up directly in front of us, rose vertically, and then leveled out at my altitude and bored in straight at our nose, an obvious collision course. Using the turn knob on the autopilot, I turned right about thirty degrees, let the SAM roar by on the left—it didn't detonate—and then I turned back onto the bomb run ground track, centering the flight command indicator, which our radar nav was using to direct me to the desired bomb release point. We released our bombs and turned hard right toward the gulf. An F-4 joined up on my left wing, obviously to take advantage of our ECM. I had counted fifty-eight SAMS fired at my formation from IP to bombs away and post-target turn. Actually, the AAA was worse than the SAMs, which I could see from launch to detonation. AAA was simply bright flashes, like flashbulbs, outside the airplane, unexpectedly. But the AAA was not at all effective. Of the fifteen BUFFs lost in eleven days, all were from SAMs and nearly all were simply midair collisions. Later poststrike recon confirmed our vertical camera evidence that we achieved a direct hit on the yard, blowing up

an obvious ammo train, scattering munitions that cooked off in an ever-expanding ring, like ripples from a rock dropped into a pond. That felt great, knowing those munitions were never going to be used against anyone.

We flew two more Line Backer II missions. The second mission was to Haiphong two days later, where SAMs were also heavy but inaccurate. The third was NNE of Hanoi, bombing the rail line to China. That last mission was almost a milk run, no enemy reaction to my formation at all. We were far enough away from Hanoi I could see only about a dozen SAMs being fired the whole night, anywhere. They had almost exhausted their supply and were effectively defenseless. No MiGs were up either. We had total air supremacy. That's when we stood down, and the NVN returned to the negotiating table in Paris. About eight months later, I flew the first BUFF to return to Robins to reconstitute the wing there to the nuke mission.

There are two ex-POWs living here in middle Georgia. I met one of them, B/G James Sehorn, at a ceremony on base, and we talked about that first night when he was in his cell and I was thirty-five thousand feet above him bombing his captors. He told me about the effect our BUFF raids had on their guards. Everything changed, he said, and the POWs instantly knew it had to be BUFFs overhead. The guards showed fear and tried to downplay their acts of brutality and ingratiate themselves with the POWs. They knew that, finally, the USA had decided to take off the kid gloves. Some POWs stopped by at Guam and briefed the crew force, but I missed that briefing.

Even today, when I see a Fourth of July fireworks display, and there is kind of an aerial display that kind of resembles a SAM detonation, it all comes back to me.

Leo Thorsness Speech During the Wild Weasel Reunion National Museum of the United States Air Force

September 12, 2008
Recorded and transcribed by Howard Plunkett
Edited by Leo Thorsness



Leo Thorsness—Air Force Photo

Leo Thorsness spoke at the banquet of the 2008 reunion of the Society of

Wild Weasels in the Modern Flight Gallery of the National Museum of the US Air Force. He spoke after a concert of contemporary patriotic music by the Air Force Band of Flight, which he refers to in his opening remarks.

Thank you very much. General Metcalf,[1] You couldn't top this act if we paid a $1,000 apiece in Las Vegas. The setting, talent, and people here who fought for freedom—we are truly blessed that you are here as the guardian, the director of this phenomenal facility. It's just a blessing for America. We're privileged to be a part of it. I also feel a bit guilty, or intimidated. Truly, anybody here could stand up and be doing the same thing. You're a bunch of experts. You knew your business. It makes me half-mad to think that some of you made one hundred landings. I only made ninety-two and one-half missions, so I'm a little jealous also. But my number was drawn to say a few things, so thank you for that.

As Gaylee and I walked in tonight, two thoughts came to mind. First we crawled up the ladder to look in a Thud, the Weasel over there. And I have no idea why, but the first thing I looked at was the last thing I used. I looked down, and there was that stupid ejection handle. I said, "Yeah, Gaylee, you pulled up, you squeezed it, and that was the start of a new career for a while."

Also walking by the guys down there - I forgot his name - he's been here for a while, and he was telling somebody about, "You rolled in, and you learned how to evade the SAMs;, you get down pretty low, and… ...."

