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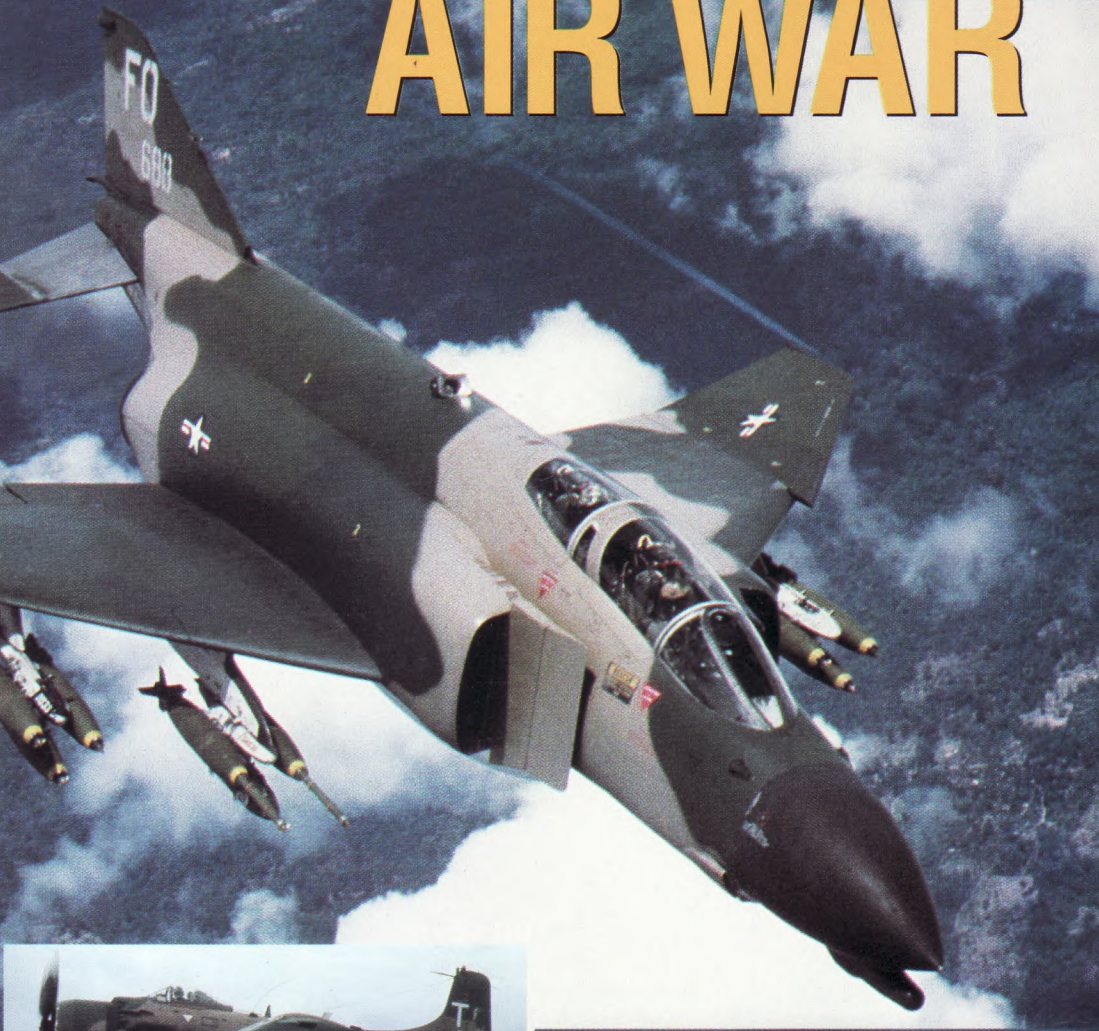
VIETNAM

AIR WAR

F-4
SHOOTDOWN

Raven
Sorties

DUST-OFF
OPERATIONS



Skyraider!

FROM THE PUBLISHERS OF

FLIGHT
JOURNAL

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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

A different war

BY BUDD DAVISSON

In a few short months, it will be 30 years since the last ground troops left Vietnam; that seems nothing short of amazing to the '60s generation. Part of us says it can't have been that long ago. Time, however, has a way of lying to us when our memories and emotions are involved.

The Vietnam War is universally remembered as a

For a lot of reasons, Vietnam was a different kind of war, and as we were assembling the articles for this special issue, we were struck by the vividness brought to the retelling of these tales by their authors—all of whom were writing from personal experience. Their language has an immediacy that seems to set this generation of combat tales apart from those of earlier wars. It

is hard to pin down the differences, but their words seem to reach deeper and explain more. Perhaps we can identify with their tales because their history is entwined with our own. Increasingly, WW II is remembered firsthand by fewer and fewer people. That is how memories fade and become part of history. Vietnam, however, was this generation's war. A little piece of each of us was there.

If nothing else, Vietnam was unique because we watched it in real time as we ate dinner. Even so, it is amazing how it became an event that didn't seem real. Many argued the politics and whether we should be over there, but somehow, those who were actually doing the fighting fell through the cracks. It was as if we argued a concept but forgot the reality.

Vietnam was also the first war to completely mold the ground and air wars together into a single, cohesive theater of operations. The helicopter came of age right along with so many young soldiers, and the specialized skill of ground support was honed to a sharp edge. We used airplanes to kill the enemy as well as to protect and save our own soldiers. From Sandys to Dust Off choppers, a layer of protection was developed that had never existed before. On the offensive side, pilots flew Wild Weasel and MiG cap

missions against a mostly invisible enemy whose presence—first known as a warbling radar signal—told a pilot that a SAM was seeking him out.

We now face yet another invisible enemy: terrorism. We hope that the haunting memories of Vietnam prevent us from repeating past mistakes. And we hope that never again will we have to erect solemn black walls that silently intone the names of young men gone. †

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long, collective nightmare of divisiveness. Only now are the memories beginning to mutate into a national understanding of what that generation of warriors endured. Only now are we offering the hand of welcome that was missing when those young men returned home. Looking back, we now realize that too many of us confused our feelings toward national policy with our feelings toward our servicemen and tarred them with the same brush.



Dust Off was the most effective combat lifesaver in the history of warfare and also the most dangerous. In Vietnam, Dust Off rescued some one million wounded under every possible condition, resulting in a death rate of less than one percent among those casualties who survived the first 24 hours. It has been said that your chances of survival were greater if you were wounded in the jungles of Vietnam than if you were in a car accident on the highways of America.

ARMED WITH A Red Cross

The patients were at the edge of a tree line backed by a river. The enemy, as always, invisible, had last been heard from a few hundred yards across an open rice paddy in another tree line. The landing zone (LZ) was classified "secure." We went upstream, dropped our Huey between the riverbanks, raced back downstream, jumped over the trees and sat down in the LZ.

BY MAJ. GEN. PATRICK
BRADY, U.S. ARMY (RET.)

Everything was nice and quiet. I was watching the green smoke that marked the LZ lazily dissipate in the rotor wash when all hell broke loose. Bullets snapped past sounding like firecrackers exploding between our ears as they broke the sound barrier. There we were—sitting ducks in a sack of JP4; our only meaningful protection, the .45s snuggled warmly between our legs. My physical reaction was a burning sensation in my ears; I tried to shrink, to somehow become a smaller target. That's when we learned the true meaning of puckering—when the cheeks from the lower part of your body slowly begin to envelop your ears.

