WINTER 2002
THE BEST OF FLIGHT JOURNAL

# VIETNAM AIR WAR

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***On the cover:*** *a 435TFS F-4 Phantom heads to a target, May 1969 (photo by James Wood, courtesy of Warren Thompson).*

FROM THE PUBLISHERS OF
FLIGHT JOURNAL

# Vietnam Pr

## *A gallant attempt to rescue American POWs*

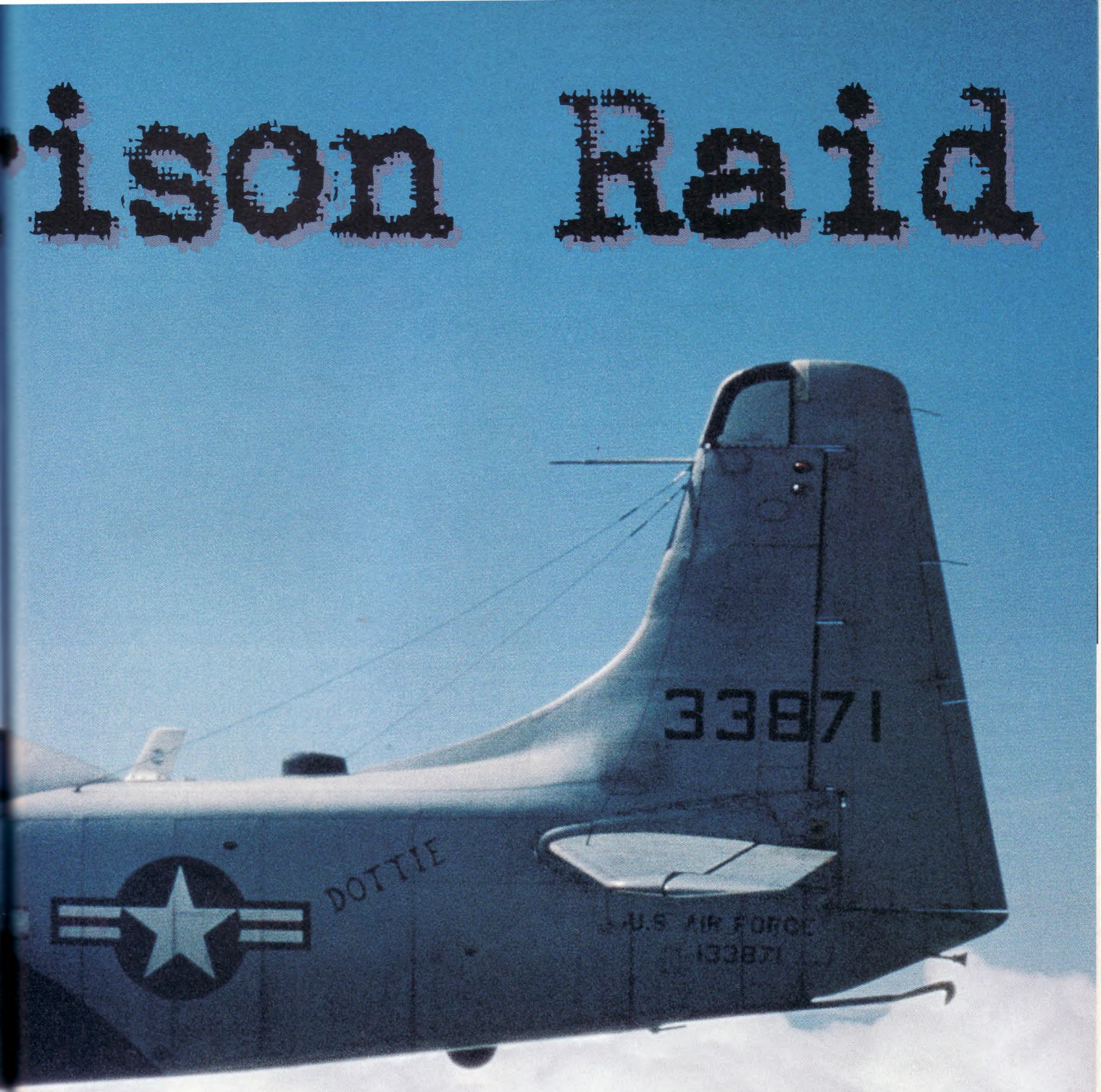
BY JOHN WARESH

***Ten of us took five "Fat Face" A-1Es like this one to Son Tay to support the rescue operation. If we had had any inkling of the outcome, we would have stayed at our base (photo by Win Depoorter via Warren Thompson).***