Just a quick background on that. Harry and I -- my backseater Harry Johnson, some of you know him -- Harry and I were the sixth crew to get to Takhli. The first five crews and the airplanes were gone in about forty-five days. So when I got there, I had a hard time getting the Ops Officer to assign wingmen. Why would we send somebody up with this Weasel? So it took a while, but we proved ourselves in the concept of the Weasel. The learning curve was very steep. I guess we all know that.

When we first got to Takhli, Harry and I read the reports of Weasel losses and talked to anyone who flew on those missions or knew about them. Basically we asked, "What were they doing when they got shot down?" They did this, and they did this, and they did this. I'm from Minnesota, Harry is from Iowa, and we're not like rocket scientists, but when we learned what

those first crews did, we said, “We’re not going to do that. We’ll try something else.” We decided that if the site were camouflaged to go in high altitude, get the SAMs to launch at us, pull the nose down, plug in the burner, get the wingmen to join up, put the SAM at three or nine o’clock, watch the SAM arch down at us, and at the last two to three seconds, pull up hard. I wondered if we could outmaneuver them. So we sent a TWX (message) back to the Fighter Weapons School. This was in October or so. And in a few weeks, we said, “Look, if we put the airplane in a real steep dive, sixty to seventy degrees down, pick up a lot of airspeed, six hundred knots or so, and we pull out just before we hit the ground, SAMs coming in, just arcing down, would we be able to outmaneuver it?”

The Fighter Weapons School—they’re the experts—sent a TWX back and basically said, “Well—not a bad idea. You might give it a shot.” So we were pretty confident that it would work OK.

Just a quick war story. Some of you know this. I can’t recall who the three wingmen were, except one, Dave Everson. Harry and I were coming back from a flight one day, and we said let’s see how fast we can could get the Thud going, and then we’ll see how far we can get the nose up. We dumped everything of course; we just had the pylons on. So we got up to thirty-five thousand, plugged in the burner; we could get Mach 1.35 that day over Laos, coming into Thailand. Harry was keeping track of all this stuff, and so I said, “OK, we started pulling now. There’s forty degrees; there’s fifty 50 degrees ...,”, and we kind of flopped out of the sky around forty-two to forty-three thousand feet. So we sent that information back to the Fighter Weapons School and said, “Look, we’re doing 1.35, we traveled this far in this amount of time as we pulled up to fifty degrees. What would happen to Shrikes if we fired one at forty and one at fifty degrees?”

It took about three weeks; they sent a note back, and they said, “Well… ah…the best we can tell, using your loft method, the Shrike will go about thirty miles.” The SAM is good for seventeen as we know. Our Shrike is good for about seven, they normally say.

So we said, “Yes!” I remember Phil Gast helped me write a TWX, and we sent a note down to 7th Air Force and said, “Here’s what we want to do.” They gave us four airplanes. As the strike flight was coming down Thud

Ridge, Harry and I were leading the Weasel flight of four aircraft, two Shrikes each. Dave Everson was one of them. One of his tanks wouldn't come off, so he had to abort that mission. So we ended up with three airplanes. The briefing was, as we started to pull, we'd spread ten degrees; we'd be about thirty-five miles from Hanoi; we'd time it so the Shrikes got there just before the strike flight gets got in there—Jack Broughton was lead —and we'd see what happens. And during the briefing I said, "Now, as we all know the SAM was built for a high-altitude not-very-maneuverable airplane. And guess what we're going to be? We're going to be at high altitude and not very maneuverable." So I said, "Has anyone got any ideas in case they launch at us?" No one had ideas, so I said, "Here's what we're going to do. If we get a launch, and we're up there where we're slowly flopping over, we'll just kick it into a spin. Just kick the airplane into a spin."

And they said, "Leo, you got…"

So I said, "Any better ideas?"

One of the guys said, "I'll go get the tech order. We'll review the spin recovery." Anyway, we did that, and some of you read the reports. We were credited that day with killing five Fan Songs with six Shrikes. General Momeyer was in Saigon at 7th Air Force. I had a friend working there, and General Momeyer…well, they said, "Good idea. Man, you got five of them. The EB66 ELINT said five of them just disappeared when the Shrikes impacted." And Momeyer, in 7th Air Force in Saigon, nearly got fired over that because an official complaint was made with the ICC (International Control Commission) that we had operated outside the rules of engagement, and his hands were slapped badly. The concept worked, the mission was successful, and we were scheduled to try it again the next day.