DUST-OFF TACTICS IN VIETNAM



ARMED WITH A RED CROSS

A battlefield is always a mess; people shooting, shouting and crawling. This time, no one will stand up to help load the wounded, and we sit there in plain sight with our heads 10 feet in the air and grind and fret about getting the casualties on board. As I go back and forth, alternately yelling out the window and shouting into the radio, I catch a glimpse of my copilot engaged in a cockpit evasive action I have never before seen. (Strange things happen in a cockpit when someone is shooting at you. On one occasion, I looked for my copilot and he was gone—not really; he had just switched the location of

no longer and began to laugh almost convulsively. He didn't miss a stroke as he coldly eyed me between gyrations and said, "Laugh, you son of a bitch; but it's harder to hit a moving target."

That story, I think, illustrates the difference between the experiences of chopper pilots and other combat fliers. We often had to land right on the battlefield while the battle raged. While the jet jockey was up there in the wild blue yonder contemplating the "face of God," we were down in the mud between His ankles. Those pilots who have bailed out and

Dust Off helicopters had to land on some of the most difficult terrain imaginable and often under enemy fire. Over one-third of Dust Off pilots became casualties in their work, and statistically, flying Dust Off was three times more dangerous than any other helicopter mission (photos courtesy of the author).



his head to where his butt would usually be.) This time, my copilot was going through some extraordinary, snake-like gyrations with his head, to and fro, side to side and all around the cyclic stick. Back to the patients—"Come on, you guys; hurry up"—and then to my buddy, whose head I feared would depart his shoulders as his gyrations became faster and faster the longer we sat there. Finally, amid the racket of the running helicopter and the all-engulfing sounds of battle, I could bear it

slowly floated down through a dogfight will clearly understand what I am talking about.

Every chopper pilot searched for ways to beat the sitting-duck syndrome, to be a moving target. But there wasn't a book on tactical helicopter flying in Vietnam, and as it was the first war in which helicopters played a critical role, we had no base of universal experience from which we could draw. We didn't have teachers such as Capt. Eddy, Joe Foss, Gabby Gabreski or

Richard Bong. We wrote our books as we went along—unique books based on each pilot's capabilities, imagination and experiences. Here are some chapters from my "book" about being a Dust Off (medivac) pilot during two tours in Vietnam.

My first Dust Off in Vietnam was in mountainous terrain near Plei Ku. My copilot was a short-timer who seemed quite relaxed until we neared the fire-fight. He then became very alert. Would I mind, he asked, if he showed me a "tactical approach." I didn't know what he

secure was our LZ, therefore the shortest, fastest route down from altitude was the safest. I was to find acceptance of the "overhead spiral theory" pretty common; many thought it was the only safe way into a hot area. During missions in my first tour, I did, too, and used it often—perhaps once too often.

It was not a good day. Earlier in the mission, near the Iron Triangle, our servos had gone out. By that time, I had more than two months in the country, and despite the fact that it took both pilots to out-muscle the controls, I should have

taken the helicopter back to Saigon. Instead, we bounced it into a grass field rather than risk the flight back. We scrambled from the bird and set up a perimeter as I saw visions of bamboo cages, or worse. Fortunately, a friendly patrol saw us go in and rushed to secure the area. They brought us another ship and we returned for the casualties. The pick-up site was west of a tree line in an open rice paddy. We were told the LZ was secure and the friendlies popped smoke. I identified the color, and we were good to go.

A few words on smoke: in earlier days, the friendly would state the color of his smoke as he popped it. Charlie, who often monitored our push, occasionally would pop that same color smoke and lure some pilots into the wrong area. We overcame that danger by having the pilot identify the smoke and the ground troops verify it.

We came up over the area and I initiated a spiral approach. I was about to flare out when there was a sudden splatter of blood across the cockpit and my copilot announced, quite calmly, that he had been shot. I pulled out of the approach and rushed him to the hospital, where they were waiting for me (darn it) with another ship and a new copilot. We went back for the patients who were still out there in that "secure" area.

I was now on my third chopper for the mission and my ears were really burning. The friendlies would insist that the area was again secure. "Yeah; you bet," I thought. I could not escape the conviction that the Viet Cong (VC) were in

that tree line waiting. In those early days, Charlie was everywhere, even in friendly units in friendly uniforms. If I spiraled in, I feared a replay of my earlier effort. As we neared the pick-up site, I visualized the rice paddy that extended to the west. Although it was pretty flat, some high vegetation and rice-paddy berms offered a little cover. I decided to fly well west of the area, lose my altitude in a secure spot and snake my way in onto the deck. I reasoned I was a more

was talking about, but although my feelings were bruised, I consented. He then flew directly over the target, beeped the rotors down a few hundred rpm, kicked it out of trim and, from 3,000 feet, bottomed the pitch and dived for the area. We were falling like a brick! Being fresh out of flight school (high-recon, low-recon, 500fpm stabilized descents), I was shocked. I was also surprised that we survived. His explanation was compelling: the only area with any hope of being





During a rice-paddy pick-up, the pilot held the aircraft at a hover to avoid getting stuck in the mud. Here, a family with a wounded child is evacuated. It was important to keep at least one adult with the child, not only to help in the overcrowded hospitals, but also to ensure that the child would get back to his village. Without a parent, many children were separated from their families.

**[To be exposed on low ground in terraced rice paddies is as bad as it gets.
I don't think there is anything worse than to be shot at from above.]**

difficult target when down low, moving fast and where fewer rifles could be trained on me at one time. I asked for smoke at the last possible moment, turned my tail toward

also because it was harder for a bullet to get to you if it had to go through the engine and transmission rather than just through a windshield.) We eventually got the wounded and were well on our way out when Charlie noticed us and cut loose.

Another mission shortly thereafter reinforced the importance of the low, fast approach. My commander had just crashed and died on a pick-up in the Delta south of Saigon. The casualties were still in the area, and I was asked to go for them. As I came up over the site, I could see the friendlies standing next to our burning ship and indicating where they wanted me to land. They said the area was secure, and I believed them. They were, after all,



The tall growth in the jungle made it extremely difficult to spot troops who needed assistance. The wounded often had to be carried through this type of vegetation to reach a suitable clearing for a Dust Off pick-up.

standing, and surely, after what had just happened, they would have cleared it. We were about 50 feet up and almost to the burning chopper when we started taking hits. I jerked the helicopter out of there and jumped over a canal to sit down and check the damage to determine whether we were flyable; we were.

West of the ship, there was a heavily vegetated river with canals running off on each side to form a "U." I went back to altitude and took a closer look at the area. I noticed a perfect square of banana trees east of the burning ship. They were a bit thin, but there wasn't another place to hide. We asked them to move the patients to the banana square and to hold the smoke. I was sure there were enemy mixed with the friendlies and did not want smoke to signal our arrival. Since it is easy to get lost when you're at a low level without smoke, I memorized the terrain as I flew east. I got as low as I could (my cheeks were well over my ears by now), flew up to the banana trees, jumped over, slid into a 180-degree turn and sat down. We got the patients out, although not before the shooting started.

I was a slow learner, but by now, I knew the overhead spiral was not the only way to go in. Low and fast was also good. The more I worked the low, fast approach, the faster I could go in. I learned to stop flat, without a flare, by cross-controlling the cyclic and the pedals as I slid into a 180. On the spiral, stopping is a problem: a straight flare or a side flare can put you in a float during which the aircraft is mushy and you are very vulnerable. If you come under fire, evasive action is difficult. But in some terrain, the spiral was still the best approach. The key was the terrain; it was everything—benefactor as well as deathtrap. Terrain and terrain alone determined the direction and type of approach. I became a serious student of the terrain: how it looked from above as opposed to when you got on the ground; the height of a berm; the width of a river; the height of trees and other growth. I visualized these things on every mission and gave the guy shooting at us the benefit of any doubt. I would mentally put him in the most favorable position with every possible advantage and would then analyze how to get in.