*Editors' note: the Vietnam conflict was unquestionably politically controversial, and military leaders were often second-guessed by D.C. But when the lives of servicemen or women were on the line, the military did what it had to, and the prescribed rules of engagement were abandoned. For that reason, when U.S. intelligence learned that Americans were being held at the Son Tay prison camp in North Vietnam, plans to free them were immediately set into motion.*

*Lt. Col. John Waresh, USAF, tells us about the mission as he saw the events unfold from the cockpit of his A-1E Skyraider.*

# ison Raid




At night, on Saturday, November 20, 1970, a C-130 picked us up from Takhli, Thailand, where we had been housed in the CIA compound since deploying from Eglin AFB, Florida. The Nakhon Phanom (NKP), Thailand, flightline—our initial destination—was blacked out; the tower people had been relieved and even the control tower was empty. Our C-130 landed without lights on a dark runway and taxied to the ramp. Even before it had stopped completely, 10 of us ran out: two pilots for each of the five "Fat Face" A-1Es we would take. The C-130's ramp was pulled up and it took off. It had others to deliver.

***When practicing for the mission, the best arrival time over the IP that we could accomplish was 10 minutes off the time specified. During the mission itself, we were off by only two seconds; it helped to have the Talon driver lead us in (photo by Win Depoorter via Warren Thompson).***

IP, over which we had a controlled altitude. The Talon would be joined by choppers—under us and coming in from a different direction. They should have been slightly ahead of us, but we couldn't be sure everyone was on time. The control time was over the camp, so IP times were adjusted to take account of our differing speeds.

Then the Talon transmitted the code word: "Alpha." It was the first sound we had heard on the radio all night. The code was to be picked up by a high orbiting EC-135 over northern Laos and relayed back to wherever. It meant we had crossed the IP. We were two seconds off our planned time, but the closest anyone had done during practice was 10 minutes. (Of course, we didn't have Talons for practice.) The Talon then accelerated and disappeared in the night.

The heading to the camp was 091, and trying to reset our DG by a jiggly whiskey compass was an effort in futility. We didn't have the latest high-tech hardware on board; good thing all the towns, cities and roads were lit up. Because of our prior target study, it was like being in our own backyard.

Number five peeled right; he was a backup in case anyone was shot down, and he was to orbit a hill just south of course until called in. The hill turned out to be an army artillery practice range, and they soon fired a few rounds, so number five moved—probably closer to the camp; don't know where. It was another example of the brilliant intel we had.

Three and four peeled left to hold just short of the camp. The plan was to call them in when we had expended 50 percent of our ordnance; they would then expend 50 percent of their ordnance, and we would change places and repeat the procedure. If someone went down, there would still be an airborne aircraft with support ordnance left for the recovery effort. Then two dropped back, so we set up a two-aircraft "daisy chain" around the camp.

It was like a precision ballet; a computer simulation could not have been better timed. Just as I banked alongside the camp, one of the Talons popped two flares right over it. At the same time, "Banana" (an HH-3 with Blue Boy assault team aboard) crash-landed inside the compound and the first "Apple" (CH-53) opened up with mini-guns on the watch towers and guard quarters, which exploded or caught fire. We didn't want the big fire to consume the two-story quarters because it would attract attention, but it was too late.

**As a distraction, one of the Talons dropped a firefight simulator on the other side of town, and we could see its sparkles. Another Talon dumped napalm on an infantry base armory to the south, and there was a large explosion.**

At that time, we had only to make sure no one approached the camp. No one did. As a distraction, one of the Talons dropped a firefight simulator on the other side of town, and we could see its sparkles. Another Talon dumped napalm on an infantry base armory to the south, and there was a large explosion.

Then the sh*t hit the fan. "Wild Root" (the command-and-control team) started to yell that "Axle"—Col. "Bull" Simons—was "lost." "We've lost Axle!" he yelled. "Goddamn! Simons has been killed. We're all in deep sh*t."