When we were taxiing out the next day, the word came down from 7th Seventh AF. They cancelled it out, and they said, "No more of that because that's not fair. Those poor people ...." One of the things that happened according to a friend in Intelligence down there in 7th Air Force— -- one of the SAM radars, Fan Songs, they said was on the Chinese embassy, and a Russian tech rep got killed by the Shrike. And I felt badly, you know, —we all felt badly.

So anyway, I threw in a couple of war stories, because the ejection wasn't the fun part, but figuring out evading the SAMs, and pulling out at the last minute, that was a lot of fun; it was something brand new. I think every one of us over there took the systems we had, the weapons we had, and we made 'em better. We figured out how to use them better. That's part of the fun of being a fighter pilot and being at the front end of the Weasel business. We didn't know how to do the business. Our learning curve was steep; we lost a lot of people, airplanes, but we learned how to do it well. You people, follow-on, and know that better than I.

A couple of years went by, and our Weasel loss rate to SAMs was so much less. It was a very unique time in a little niche of ancient history, and we had the privilege of being out in front of that, so it was a real honor and privilege to be here with you tonight to have been part of that front end. I'm looking at people here, and I'm looking at Ben and Norm[2] over here. I still haven't quite forgiven them. Just kidding, Ben and Norm—you were a great Weasel crew. I filled in as a spare that day, and they were leading, and they did a great job. It was just the luck of the draw on that day in April.

I asked several people here what to say in my short remarks. They said, "Tell us a couple of Weasel stories and give us a couple of lessons from Hanoi."

So if you will indulge me a little bit. A couple of facts. One, Harry and I had just accelerated to six hundred knots. The F-4 MIGCAP flight was about ten miles behind us, and we turned over the mountain peak; we lined up on a heading, we knew where the SAM site was, we were going to pull up about fifteen degrees, and we had figured that out. And all of a sudden we got air-to-air. I think I punched the mic button and said to the F-4 flight, "We got air-to-air."

It came back something like, "Well, have no fear; we're here. That's our radar, I suppose."

Had that F-4 flight spread out far enough, they could have seen the MiGs behind the mountain. But nooo! They were showing off their formation or something. I don't know. But anyway the frustrating part was I did nothing, and a few seconds later, my wingman, Bob Abbott, and I both blew

up. And we were going real fast, six hundred knots about.

Harry and I had decided early on that if we were ever hit badly, we wouldn't wait to slow down. In this case, instantly the rudders flopped, and the stick was gone. I remember I put my visor against the canopy; you couldn't see out, —the smoke was so thick. And within a second or so, we were gone even though we were going above safe ejection speed. We had seen airplanes come apart, and the guy never got out. Harry and I discussed that. We knew what we were going to do. So I said, "GO!"

And Harry said…well, he said, "Shit!" And then I heard the canopy. So it took me at least a nanosecond after that, and so I went out.

A couple of things as we floated down. One, it was fairly late afternoon, and I noticed a small clearing in the jungle—and you're looking around, you're adrenaline's going, and airplanes are zipping by. That's a thrill to be in a parachute to see a Thud come by you, one hundred feet out, about four hundred knots, showing off or something, knowing where I'm going. But I looked back and there is a little clearing down there. And I could see muzzle flashes. I was two to three thousand feet up yet. And they were shooting at you. Now it's just darn hard to hide in a parachute. That's a fact.

One thought was going through my mind—a serious note. I think everybody's life is fuller if you have some spirituality—OK? A belief in something greater than self, or higher than self. My wife and I, our daughter, our family happen to be Christian. And as I was going down, these bad thoughts, seeing them shooting at you and so on was a bad feeling; I knew that I was going to be killed or captured. My real disappointing thought—a failure thought—was about Gaylee and our daughter. And I thought, "If I'm killed when I get on the ground, will they ever find out?" We already had friends—we all did—who were MIAs over there, and they didn't know if they were dead or alive. It's a terrible thing for families. We were on our ninety-third mission, Harry and I, and I figured it had to be my fault. I made a mistake somehow, or we wouldn't be in this position. The thought was, "Will the family ever find out?" It was a difficult feeling when you feel like you failed your family.