Although we had the Red Cross markings on the sides and front of the helicopters, many Dust Off aircraft were fired at and downed by enemy gunners.



Hoist missions were seven times more dangerous than any others, but they were absolutely essential when flying over minefields and other hazardous terrain.

controlled. In combat, you need to be able to turn your imagination on when it's needed and off when it isn't. Imagination can also produce terror that can turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. My buddy with his head gyrations is a good example of an imagination a bit out of control.

Anyone can develop a strong imagination if he works hard. The more you know, the more alert you are and the more you care, the more you are able to combine and compare—to brainstorm—and to find new ways. Any success I had as a Dust Off pilot was because I used and could control my imagination. There were missions in which the terrain was of little help—even a distraction—but if you used your imagination, you could find a way. A couple of examples of imagination at work:

The friendlies were on a small mountain in a valley surrounded by higher mountains about to be overrun by North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars. They had suffered numerous casualties and were eager for us to evacuate their wounded so they would be able to abandon the post. I initially landed between two Marine helicopters just outside the compound. Both Marine choppers had been disabled by enemy rockets soon after they hit the ground. For some reason, I was not hit, but I knew I could not land in the same spot again. (I know it will sound strange to some, but I



One of approximately 30 aircraft that were piloted by the author and shot up by the enemy.



ARMED WITH A RED CROSS

believed that some disciplined NVA regulars respected the Red Cross. Nothing else could explain some of my experiences.) As I took out the first load, I could see the enemy rockets raining down on the compound. I also formed a mental image of the area. They had cut the trees off the top of the hill and partway down its sides. Other trees remained on the side hill. The beauty was the space between the bald hilltop and those trees. I visualized that as our security blanket—and it was. Down between the trees and the hill, we had cover from every angle. I could not actually land, but at a hover, we were able to load all the casualties safely before the friendlies abandoned the outpost.

On another mission, as I studied the area from altitude, I got sick to my stomach: there wasn't a good approach. The patients were on a small strip at the bottom of a valley. To be exposed on low ground in terraced rice paddies is as bad as it gets. I don't think there is anything worse than to be shot at from above. The strip ran north to south and was completely exposed with a ditch on each side. The casualties were near the north end of the strip. Charlie was mortaring the entire area from above, and he was good with mortars. I knew we would have to take our chances with small-arms fire, but I did not want an encounter with the mortars. As I studied the area, I had an idea: I asked the friendlies whether



On some hoist missions, it was necessary for a Dust Off crew member to be lowered to medically prepare the casualty for hoisting.

they could get the casualties into the ditch at the northern end of the strip. They said they would try. I told them to be ready to load as soon as I got there. They said they would be. When everything was set on the ground, I came in from the south and sat down on the southern edge of the strip. And I sat there. I had no idea how long it took to set up a mortar, but when my ears burned so badly that I could not stand it, I scooted to the northern end of the strip, loaded the patients and got the hell out of there. I don't remember whether we took any hits, but the strip took a beating as we departed.

Night missions were the most challenging. More pilots were killed at night or in weather-related accidents than by enemy action. But Charlie was active at night, and the casualties needed our help. I flew my first night mission as a strap-hanger. I had been in the country only a day or so and was waiting to go to Plei Ku when the mission came in. It was called "routine," so the crew agreed to let me ride in the "water bucket" between the pilots—the only seat available in the B-model Huey. We went in with all our lights on, including the searchlight and the landing light. We must have looked like a Christmas tree to Charlie because he lit up the sky with tracers as we departed. I think we took some rounds on the way out, but we made it back. I wondered about all those lights, but being an FNG, I dared not question the pro's. From that night on, however, I flew

Not all missions included flying over rough terrain; sometimes, we flew over the South China Sea for part of our trip.



ARMED WITH A RED CROSS

blacked out. I didn't figure Charlie needed help to find me.

In the daytime, terrain is everything; at night, the darkness is your friend. It seems as though you can hear a chopper earlier at night, but if you have ever been in a dark field and a blacked-out chopper lands, you'll find you do not see it until it is almost on top of you. I also dimmed the instrument lights and turned off the console lights, which are visible in a bank near the ground. Whenever possible, I also landed without landing lights. On most nights, this wasn't difficult as long as you kept the signal from the ground troops in sight through an open side window and circled in slowly. The visibility at night was unpredictable. You have to get airborne to find out the visibility status. It may be a beautiful moonlit night, but there is nothing but ink down there. On other nights, I have gone out under low clouds and had excellent visibility.

Because of the danger, some units avoided night missions, except for the most urgent ones. I thought that was foolish. You can't avoid something that has to be done. The key is to get good at it. The units I flew with flew night and day missions in the same way. We had a lot of practice and were able to do them well. The result was that although we had more exposure at night than most units



In 1964, the author (seated) and his crew paid a visit to Paddy Control—a radar unit in the Delta—to thank them for helping us get through some serious weather.

The troops cut loose with a “mad minute,” everyone firing everything he has to keep the bad guys’ heads down.

did, we never had an accident. I came to prefer night missions. You face different obstacles, but the enemy is not as much of a worry and his bullets aren't as accurate. Some fool said it was exhilarating to be shot at and missed. It is not, especially when you know you will be shot at again on the next mission. But at night, there is a strange beauty in the sight of tracers searching for you while missing by a mile.

Many areas that may be too hot in the daytime are readily accessible at night. On a night approach, it is vital that every crew member be engaged—the copilot on the instruments and the crew with their heads out the doors looking for obstacles and helping the pilot set the bird down. Any light at night is sufficient for LZ identification (some pick-ups have been made using only cigarette lighters—in one case, a flickering lighter that would not light), but there should not be any flares on the approach. They will blind you. I know of one ship that was saved when the crew directed its temporarily blinded pilot to the ground after a flare went off on the approach. The entire crew is indispensable, however, as one sloppy eyeball can ruin your whole night.

I learned some other hard lessons as I mucked around at God's ankles. For instance, you very often have to land in areas that are not secure and everyone knows it, but there are wounded down there and you have to get them out. The troops cut loose with a “mad minute,” everyone firing everything he has to keep the bad guys' heads down. The gunships are circling on both sides of you, shooting up the countryside. At the same time, Charlie is doing his level best to return fire.

I remember the first time I landed in an unsecured area. I couldn't hear a thing, and the first thing I felt was a burning sensation going down the back of my neck. I was sure I was dead. It turned out to be hot shells from rounds that had been fired by the crew chief

behind me. I did not like that whole scene and wasn't convinced our door gunners did much good. The enemy was seldom seen, and if you did see him, he was almost impossible to hit from a moving chopper (we actually had to shoot behind the target). I was never able to determine from which direction fire was coming, unless we got hit; and I could not tell friendly fire from that of the enemy. A more serious problem was that gunfire causes confusion, and there was always the danger of firing into friendly lines.

Over time, I decided that I preferred a quiet approach—no mad minute; no gunships—just me and Charlie and peace and quiet. Then, if I heard fire on the way in, I knew it was Charlie. I could take evasive action and try another route. I must confess that I had trouble selling this approach to my fellow aviators. Despite my logic, many preferred to blast their way in, simply because they just felt better that way.