At this point, I must tell you that I think the universe will

*Bill Northup's rendering of us taking out "the bridge" (illustration by Bill Northup).*

collapse inward before Army and Air Force personnel will ever be able to talk on a radio and have one another understand what is going on. Simons wasn't dead ("lost" in Air Force jargon); they just didn't know where he was.

Then the radio erupted with chatter from everywhere. The second "Apple" that carried Simons and half of the assault force had landed them in the wrong place. Coming in from the IP, their heading had been one degree off, and they were several hundred meters south of the camp. When the time ran out, they saw a building that didn't quite look like the guard quarters, but it was the only building around, so they landed. That's where the infamous "firefight at the school" took place. It wasn't a school; it just looked like one. "The white building south of the camp" was way too cumbersome a description! There were lots of buildings south of the camp, and we named them so that we would all know which building was being referred to.

Unfortunately, the media took "the school" reference literally and had a small field day. I remember a TV reporter later asking Col. Simons whether he had killed anyone at "the school." He said something to the effect, "I was approached by a big fella; I had a tracer as every third round in my M-16 and saw three go through his middle." There wasn't a follow-up question.

*A fifth "Fat Face" was a backup in case anyone was shot down. Once we had passed the IP, he orbited to the south of the target (photo courtesy of Jay Miller).*

The troops in the wrong place were screaming, "Wild Root" was screaming, and all the "Apples" were screaming. The FM and VHF radios were almost impossible to read let alone get anything in of your own. (The UHF was kept for AF use to call the MiG Cap or Weasels and to talk among ourselves.) The "Apple" that had dumped the guys in the wrong place was the closest, so it did a 180 and went in to pick them up. All the others took off and headed for "the school," too—just in case. No one has yet figured out how we avoided a midair.

The troops at the school were in a fierce firefight. Right after they landed, people poured out of the building, and because most were thought to be too tall to be Vietnamese, the guess was that they were Chinese or Russian, but no one had time to check. The estimated kill ran from 17 to 70, but we don't know for sure.

"Bull" Simons and the rest of the assault force made it back to the camp without a casualty. The incident had lasted a few minutes, but it had put the entire ground operation off schedule. The two perimeter teams—"Red Wine" and "Green Leaf"—headed out to do their thing, but "Blue Boy," the assault team inside the prison compound, had already searched most of it. As soon as Simons got on the radio, he asked "Blue Boy" for a status report. "Negative items so far; still searching." (An "item" was the code for a prisoner.)

Then Simons told us to take out the footbridge to "the citadel"—our name for a group of buildings a few hundred meters southeast of the camp. They were surrounded by a narrow moat spanned by a footbridge on the camp side. Our intel told us it was a military cadet training facility and probably had a small-arms armory. We didn't want armed personnel crossing the bridge and getting within range of the camp.

Jerry and I put two WP bombs on it, and when number two came in and saw the bridge aflame, he dropped his ordnance short to get anyone who might have already crossed it. In the process, he took out a few blocks of housing between

the camp and the citadel. WP does a real number on wooden structures; the firestorm was far from small.

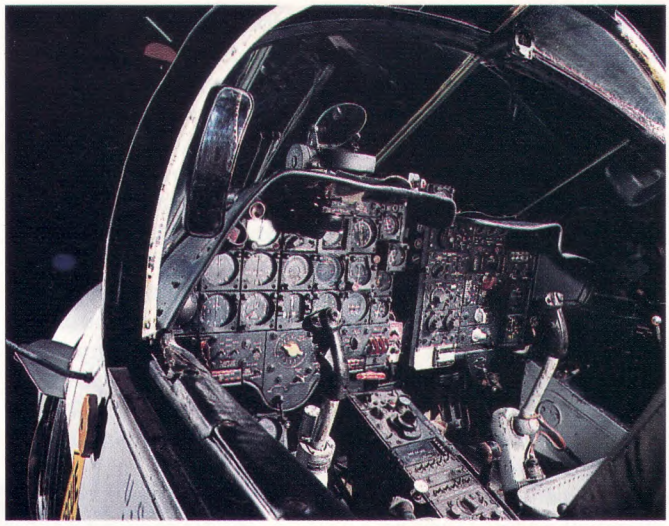
Now the sequence of events is all jumbled in my memory. At about the time as Simons and the troops got back to the camp, the first SAM took off. You cannot miss a SAM launch at night; it lights up miles in all directions. The first few launches were called—"SAM, SAM, dive, dive"—but there were so many launches that they couldn't all be called. There seemed to be about four launch sites within a few miles of the camp west of Hanoi. The rest were farther east, and we didn't think they were a threat. Most of the SAMs went high after the MiG cap Weasels and the Navy's 200-plane feint came in from the east. The idea was to fool them into thinking there was a major raid on Hanoi so that they wouldn't bother with a few planes to the west. It worked! NSA later told us that the Air Defense Commander screamed, "Fire at will!" Then they shut down and went off the air.