On the other side, the spirituality thing, there was a voice kept going

back and forth, like a tape, kept saying, “Leo, you’re going to make it. Leo, you’re going to make it.” It was the first time in my life the Lord ever preempted the answer to prayer. It was a wonderful feeling. And also, if somehow your priorities were not quite in order, as you’re floating down, you knew you’re about to be killed or captured. Just with the snap of a finger, right then, you know what’s truly important in life. Like, for example, I never thought about, “I wonder what our net worth is?” while I’m floating down.

Just fast-forward quickly—I came home six years later, and Gaylee, had gone back to South Dakota; she handed me a newspaper article in the *Argus Leader*, the newspaper in Sioux Falls, and it was talking about this professor who was going to take a six-month sabbatical to figure out what’s important. And I thought, “That’s good. You should know what’s important in life. We all should.” But I had this cynical thought. If I could have him, take him over there, eject him, and let him look at people shooting at him, he could do it in less than six seconds. He wouldn’t need six months.

Just a couple of references in prison. To get through tough times. When we came home, after the last known POW was released, the DoD decided to hold three POW press conferences: one East Coast, Midwest, and one West Coast. I was at Scott Air Force Base along with Dave Winn and one other I’ve forgotten. We each made a short statement and then took whatever questions the press had. DoD told us to answer with as much detail as the press wanted. Of course the first question was, “Were you tortured?”

And we said, “Yes, we were.”

“Why were you tortured?”

“For propaganda, mostly.”

So they kept up. “How were you tortured?”

“Ropes and hooks and stuff.”

Well, they wanted to know more and more. Of course we still had the scars to prove it. They looked at us—they kept prying, and we kept answering in as much detail as they wanted. “It was very brutal for two and a half years or so.”

They believed us, but they just kind of sat there, and then finally said, “How did you do it? How did you get through tough times like that?”

None of us answered it well, and we talked about it afterward. Everybody here has been through tough times. Everybody will go through tough times again. It’s all relative. But the way you get through tough times, according to us POWs, is this: Number one is you just don’t quit. The will to survive is very strong. That’s the best and first way to get through tough times. The second way is time. Everybody here knows someone else, or you yourself have been through tough times. People decided to break down time and get through tough times a day at a time. You just break down time. We did the same thing. You’d estimate; you’d say to yourself, “I think I can make it another thirty seconds.” Break it down. The third way: It took me a while to put in words, and it turned out to be the word “Love.” I lived longer with Jack than any other single POW. One time they came to the cell and started torturing—Jack first and then me. It’s terrible to be tortured, but when someone else you have so much brotherly love for is tortured—right next to you—you hear sounds coming out of his body. I knew Jack so well, and he knew me so well; you would do anything you could for someone you loved that much. I think the lesson that I brought home was this: if you’re with someone who’s going through real tough times, and they the person know that you know you care about them, it’s a real help. It’s just a blessing to be with someone who’s a support network. Cancer support groups—we’re all in a lot of organizations. You don’t always know who is going to rise to the top when you’re going through tough times. There are always people there. I think every organization has got good people, and we had more than our share of outstanding POWs. Fred Cherry—someone was talking about Fred today—and Fred taught me the tap code. They just beat the hell out of him for a long time because he hollered it to me because I wasn’t smart enough to figure it out on my own. Great man. Another way of getting through tough times—back to my spirituality—is times when the strength wasn’t there, at least for me, some prayers were answered. Of all the lessons coming out of Hanoi for me, the one I use most frequently—and I rarely think about Hanoi—but occasionally when something’s going wrong in a day, and just for a nanosecond I’ll think about when I was in the cell going through really tough times. With that memory in the back of my mind, since I’ve been home, I can say truly I never had really a bad day. There’s something to be said about

remembering what bad times were. I don't dwell on them, but I think we've all been through them, and if you concentrate on what you learned, I think generally people come out the back end of bad times whole. Bad times can teach you to be better, smarter, and more prepared for life. We get better and better the more times we're tested and suffer.

I'd just like to make two more points. One was the last three years. As you know the first three were brutal, the last three boring. The first three, solitary in cells, and the last three, in big cells. The first three, if any sound could be heard from your cell, they beat you, and the last three, you could talk out loud and all that. This happened during the last three years. I think there were about forty of us in this big cell. Some of the windows had been opened up. We all had mental ways—we had no pencils or papers—we had mental ways to try to pass time to get something out of it, just ways to keep your mind going strong.