An awards ceremony with the original Dust Off unit in Vietnam, the 57th Medical Detachment, when the author was awarded the Air Medal, the Bronze Star with Valor, the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) and the Purple Heart. These are the first of some 70 medals he earned for his tours in Vietnam; others include five more DFCs, the Distinguished Service Cross and the Medal of Honor.

By now, you will have noticed that there was not necessarily any connection between the reported security of the LZ and its actual security. For a successful pick-up, it is vital that the communication between the air and ground be complete and accurate. Much of the information, i.e., location call sign, number of patients, etc., was no problem. But security was often a problem. It means something very different to the grunt than it does to the pilot. For a guy on the ground who has had the enemy in his face all day, a few hundred yards is ecstasy, but it is meaningless to a pilot who may use up several miles just getting in. I learned early on never to harass the ground troops about security. Someone shot the casualties, or you wouldn't be there in the first place. If you badgered the troops on security, there was the danger that some would exaggerate the security if they feared that it might affect the possibility of getting a wounded buddy out. I know I would. After all, while the wounded were patients to Dust Off pilots and we cared about them, to the guys on the ground, they were best friends, and they really wanted them to reach a hospital. After some bad experiences, I began to ignore the security classification and tried to focus my attention on the last known location of the enemy and the weapons they had. With that information, if our troops would stand up and help load the patients, I would go in.

By far the most challenging missions were bad-weather missions—especially at night—and hoist missions. Night and weather killed more Dust Off crews than the enemy did, and hoist missions were seven times more dangerous than any other. Dust Off got the patients out, even under these conditions, yet despite our best efforts to safely rescue the wounded, one in three of our pilots became a casualty.

All things considered, the Dust Off crews were very difficult to kill, and with imagination and determination, they rescued some one million souls in Vietnam. And that's why many of us chose to go back for a second tour. There is no satisfaction in the world like knowing you've helped save a fellow soldier's life. ✚

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Fighting Falcons F-4J

"It's Showtime!"

A carrier flight deck is a crowded, noisy, dangerous place. Here, the young deck crew of the USS *Constellation* works furiously to prepare *Showtime 105*—an F-4J Phantom of the famous *Fighting Falcons*, VF-96—for yet another mission over North Vietnam.

The McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantom II became a legend in Vietnam. It took on MiGs in the high, cold skies nearly out of sight to those below and then dived to pound ground positions in the dank, humid air, so familiar to the troops they were protecting. In that war, the versatile Phantom mastered every mission to which it was assigned.

The *Fighting Falcons* became famous for having among their members the first Navy team to produce aces in nearly two decades: Lt. Randall H. "Duke" Cunningham, pilot, and WSO Lt. j.g. William P.

"Irish" Driscoll. They achieved five victories in their Phantom, the last three (all MiG 17s) on May 10, 1972, before being shot down themselves.

Once catapulted off the "boat," this Phantom's crew will do what fighter pilots do. They may face SAMs or MiGs. They may return with ragged holes in their aircraft inflicted by AAA. The hard part of the mission, however, lies beyond the combat; they still have to come home.

All medical studies have shown the landing, especially one at night, to be the most intense part of any mission. But landing an airplane as big as the Phantom on a carrier is what wearing Wings of Gold is all about. That's what separates naval aviators from the rest of the aviation community, and they are proud of that distinction. ✚

—Robert S. DeGroat

Original Vietnam War color—
photo provided by David Ethell.





SS MAYAGUEZ

THE LAST BATTLE OF VIETNAM

BY RIC HUNTER

May 12, 2000, will mark 25 years since Khmer Rouge Communists hijacked the U.S.-flagged container ship SS Mayaguez off the coasts of South Vietnam and Cambodia. After the fall of Saigon two weeks earlier, the Khmer hierarchy felt that the U.S. was weakened and that one of its ships would be an easy target. President Gerald Ford quickly responded by sending in U.S. forces—predominantly airpower. The crew of the Mayaguez was returned to the U.S. side three days later, but at a heavy cost.



F-4Ds from the 34th Tactical Fighter Squadron en route to the Koh Tang Island target area. They carried LAU-3 rocket pods and centerline Vulcan Gatling guns that were used to destroy Khmer gun fortifications (photo by Ric Hunter).

The scene was surreal. The sun dipped in the west and now cast a peaceful, red-orange glow behind tracers that had crisscrossed the sky and the corridors of fire that had swept the darkening jungle. A din of whirling rotor blades, automatic-weapons fire and exploding mortar and cannon rounds drowned out even the loudest commands. The air reeked of spent gunpowder, jet exhaust and salt spray.

As Air Force para-rescuemen pulled wounded Marines aboard their CH-53, the crew spewed M-16 rifle fire at Khmer forces. From defensive positions on the beach around the big chopper, the remaining Marines returned

**With the war over, the Khmer Rouge thought
America was weak and tired of fighting; they were wrong!**



fire through a pall of smoke. A “Nail” forward air controller (FAC) buzzed overhead in an OV-10A Bronco, rolled in on enemy gun positions and unleashed white-hot, “willy pete” 2.75-inch rockets. Higher, a circling AC-130A Spectre gunship pounded enemy positions with a continuous barrage of 20- and 40mm cannon fire.

First Lt. Richard C. Brims’ CH-53—designated “Knife 51”—ripped a minigun fury along the tree-lined beach of the western landing zone (LZ). Brims was not helping to cover a retreat; this was an “extraction” from Koh Tang, a desolate atoll off the southern coasts of Vietnam and Cambodia.

At the same time as 27 Marines fought their way aboard Knife 51, Air Force Technical Sgt. Wayne Fisk ignored intense hostile fire and ran, half-crouching, across the beach to the tree line. His mission was to make sure that no one was left behind. He spotted two young Marines laying down suppressive fire—unaware the helo was about to depart. The three sprinted for the CH-53 and clambered up the ramp as it lifted off. Eventually, 29 Marines were extracted from the last firefight of the last battle of the bitter Vietnam War. Behind Knife 51, a Khmer encampment burned like an unearthly bonfire; it had been leveled and



A three-ship formation of F-4Ds from the 34th Tactical Fighter Squadron ("JJ" fin flash on vertical tail) en route to combat in the Mayaguez operation (photo by Ric Hunter).

set ablaze by 152 willy pete rockets from "Bucktail," a flight of four F-4D Phantoms. Flames from the burning hooches served as a navigation beacon for the three remaining helos. There had been 11 when the savage day began.

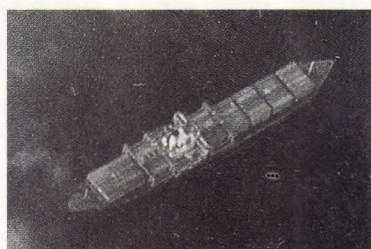
Soon, a deathly silence fell over Koh Tang. Fourteen hours of intense, high-tempo combat were over. The western LZ was dark except for the eerie wink of a strobe light abandoned on the beach. All that had been the crucible of the Vietnam War was over—if not forgotten.

This is the story of Koh Tang as told from a fighter pilot's personal experience, as well as from declassified documents and photographs.

Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese on April 29, 1975, and for the next two weeks, U.S. morale was in the trash can. I was among the Air Force F-4D Phantom pilots based at Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand. As U.S. participation waned in Southeast Asia, it was clear America was on the run. It had evacuated Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and then Saigon,

South Vietnam. We wondered whether Thailand's capital, Bangkok, would be next. The situation looked exceedingly bleak.