We were at our briefed 3,000 feet until the SAMs started to come our way. Our intel had told us that at that altitude, we wouldn't have any trouble with SAMs—a lot some pencil-pushing puke knows! We all hit the deck and kept an eye on the launch sites close to us. Sure enough, someone at the site closest to us—just a few miles to the northeast—decided to try for the guys to the west—us! They launched one that never reached the horizon. I watched it rise and almost immediately level off. Then it seemed to stop moving. We knew what that meant—collision course! We dived toward the Red River and turned west. Jerry was flying, and I was keeping an eye on the damn thing over my right shoulder as it charged at us. I repeatedly bumped the stick forward, exclaiming "Lower! Lower!" Jerry kept bumping the stick back saying, "We're going to hit the water." When the rocket plume on the thing seemed as big as the A-1, I yelled, "Break left!" We went up and over the river bank, about 50 feet, and leveled off at phone-pole height going straight south.

We never saw the thing again. It either hadn't had time to arm, or it buried itself in the water/mud so deeply that the flash of detonation was masked. That's another thing you can't miss at night: the detonation of a SAM. It's a lightning-bright flash, and it is quite large. They were going off over us constantly, and once you got used to them, you didn't even bother to look up. For about 30 minutes, there were no less than three SAMs airborne at a time, and at other times, so many we couldn't count them. I've never heard an estimate of the number fired that night, but it had to be in the dozens. All the SAM misses self-detonated, either at a preset altitude or when their motors burned out.

As I said, you wouldn't look up at a SAM detonation unless something was different. Then there *was* something different: the flash was yellowish instead of bright white. Looking up, we saw a large fireball with flaming debris falling from it. "Damn; someone got nailed." Suddenly, there was a flaming dash across the sky heading southwest; then another and another. Three dashes were all I saw; I couldn't spend any more time looking up.

Later, we learned that a SAM had detonated close to a Weasel and filled it with holes. Fuel was streaming out and its afterburner (AB) was igniting the fuel in dashes across the sky.



***I was in the right seat of the Sandy we took to the target (photo by Dan Patterson).*** **Editors' note: this is the cockpit of Bernie Fisher's MOH Skyraider, which is now at the USAF Museum in Dayton, Ohio.**

Because the jet was losing all of its fuel, the pilot left it in AB until the fuel ran out. He got to the Southern Plain of Jars (PDJ) in Laos before bailing out.

About this time, Blue Boy calls Axle and says, "Search complete; negative items." Silence! Then Simons asks for a repeat. "Search complete; negative items; repeat negative items." More silence.

I don't know what anyone else was thinking then, but for me, it was a setup—an ambush. But hell, we had already been there 20 minutes, and surely, they would have sprung it by then. So then it turned to, "What the hell are we doing here?" and "How the hell are we going to get our asses out of here intact?" Simons must have been thinking the same thing. He called for the perimeter teams to pull back and for the Bananas to come in for the pickup. Then he told us to take out the "big bridge."

**I watched it rise and almost immediately level off. Then it seemed to stop moving. We knew what that meant—collision course! We dived toward the Red River and turned west. Jerry was flying, and I was keeping an eye on the damn thing over my right shoulder as it charged at us.**

All sounds very simple, but it sure wasn't. First, we had no hard ordnance and couldn't take out the "big bridge." We had no more WP bombs, and that was the only thing that would have damaged a wooden bridge, which supposedly was Green Leaf's objective; they were supposed to blow it up, but because of their late start, they hadn't reached it before the pull-back order.