One day I decided I was going to keep track of what we talked about in that cell, what were the dominant subjects we talked about, and how frequently they came out. So I built myself a little mental file cabinet. I numbered it, and I put little files in there. We all had gimmicks like that. So I just listened to conversations. In a few days, I had picked up about twenty different conversations that seemed to be the ones we talked about most. So I had a list of about twenty topics, and I kept track. The thing that surprised me was how infrequently we talked about our work. Look at us. We're the best fighter pilots and aviators in the world, and we get better the older we become. And they paid us to have jobs like that; we really had good jobs, the best jobs in the world, but yet rarely did we ever talk about that when we were pulled away from it. In fact it was number seventeen out of twenty. I thought, "You know that's worth remembering." We had jobs to go to; we had jobs we really liked—jobs you feel good about when meeting milestones. You provide for your family; your job is a big part of your life. I'm not knocking your life work, but that's not the most important.

What I found was the most important there, and I use mnemonics to remember, is this: friends, family, faith, and fun. Those are the things we talked about most often.

Family is number one. We talked about family more than anything else,

and sometimes the others; the fun things we did and our faith—that came up more frequently in prison than it does did at the office. They were the top-priority topics in prison. There's some meaning in there somewhere. I think what happened, when I was a young guy, like a lot of us when we were young, we got tied up in our work once in a while, and we ignored the important things in life. I remember Gaylee gave me an awful lot of kitchen passes.

As a young lieutenant, we scrounged airplanes, as you know, in those days, and every weekend I would be gone. I was ignoring my friends and my family. I didn't have to do that. She allowed me to become as good an aviator as I could. We are all set in our way and probably won't change, but for our kids and grandkids, I just hope you pass on to them to make sure they balance their life in some of those important things as well as their work.

Last thing I'll mention—a serious note about freedom. For a year I was in a cell, five and a half by six feet. About once a week, I got out to pour a couple cups of water over my body—bath time—and I saw and sneaked into the cell a rusty nail. The windows were bricked up. The bricks were mortared in on their sides so the mortar was just over an inch thick—and not good mortar at that. With the nail I drilled a teeny little hole in the mortar. It took a while, but what else did I have to do. I spent hours every day with my eye right up against that peephole. I could see a slice of the prison yard about the size of this little alley going down here. There was a little branch—I can still draw a picture of that branch. I'd look out and see a guard going by once in a while and a POW going to interrogations now and then. You didn't know who they were because you never lived with them, but with the tap code you could figure out who went to interrogation that day and then you knew what that guy looked like.

And you know for a long time, through the "wisdom" of Johnson and McNamara, they stopped the bombing. There was no other lever or incentive for the North Vietnamese to release us POWs. When Johnson and McNamara stopped the bombing with no mention of the POWs, there was no pressure on the North Vietnamese to get us home. They just left us up there for years. I've never known two more inept leaders for a war.

There were 350 of us, and the ratio as you probably know was about

two-thirds Air Force, a third Navy, and there were five Marines there; Orson Swindle being one of the toughest Marines in the whole world. We're still good friends. But let's say that you and I were standing on the opposite sides of a prison wall, and I was tapping to you, and you can could tap back to me. After we learned the tap code, you can send about fifteen words a minute, like typing or the Morse code. Tom,[3], let's say for a moment, pretend you were in the Navy. I'd slow down to about twelve words when tapping to you, and those five Marines, we wouldn't bother to teach them. Maybe that's true, and maybe it isn't. You look a lot alike when you are in prison pajamas, and you're kind of scruffy.

But anyway I saw this guard go by one day, and this is the thought—I was just peeking out—this is the thought that went through my mind. I visualized myself flippin' a coin, and I caught it of course, and I put it on the back of my hand. I remember it was so real—this imagination. I looked down to make sure I had heads. I did. So obviously this guard had tails. The thought behind it was simply this—it was a profound thought for me; I had never thought of it before, and it really impacted me. My thought was this: I had no control and the guard had no control who our parents were. With a flip of a coin I was born American and he was Vietnamese. There's nothing wrong being born Vietnamese, but if you were a Vietnamese born into communism and a guard in prison camp having to torture people, there is was a lot wrong. I thought if that kid lives to be one hundred—I was thirty-five—he'dll only experience less than half of what I did in my thirty-five years, just by the luck of the draw being born in America. We're really a very fortunate people. Just by birthright we are given a platter of rights and freedoms and opportunities. I've been given the freedom right now to use a little bit of your time, and I appreciate your attention and hope you got a fair return on your investment of these ten minutes.