At 2:20 p.m. local time on Monday, May 12, 1975, a Khmer Rouge Communist gunboat changed the course of U.S. influ-



A recon photo of SS Mayaguez off the coast of Thailand (USAF photo, courtesy of Ric Hunter).

ence in Southeast Asia for decades to come. When one of its machine gunners triggered those first few rounds across the bow of the container ship, SS *Mayaguez*, he unleashed a maelstrom. The Khmer radicals seemed to have forgotten their own Asian proverb, "One should not anger a sleeping tiger."

On a small, remote base such as Korat, rumors travel at warp speed. On the evening of May 12, at the squadron dinner table, we heard that an American ship might have been hijacked in the Gulf of Thailand, 300 miles to the south. Already on edge, we reacted bitterly. Were we about to taste yet another defeat in Southeast Asia? Would this be another *Pueblo* incident? That specter both energized us and made us as mad as hell.

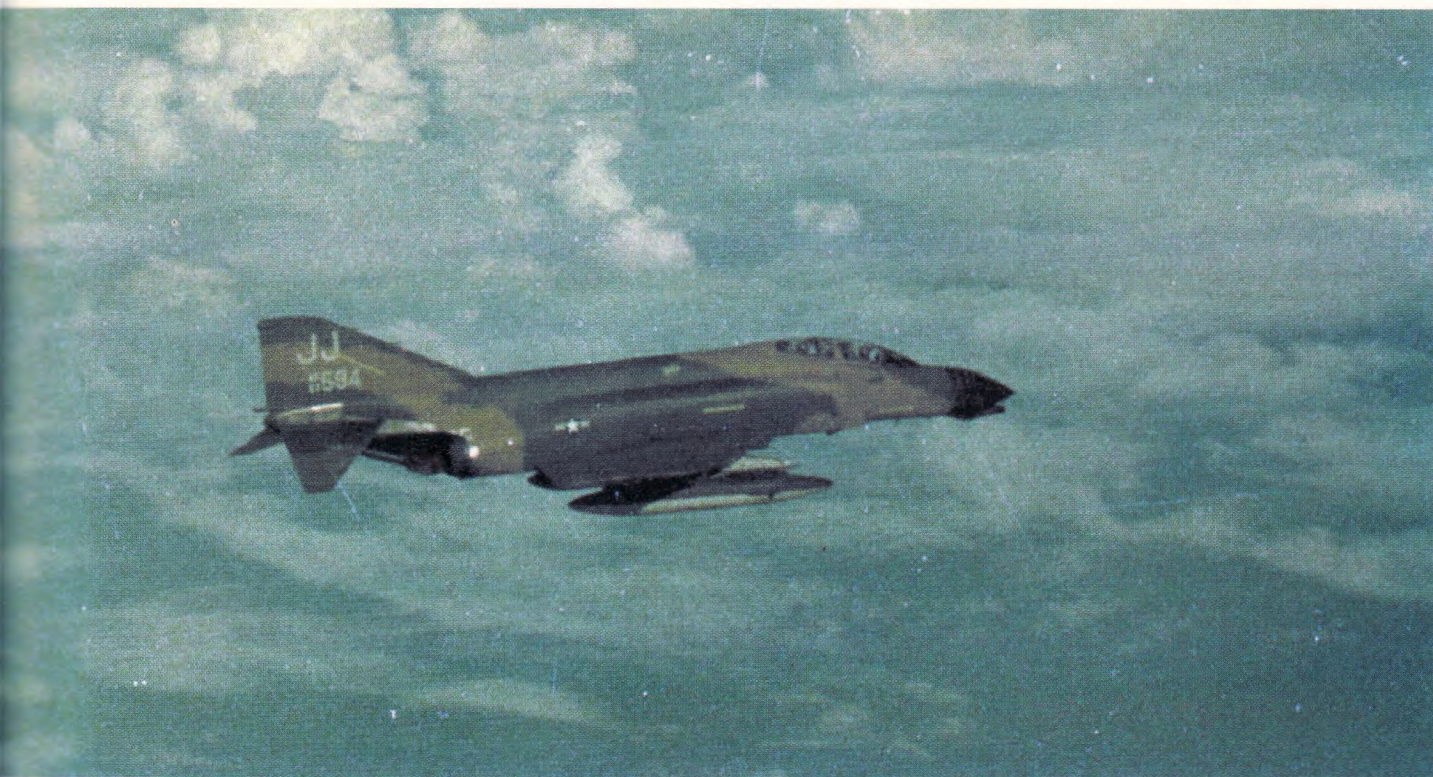
It was long after duty hours, but nearly an entire squadron of pilots and weapons-system operators trickled into the operations building. We learned that the Khmer Rouge had indeed hijacked an American ship in international waters eight nautical miles from Poulo Wai—an atoll claimed by the Khmer Communists and the provisional revolutionary government of South Vietnam. Through diplomatic channels, President Ford demanded its return. If a game was to be played, we wanted in; my group was the nearest airborne firepower.

TUESDAY, MAY 13

FIRST MISSION

Two F-111As from Korat diverted from an unarmed training mission and were the first to sight the *Mayaguez*. At 2 p.m., they reported the ship off Koh Tang Island. Four armed, A-7D "Sandys" from the 3rd Tactical Fighter Squadron at Korat launched at 2:48 p.m. to replace the F-111s and surveil the *Mayaguez*. While the Sandys were overhead, the ship attempted to move, but the A-7s fired rockets and 20mm Vulcan Gatling-gun rounds across its bow and stopped it. At 5:17 p.m., the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered 24-hour surveillance.

AC-130A/H Spectre gunships from the 16th Special Operations Squadron at Korat, equipped with infrared and low-light-level television, orbited the island and the *Mayaguez* all night. At 3:30 a.m., Spectre 41 encountered heavy .50-caliber and 40mm fire from a Khmer patrol boat near Koh Tang. It returned fire with 53 rounds of 40mm, and the boat ran aground.



WEDNESDAY, MAY 14

THE BATTLE IS JOINED

At dawn, the action picked up. Four Khmer gunboats left Koh Tang for the Cambodian mainland. Spectre 51, now on the scene, was directed to fire across their bows and prevent them from reaching the coast. The gunship's 40- and 105mm howitzers turned three gunboats back. Flights of F-111As, F-4Ds and A-7Ds attacked in front of the remaining gunboat with 2,000-pound bombs, 2.75 rockets and riot-control agent (gas). It refused to turn, apparently to test U.S. resolve.

"Denis"—a flight of four A-7Ds led by Lt. Col. Donald L. Rebtoy—was directed to use 20mm strafing to disable the gunboat's engines. Accurate strafing set the stern ablaze but didn't kill the engines. Denis was then directed to sink the boat with 20mm cannon fire and 2.75 rockets.

A few minutes later, at about 7:15 a.m., a different kind of boat was observed leaving the island for the mainland. Denis identified it as a 40-foot Thai wooden fishing boat with what could have been our guys onboard. During the four hours it took this boat to reach Kompong Som in Cambodia, A-7Ds and flights of F-4Ds led by Col. Roger L. Sprague, Lt. Col. Phillip W. Offill and Maj. Joe D. Parker precisely employed rockets, strafing and riot-control agent in front of the vessel in an attempt to make it turn back to Koh Tang. The Thai fishing boat did not turn.