A little info about the "big bridge." It was a few hundred meters northeast of the camp on the road that ran along its entrance. It was about 100 feet long, heavily constructed and, we were told, could take any vehicle—even a tank. Green Leaf was supposed to blow it and hold the road while Red Wine would go southeast and hold the road there.

During training, the engineers said 12 pounds of C-4 would

take out the bridge. To be sure, however, they were going to double it and use 24 pounds. Col. Simons said that he wanted to be doubly sure, and he doubled that to 48 pounds and then added that two people would each carry 48 pounds—96 pounds of C-4. I would like to have seen what 96 pounds of C-4 would have done to that bridge, but it wasn't to be.

What made things worse was that the outbound and pull-back routes for the perimeter teams were different. Because each outbound team had to take out all possible threats, they didn't want to retrace their steps and possibly run into someone they missed. That someone would have been one angry gomer. There was a lot of housing just outside the camp; intel said it was for the camp commander, married officers and maybe some camp workers. The outbound teams went house to house to make sure no one would be a threat. It was a slow process, so between starting out late and an early pull-back, they had no chance of reaching their goal.

Because they hadn't reached the end of the outbound route, they could not follow the pull-back route. The radios went nuts again. "There's part of Red Wine's team in Green Leaf's area of responsibility and part of Green Leaf's team in Red Wine's area. Do not fire without identification." This was repeated over and over again—so much so that the teams could hardly get in to acknowledge. They were so out of breath that they could say only one word between two or three breaths. It wasn't fun to listen to.

***The Skyraider could carry a variety of weapons. For the Son Tay raid, we had white phosphorus (WP) bombs and the Navy's Rockeye ordnance (photo by Dan Patterson).***

Sometime during all of this, we had expended 50 percent of our ordnance and called in three and four. They had done the same and called us back. We dumped the Rockeyes on the bridge. The Rockeye is a Navy fast-mover ordnance that we had to certify the A-1 to carry while in training at Eglin. It's a multi-munitions thing with gobs of little shaped charges, and it's used to take out vehicles—even tanks, I guess. It was not very good for bridges, but we put a lot of holes in it. After that, we laid down continuous strafing until everyone was in the Bananas and on their way out.

We never saw any vehicles or people moving anywhere near the camp. There was a lot of traffic on the east/west road along the Red River, about a click north, going into and out of Hanoi, but no one turned toward the camp. Also, at about this time, the SAM launches were slowing down, but the MiG calls were increasing. Roughly 20 minutes into the 40 minutes this took, we started to pick up MiG calls. Our intel told us they had no night-qualified pilots, so we would have no trouble with MiGs. Right!

There was one call of an air-to-air missile firing. The pilot said it zoomed right past his plane. I don't know who it was, and I never saw any myself. That was the only call of a firing I remember hearing. But the MiG warning calls from Collage Eye, or whoever makes those things, were coming regularly.

Once the Jollys were off and running, we putted along above and behind them, guessing where they were because it was dark and no one could see a thing. Everyone was to call the IP outbound. One by one, we heard the calls, thank God. Then we heard this, "Is everybody out?" "Who are you?" "This is Banana something or other." "Where are you?" "I'm back at the holding point waiting to be sure everyone got out OK." "Goddamn jerk." We told him to get his ass airborne and head for the IP as fast as his funny machine would take him. He acknowledged. By this time, we had nearly reached the IP ourselves. Jerry and I looked at each other and said, "We don't have a choice." With possible MiGs around, a lonely Jolly all by himself makes a pretty good target. We turned around, climbed to a nice MiG target altitude, three or four thousand, and went "Christmas tree." We turned on every light we had and slowly drove back to Hanoi. With MiG calls coming every few minutes, I was sweating profusely. I don't know whether it was hot, I was scared, or just pooped out, but I was soaked. It seemed an eternity, but as the camp and the west side of Hanoi slipped under the nose, we heard the IP call. Lights out and split-S. We beat feet west for the IP on the deck.