Postscript (Mike Ridnouer): On October 19, 1973, Leo Thorsness was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor by President Nixon for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty during a mission over North Vietnam on April 19, 1967. As pilot of an F-105 aircraft, he and his wingman attacked and silenced a surface-to-air missile site with air-to-ground missiles and then destroyed a second surface-to-air missile site with bombs. Lt. Col. Thorsness' wingman

was shot down by intensive antiaircraft fire. As the crew of the wingman's aircraft descended in their parachutes, they were threatened by a MiG-17. Lt. Col. Thorsness immediately initiated an attack and destroyed the MiG. Low on fuel he was forced to depart the area in search of a tanker. Advised that two A-1 aircraft orbiting over the downed crew's were being attacked by MiGs, he returned to the downed crew's position, spotted four MiG-17 aircraft and initiated an attack damaging one and driving the others from the rescue scene. His extraordinary heroism, self-sacrifice, and personal bravery reflected great credit upon himself and the U.S. Air Force. The following week, on April 30th, he was shot down by a MiG-21 while flying his 93rd mission over North Vietnam. He was held and suffered as a POW until Operation Homecoming and was released March 4, 1973. Colonel Thorsness died May 2, 2017, an American hero.

NOTES

1. Major General Charles D. Metcalf (Retired) was the Museum Director.

2. F-105F pilot Ben Fuller and EWO Norm Frith, "Carbine 01" on 30 April 30, 1967, when Leo, as "Carbine 03,", was shot down by a MiG-21.

3. Referring to former USAF POW Tom Hanton in the audience.

COFFEE WITH COLONEL BEN
STEVE MOSIER

We moved from our four-year tour at Bitburg Air Base, Germany, in the fall of 1973 to our new assignment at George Air Force Base. Four years is a long time to be away; we learned a lot—not much German but could navigate our way around the continent thanks to good maps, Esso gas stations, and a sense of adventure. One thing I learned was to drink coffee—standing around the duty desk. Waiting for the Eifel fog to move out or tail numbers to come in from maintenance, I learned to drink the German brew in large quantities. Coming back to the States, we learned we'd missed a lot. If you think back, the late sixties and early seventies were tumultuous times in the United States. End of the Vietnam War, Kent State, and resignation of President Nixon were just three of the events we viewed by black and white TV and through the sporadic coverage of *Stars and Stripes*. But we were glad to be home and ready for the American lifestyle. We sold our Volvo in Germany, planning on replacing it with American iron. Well, after shopping pretty vigorously for Chevys, Fords, Pontiacs, and Plymouths, we were disappointed in the products. In those days "Made in the USA" was not much of an endorsement for a car, so we bought another Volvo for the cross-country drive to California from the midwest. It was good to be back, but some parts of America were not as impressive as we'd remembered.

We motored into the high desert area and checked in at the base and the housing office, ready to enter the home buying market. We were lucky with our realtor, the widow of an A-1 pilot, who was friendly and competent. We

gave her our ideas on what we were looking for, and she set out to find us a place. We homed on in Apple Valley, a high desert community about a fifteen-minute drive east of George. We did our share of looking but pretty quickly found a house we were really happy with and set about the negotiations for the sale. The couple we were dealing with was great and ready to move back to their Texas roots. We made an offer, and they said yes. It was a quick deal from that perspective, but the purchase process was new to us, and we were not ready for the California red tape. But, Charlotte, our realtor, was good at getting us through the many wickets.

Colonel Ben has been retired for several years but was still engaged. The house sale was actually out of both of our hands—the banks, escrow agents, credit agencies, the State of California, and our realtors were actually in charge. Regardless, Colonel Ben could often find a reason for me to meet with him, discuss our deal, and have a cup of coffee. I was not fully back in the operational environment at George, so it wasn't hard to find the time to join him for a cup.