Several of us tried but weren't able to fire rockets in front of the boat because our F-4s had not been properly armed prior

to takeoff. The only armament on board was an SUU-23 centerline pod that carried a Vulcan Gatling gun. When I selected the gun station, the centerline armament circuit breakers popped, and that left me without weaponry. I remember thinking, "I've got a screwed-up jet, just like this screwed-up war." Our only option was to drop low over the water and take a good look. I rolled the F-4 up on its left

wing in front of the boat and then could see people lining each side of its curved, upward-sloping bow. They appeared to be Americans, doubled-up in the schoolroom air-raid position with their hands protecting their heads. A few of them looked up as I passed overhead; I felt profoundly helpless.

I'll always regret not photographing the boat and crew with the 35mm camera in my cockpit map case. If the entire crew had been accounted for, the assault

on Koh Tang the next day might have been avoided. I was angry and too engrossed in flying a toothless Phantom to think of taking photographs.

Two days after the operation had ended, Capt. Charles T. Miller of the SS *Mayaguez* told the *Honolulu Star Bulletin*: "You have to give our pilots a lot of credit. They can hit the eye of a needle. They did everything possible to get it [the fishing boat] to turn around. If we were strafed once, we were strafed and bombed a hundred times. It was clear that they saw we were in the boat. Two jets flew seventy feet above us; the Thais turned back once, but Cambodian guards put guns to their heads"



After they had been diverted from a routine training mission, F-111s were the first to spot SS Mayaguez. The next day, a flight of two attacked a gunboat with 2,000-pound bombs similar to the ones carried by this F-111 (USAF photo, courtesy of Ric Hunter).

THURSDAY, MAY 15

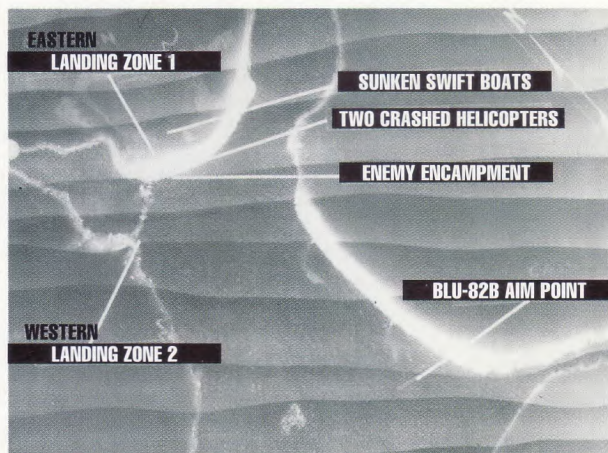
DEATH ON THE BEACH

The Sikorsky CH-53 Knife and HH-3E Super Jolly Green Giant are not ordinary aircraft. They are much larger than the UH-1 Huey helicopter, have armor-plating and are equipped with 7.62mm rapid firing miniguns. Both the HH-3E and CH-53 are rescue helicopters and have miniguns in the waist positions; the HH-3E can be refueled in the air (it has 450-gallon foam-filled tip tanks—self-sealing in case of damage), and it has an additional minigun in the tail. Both helis are much more likely to survive than are most choppers, but on this day, they were forced beyond their limits. Several did not make it back.

At dawn, 11 helicopters approached Koh Tang from the northwest. Three separated from the group and unloaded a reinforced Marine platoon onto the USS *Harold E. Holt*, a Navy destroyer escort near the island. Their mission was to board and secure the *Mayaguez*. The other eight helicopters—with 170 Marines aboard—continued in pairs to Koh Tang. As the sun boiled up in the east, surprise was their greatest asset.

Koh Tang is an irregularly shaped island; its northern end resembles a slingshot. Between the forks lies a U-shaped beach that was the eastern or primary LZ. Across the neck of land was the western LZ. Preparation of these areas with tactical air strikes was ruled out because *Mayaguez* crewmen might still be on the island.

The helos split up for a two-pronged assault as they approached the island's northern end. Knives 21 and 22 reached the western LZ first and didn't face resistance. As Lt. Col. John Denham of Cheyenne, Wyoming—pilot of Knife 21—touched down on the beach, his Marines streamed out and down the back ramp just as Khmer forces let loose with automatic weapons, rockets and mortars. While the



This photo mosaic of the northern part of Koh Tang shows the area in which most of the action took place. An analyst has penciled in a change to the names of landing zones. The distance between the eastern and western LZs across the island neck is only 400 yards, and Khmer gunners had clear fields of fire at both areas (USAF photo, courtesy of Ric Hunter).

Shramm, took punishing hits to its rotor system. As he looked to his left, Shramm saw his wingman, Knife 31, piloted by Maj. Howard Corson, get hit, burst into flames and fall to the beach. Shramm wrestled his own wounded CH-53 onto the beach just as the tail section was torn off. Miraculously, no one was killed in the crash landing; the 20 Marines aboard scrambled to the tree line for cover.

Meanwhile, Maj. Corson's downed CH-53 continued to take hit after hit from machine guns and rockets. Sgt. Randy Hoffmaster returned fire with the waist minigun while the copilot, 2nd Lt. Richard Vandeggeer, fired an M-16 from his window. A direct grenade round hit the cockpit and blew it apart, killing Lt. Vandeggeer.



Above: an HH-3E on the ground at Da Nang, South Vietnam. The CH-53 and HH-3E looked very similar. The 3E could be refueled while airborne, it had foam-filled tip tanks that self-sealed when hit, and it had a tail minigun in addition to the two in the waist positions. During the Mayaguez incident, three CH-53s were shot down, and the rest took punishing hits from machine-gun, mortar and grenade rounds (photo by Don Doran, courtesy of Ric Hunter). Left: the Sikorsky CH-53 was the largest heavy-lift helicopter used by the Air Force in the Vietnam War. Along with CH-53s, the HH-3Es provided the only transportation into and out of combat action for Marines on Koh Tang Island (USAF photo, courtesy of Ric Hunter).



chopper held to allow Marines to scramble down the ramp, one of Denham's two engines was severely damaged by enemy fire. The crew jettisoned everything they could while the "wingman," Knife 22, laid down suppressive fire with its miniguns. Denham's CH-53 skipped across the waves, taking on water as the pilot fought to stay airborne. After struggling for nearly a mile, Knife 21 ditched.

At the eastern LZ, the choppers made it in without resistance; a trap had been set. As the two helos hovered to offload Marines, a murderous crossfire erupted. Knife 23, piloted by 1st Lt. John

Four men were shot or drowned near the burning wreckage of Knife 31. A fifth, stunned and wounded, stumbled his way nearly 100 yards to the tail ramp of Knife 23 before he was cut down. His death marked the 13th KIA of Knife 31: one USAF copilot, two Navy corpsmen and 10 Marines. Thirteen survivors were picked up at sea. One survivor was Marine Lt. Terry Tonkin, a forward air controller (FAC). While swimming on his back away from the beach, with enemy bullets spewing geysers all around him, Tonkin used a small USAF survival radio to call in air strikes. At the same time, 1st Lt. John Lucas, copilot of Knife 23, was on his survival radio, calling in air strikes against enemy positions that had his group pinned down in

the tree line of the eastern beach.