Getting away from the river valley and into the dark countryside, we climbed to a safe altitude to clear the mountains en route to Udorn. We then started to take care of some pilot stuff. We had used up the left stub tank getting there and most of the right tank, too. We were on internal over the target and used the centerline while holding. Time to clean up the fuel mess. The right stub ran out almost right away; just a couple of minutes of fuel remained. Time to jettison. That's when I experienced the longest two seconds of my life.

I hit the button, but instead of falling away, it pitched up and slammed back against the leading edge, making the tank into a "vee" shape. It came bouncing along the leading edge of the wing toward the fuselage. I can see it to this day, making four bounces and then falling away under the wing. It all happened in one or two seconds; I didn't even have time to say "Oh, sh*t." I sometimes wonder what would have happened to the right horizontal stabilizer if it had decided to pass up and over the wing instead of under it. I don't dwell on it, though—too scary.

The five helicopters, three carrying the assault force and two empty because of no items, were all together and had to "hit" a tanker to make it back. The A-1s were spread out who knew where but still in radio contact. As we crossed the PDJ, we picked up the downed Weasel's beepers and soon made voice contact. They were both all right. Number one was cool, but number two was a little panicky—not because he was being threatened but because he was all alone, in the dark, in the woods, in Laos. I didn't blame him one bit. Then we made contact with four Sandys launched out of NKP in answer to the Weasel's mayday. They didn't know who we were because of the call signs. Took a hell of a while to convince them that Peach and Banana really meant "Sandy" and "Jolly."

The call-sign battle had been long and arduous, but in the end, we lost. I'll never forgive the Air Force either for

picking them and allowing them to be forced on us. The Army had call signs that, if not macho, were at least neutral: "Blue Boy," "Red Wine," "Green Leaf," "Wild Root" and "Axle." What did the wimpy Air Force come up with? A-1s: "Peach"; Jollys: "Banana"; the CH-53s, "Apple." Talons were "Cherry" and the C-130 tanker "Lime"—a damn fruit salad! It was embarrassing and downright humiliating. I'll never forgive those pencil-pushing Air Force pukes for that.

Anyway, it was decided that the two empty Jollys would hang around with the four Sandys and make a first light pick-up. From what I understand, it was uncontested and pretty much a piece of cake.

Landing at Udorn, we were all rushed to debriefing in a building right on the flightline. As I walked in, I was met by a group of intel people with wide grins, and they seemed higher than kites. I thought they were lunatics. They asked, "How many prisoners?" I said, "None; the camp was empty." The grins disappeared, and their faces paled. "What?" I repeated it, and I thought they would pass out.

What had happened was, after leaving the target area, the Army did a head count and got it all screwed up. For a while, they thought someone might have been left behind. For several minutes over the radio, we could hear the chatter between the Jollys. "I've got thirty-three." "I've got thirty-five." "I've got thirty-two." "I've got thirty-one." This seemed to go on forever. Finally, they got it right, and no one was left behind. The high-orbiting EC-135 must have been relaying all that back to Udorn, and it was interpreted by the intel people as a prisoner count. They all thought we had rescued 30 or so prisoners.

Once that had been squared away, the debriefing was chaos. People ran every which way. I don't remember being debriefed, and I don't think anyone ever was. I don't know whether any preparations had been made for prisoners, but they were all down the tubes. It was almost a state of panic.

Col. Simons, Jerry Rhine, Dick Meadows and maybe others were whisked off to meet Gen. Leroy Manor at Monkey Mountain, Da Nang. The rest of us were left in the lurch and forgotten about. The sun was coming up by then, and we all wandered out onto the ramp. We sat down on the cement, cross-legged—in circles of about 10. We were in our reeking, sweat-soaked flight suits, and the assault force had their blackened faces, guns, grenades and what-have-you hanging off them. They were bleeding from every square inch of exposed skin from dozens of cuts, scrapes and bruises. We just sat mumbling to one another. No stories were being told. We had all just done it, seen it or heard it and knew what had happened.

Then someone came out and handed a bottle to each of the circles. Each of us took a sip and passed it on—around and around and around until it was empty. I can't attest to what was going on at the other circles, but there wasn't a dry eye at ours. Tears ran down every cheek—a gallant effort with nothing to show. To hell and back for naught. +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