The routine was simple: I'd drive to our house to be, and Ben would show me some of the features—it was a "Silver Medallion Electric" house. I really didn't know what that meant; it was sort of a California thing. But features like a very efficient air conditioning system, a built-in home appliance suite—blender, mixer, knife sharpener, an ice crusher—and a house-wide vacuum system plus the Silver medallion embedded in the foyer were features we certainly didn't have in Germany, but part of the package.

After a few visits, it became clear that Colonel Ben was happy with the status of the real estate deal and really wanted to talk AF. He asked a lot about our experience in Germany, the activities at George, and pretty much anything about the AF of those days. So I gave him my updates and stories about flying in Europe. Then I had an occasion to ask him about his experiences. He was a quiet guy but had a good memory and was more than willing to talk about his flying days. And they were interesting.

Colonel Ben had been a B-24 pilot in the 8th Air Force in WWII. He shared his experiences flying on the bombing raids out of the United Kingdom, including about six trips to Berlin. His stories about flak, fighters, and the eight-hour trips, often in the "thousand bombers" raids, were related

calmly without any boasting. He was on the schedule, flew the sorties, and came home. No drama, just stories about stress, fear, adrenaline, and the relief on rolling out in his Liberator on one of the many bomber bases in England.

I knew he'd been on active duty till his retirement in the late '60s, but I never knew what he did after WWII until we began to talk about the Vietnam War. Then he mentioned he'd flown RF-4Cs out Udorn. This interested me for several reasons—one being my back seater at Bitburg had been a recce WSO in that same time frame, at the same base. They had been there at different times, so we didn't have any stories to share in that regard. But we both were Phantom drivers and had some tales to share even though our missions were different; he was recce, and I was a bomb dropper. We talked about our experiences and discussed the differences and the similarities—it made for several coffee sessions.

One day I asked Colonel Ben how he compared his two combat experiences, one in the B-24 Liberator and one in the recce Phantom. He took a couple of sips of coffee, paused, and said, "Steve, I guess I never thought about comparing those days, but now with time under my belt, I guess I'd say that flying low and fast across Thud ridge before a strike and getting the pre and poststrike photos of the Than Hoa Bridge and the MiG airfields as a single RF-4C was a heck of a trip. SAMs, tracking AAA, and listening to T-Ball call out Red and Blue Bandits on the only friendly in Pack 6, me, was something I will never forget. But it was just five minutes. When I think of taking off out of one of those small bases in the Wash with a full bomb load, climbing out through thousands of feet of clouds and hundreds of other B-17s and B-24s and topping out around twenty thousand feet or so. It was enough to make you sick at your stomach just thinking about it. Then you formed up in the Combat Box and settled into a seven hour or so trip at 170 knots being shot at almost continually upon coasting in across the Netherlands and being harassed by Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs every minute of the trip. You held altitude and heading steady on the bomb run for what seemed like a lifetime, dropped your bombs, and made a 180-degree turn headed home, facing the fighters and flak, and maybe a weather let down to your home aerodrome, or any runway you could find." He paused then said, "As bad as Pack 6 was, no way five minutes at six hundred knots and three hundred feet

compares to seven hours at one hundred seventy knots being shot at every minute of the mission—not even close."

Making these comments seemed to unearth another memory of WWII in Colonel Ben. He paused a bit and then mentioned he'd gone to London to celebrate his last mission. He was in the Savoy bar, savoring a scotch, when he was tapped on the shoulder by one of his pilot training classmates. They went through some greetings and catch up. Colonel Ben noted ribbons on his friend's chest—a Silver Star, an Air Medal with several oak leaves on the ribbon, and several foreign decorations. Ben himself had a Distinguished Flying Cross and an Air Medal for his twenty-seven missions in the Liberator.

He commented his classmate friend's decorations suggested some very special performance and asked what he'd been doing. The reply was, "I've flying C-47 overloads in support of the Supreme Allied Commander's staff in and out of Paris since the liberation of France."

Ben said, "My mind conveyed images of silk stockings, cigarettes, scotch, champagne, and cheeses in large quantities. I had thought of how I might respond, verbally and physically, but I just finished my drink, turned, and walked away."

I am glad I learned to like coffee and got to know Colonel Ben.