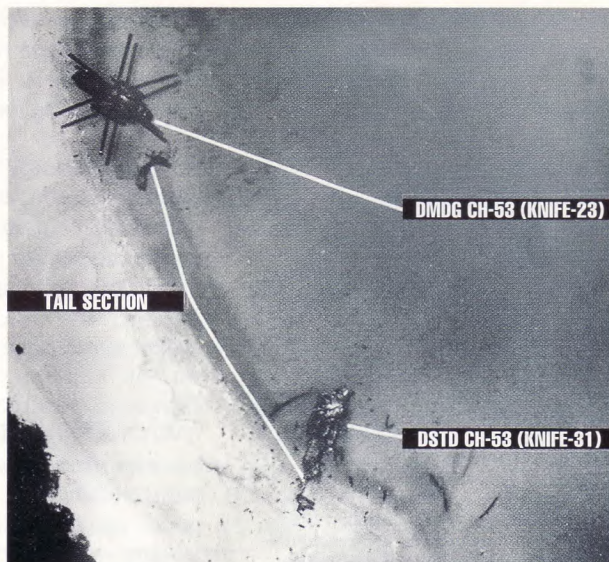
Situation: three of eight initial assault helos were down—two on the beach of the eastern LZ and one a mile out at sea. Battle damage forced a fourth helicopter down on the mainland, and two more were severely damaged. An hour after the assault began, only 54 Americans were on Koh Tang, and they were split into two groups. The day's battle was under way.

"Karen"—a flight of three A-7D Corsairs lead by Maj. Phil W. Nuber—circled overhead and observed the CH-53s taking hits. Armed with 20mm cannon, the Corsairs quickly rolled in and silenced several Khmer gun emplacements. Time and again, the A-7s flew low to attract enemy fire and thereby locate enemy positions. After each A-7 pass, Khmer troops resumed their fusillade against the few Americans who made it to the island.

A chaotic situation was quickly worsening. Friendlies scattered into tree lines along the eastern and western LZs. At times, they were no more than 20 meters from enemy positions. They desperately needed more Marine firepower. The 25 Americans trapped on the eastern beach after the two CH-53 shootdowns were in the worst situation. Khmers used them as bait to lure more helicopters into their crossfire.

Several attempts were made to rescue the trapped Americans; it proved to be a day for heroes. An official report to Gen. Louis L. Wilson, Commander of Pacific Air Forces, gives this account of one heroic helicopter crew:

"Shortly after 8 a.m., First Lt. Charles Greer, pilot of Jolly 13, began his approach. Heavy fire was observed early in the run-in, and it continued all the way into the landing zone, which was a short distance north-northwest of the wreckage of Knife 23. Disregarding the thud of rounds smashing into



At the eastern landing zone, Khmer gunners held their fire until the last minute and then unleashed a fierce crossfire of automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades that brought down Knife 23 and Knife 31. This photo shows the severed tail section of Knife 23 and the wreckage of Knife 31 (USAF photo, courtesy of Ric Hunter).

pulled back from the landing zone. He nursed his chopper away from Koh Tang and limped back toward the mainland with 35 holes, severe rotor blade damage, and fuel, oil and hydraulic leaks."

Meanwhile, on the western beach, after repeated attempts and against heavy enemy resistance, Jollys 42 and 43 successfully inserted their Marines. There were now 109 Marines and five USAF personnel on Koh Tang.

First Lt. Thomas D. Cooper Jr. of Tallahassee, Florida, made two attempts to land on the western beach with his Marines, but he was driven back by intense fire that included .50-caliber machine-gun rounds that hit the right fuel tank and ramp area. During the next hour, Cooper made two more landing attempts, only to be pummeled by heavy fire and mortar attacks. While Cooper completed his third aerial refueling, a Spectre gunship hammered enemy positions near the western beach with 20/40mm cannon and 105mm Howitzer rounds. The Spectre reduced one fortified emplacement to rubble, and Cooper then made his fifth attempt and landed at the western beach. Marines poured out of the back of Cooper's aircraft while mortar rounds walked toward them. Each round came closer to the HH-3E, and the sixth was only 10 feet off the tail rotor. With Marines still aboard, Cooper aborted and lifted off. When he returned to hover for the last Marines to deplane, a mortar round passed through the rotor blades and exploded only 20 feet away, blowing a hole in the helo's belly. The HH-3E withdrew for the last time with its five remaining Marines and returned to the staging base. Severe damage prevented its use for the remainder of the operation.

In the initial assault, eight helicopters were so badly damaged that they could no longer be used. At this point, 15 Americans had been killed in action.

Mayaguez crew recovered

While Lt. Cooper made valiant attempts to insert his Marines, a Thai fishing boat with the crew of the *Mayaguez* on board was on its way to Koh Tang under a white flag. At



The Vought-LTV A-7D Corsair II proved to be an imposing attack fighter in close support of ground troops. The "sharks' teeth" aircraft of the 3rd Tactical Fighter Squadron were the first to strike enemy gun emplacements once Knife 23 and Knife 31 had been shot down (photo by Ed Skowron, courtesy of Ric Hunter).



This was the last squadron photo taken of the men of the 34th Tactical Fighter Squadron based at Korat, Thailand, before it was disbanded in December 1975 and redeployed to the United States. After nearly two decades and the evacuation of Saigon, direct support of operations in Southeast Asia finally ended with the closing of bases in Thailand (photo by Ric Hunter).

10:05 a.m., the entire crew boarded the USS *Henry B. Wilson* and later transferred to the *Mayaguez*, which steamed away from Koh Tang under its own power.

The challenge now shifted to getting the Marines disengaged and off the island. Before that could happen, more Marines were needed to stabilize the situation. Air insertion was the only option. Just five helos remained to carry nearly 100 Marines into the assault and later to extract all of the Marines from Koh Tang. Two additional helos were repaired and added to the effort after the battle started.

Knives and Jollys— the only way in for reinforcements

As he tried to insert his Marines one last time on the eastern beach, the pilot of Knife 52, Lt. Robert Rikitis of Springfield, Pennsylvania—low on fuel—was immediately hit, and what little fuel he had began to leak. He aborted and returned to his staging base. Under continuous automatic-weapons and 60mm mortar fire, the four remaining helos successfully delivered Marines to the western beach. Wounded Marines were evacuated on each return trip, and the helo crews administered first aid.

Shortly after noon, reinforcements were complete; more than 200 Americans were on the island, nearly all concentrated on the western side. Enemy resistance was intense, so American ground commanders decided not to push across the island's neck to link up with the 25 men pinned down on the eastern beach. They would have to be extracted by helicopter, and that would not be possible until Khmer resistance was reduced, if not obliterated. With one HH-3E miraculously repaired and returned to the effort, there were four helos to complete the extraction. Nightfall was only two hours away when two OV-10A "Nail" FACs began their watchful orbits overhead.

I was excited and a little apprehensive when my squadron commander, Lt. Col. Phil Ofill, called me into the command center. He was busy. In very few words, he told me to pick my flight members for a four-ship and report the ordnance needed for the mission. We were to be ready on short notice, as the Americans on Koh Tang were in trouble. We were needed even sooner than we had expected.

After air-refueling over the Gulf of Thailand, "Bucktail,"

with four F-4Ds, flew east to find Koh Tang. As we split from the KC-135 Stratotankers, we checked in with "Cricket," the Airborne Battlefield Command and Control aircraft orbiting the island.

"Cricket, Bucktail, four fox-fours with you, 68 miles northwest of the island."

"Bucktail, proceed inbound pronto; I've got work for you with Nail 68."

"Bucktail's pushing it up."

As the island came into view, I formed a mental picture of the airpower stacked overhead to make an extraction possible. Looking vertically, Nail 68—an OV-10A Bronco—was lowest, with Nail 47 above him. We were next in the stack; followed by "Cricket" and a Klong 960 flight of four C-130s with BLU-82B, 15,000-pound bombs, waiting to clear jungle undergrowth for landing zones. Departing Koh Tang was "Coach" flight, which had expended eight Mk.84, 2,000-pound bombs on the island.

We had the only weapons in the area suitable for use in close support of our forces engaged with the enemy. We checked in with "Nail 47," the high FAC.

"Bucktail, Nail 47, go ahead with your lineup."

"Roger. All four F-4s have 20mm; numbers one and three have LAU-3 rockets; two and four have Mk.82s" [500-pound bombs].

"Nail 47, copy."

"Bucktail, green 'em up" [arm weapons].

"Bucktail, this is Nail 68; I'll take over now. Do you see me over the north end of the island?"

"Roger."

"OK, FAC is in to mark; where my rocket goes will be the target."

"Bucktail is 'tally-ho'; the target is the hooches."

"Affirmative; you're restricted to a run-in heading to the southeast only. There are friendlies just to the northwest. Can you put your rockets where I just put that rocket?"

"Bucktail, affirmative. How many do you want?"

"Let's try two pods on the first pass. Knife 2 dash three, keep your heads down, please." (The survivors of Knife 23, the downed CH-53, who made it to the tree line.) "Bucktail, you're cleared hot."

"Bucktail's in hot; FAC in sight."

Into the heart of the enemy encampment area went eight LAU-3 pods—152, 2.75-inch rockets tipped with white phosphorous that would burn through anything in their paths. I pressed in close, working the gunsight precisely to the target and trimming the heavy jet to feel as



"Rhino" was a good nickname for this beast. With its wingtips bent up, its horizontal tails bent down and its nose sloped toward the ground, it looked like a rhino ready to charge. The author stands in front of his F-4E Phantom II while in training at Homestead AFB, Florida, just prior to departing for Thailand in January 1975 (photo courtesy of Ric Hunter).

light as a feather; then I unleashed the rockets. As they disappeared into the trees in the hooch area, they reminded me of an eagle's talons reaching out in front as the raptor dives toward the ground. Nail 68's enthusiasm was obvious, "That's it, my friends; that's it!"

Maj. Robert W. Undorf—"Nail 68"—called me the next day at Korat. He credited Bucktail with 39 enemy KIA and for the destruction of the Khmer encampment. He said our ordnance had been instrumental in allowing the Marines to be extracted. I recalled the death of my best friend from high school—a 19-year-old Marine who had been killed near Quang Tri, South Vietnam, on July 20, 1966: "This mission was for you, Tim Davies."

Extraction under fire

Though Khmer forces were hit hard, they continued to resist strongly until the last Marine had been taken off the island; their mission was to inflict maximum damage on the remaining U.S. forces. While the *Mayaguez* crew steamed west, 25 Americans remained trapped near the eastern beach tree line, and nearly 200 defended the western beach LZ.

Capt. Thomas DesBrisay, in his December 1975 official report, "Fourteen hours at Koh Tang," described the last extraction effort on the eastern beach in this way:

"Although all three helicopters raked the shoreline with mini-gun and submachine-gun fire, Jolly 11 took ground fire from all quadrants, some less than 50 meters away. The Marines began an orderly withdrawal from the tree line, stopping every few feet to fire their weapons. Despite the cumulative effects of

daylong airstrikes and the fact that three helicopters were spewing minigun fire up and down the length of the tree line, enemy resistance was almost fanatical. At one point, Cambodian soldiers—seeing the Marines escaping from their grasp—stormed the helicopter and attained hand-grenade range. Just as one of them started to throw his grenade, the whole group was cut down by minigun and rifle fire."

The extraction on the western beach continued into darkness, and the three remaining helos rescued approximately 200 Marines. At one point, Jolly 43 lifted off with 54 Marines aboard—nearly twice the allowable combat-loaded configuration.

Resistance remained heavy throughout; heroic efforts were the norm. It was an operation that involved the best teamwork among the Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force and used airpower to insert, defend and evacuate U.S. forces from the last battle in Southeast Asia.

A military press release dated June 4, 1975, quoted a 20-year-old Marine machine-gunner, PFC Daniel Mendez of Poteet, Texas: "As I lay there, wounded, I began to feel a lot better and thought I might make it out when I saw the Air Force planes come in to strafe. I saw four rockets shot up at them, but they came in anyway."

Air Force Capt. G. Scott Ralston, an A-7D pilot based at Korat, added, "This portion of the fighting was one of the most rewarding moments of my life. It was a moving experience when I realized that the survival of those Americans depended on our skills as airmen." +

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"Down There Amongst Them"

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BYRON HUKKEE

A Spad pilot's story

The red-orange tracers arced lazily up from the right to a point not too far in front of me. I wasn't sure whether their apparent lack of speed was the result of the survival fright reaction that makes time stand still or the angle from which I viewed them. I could tell that they would not find me, and the gunner who fired them was not the first to be fooled by the slow speed of the Skyraider. But I also knew that those rounds were meant for me, as I was the only Skyraider in this piece of South Vietnamese sky west of Da Nang. I glanced down to the right in time to see more rounds leaving the muzzle of the 23mm AAA weapon. The gun was just about a mile to the south at my 3 o'clock position on the floor of Ashau Valley.



A crew chief scrambles up the wing of A-1E 132-643 to assist the pilot after a combat mission. I was eventually assigned to this aircraft and dubbed it "Minnesota Fats."

As the nose of my Skyraider tracked through the final part of the turn, I turned on the master arm switch and armed up the SUU-11 minigun that I would use as an aid to aim the rockets. I briefly tracked the pipper up to the target then eased forward on the stick. The 7.62mm rounds buzzed out of the minigun at the rate of 4,000 rounds per minute, or nearly seven rounds per second. After a short, two- to three-second burst, I moved my right thumb from the upper button to the lower button and held it down. In less than two seconds, all 38 rockets were on their way to the AAA site. I wondered if "time was standing still" for the AAA gun crew.

The date was June 20, 1972, and, as Sandy 04, I had launched from Nahkon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB) about an hour and a half earlier. My flight lead, Joe Seitz, was also a first lieutenant in the 1st Special Operations Squadron—the last operational A-1 Skyraider squadron in Southeast Asia. We were flying under his call sign of Sandy 03. Earlier in the day, a Navy

F-8 pilot off the carrier USS *Hancock*, call sign Nickel 102, had been downed in the north end of Ashau Valley. Other Sandys were working the Nickel 102 search-and-rescue (SAR), and there was no telling whether Joe and I would be needed. We were also escorting to the scene a pair of HH-3E Super Jolly Green Giant rescue helicopters from the 40th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron.

Throughout the war in Southeast Asia, the A-1 Skyraider had performed admirably in various roles related to close air support. The aircraft was a perfect match for that mission in that threatening environment. It carried tons of ordnance and external fuel on 15 external stations and was equipped with four internal 20mm cannons. It could take hits and keep on fighting or at least get the pilot away from the target area to where he could be rescued. The A-1 was equipped with enough radios to communicate and coordinate with virtually anyone in the theater—a UHF, VHF/AM, VHF/FM and ADF (automatic direction finding) on UHF. In addition, the E model had HF-SSB (single-side band).

The Skyraider's most important asset for the close air-support role was its lack of speed. There is simply no substitute for tracking time during a weapons-delivery pass, and at times, we had more than we wanted. In the Skyraider, we were "down there amongst them," and that is why it was the best close air-support aircraft of both the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Of course, this operating environment also took its toll on men and machines alike.

Approximately 274 Skyraiders were lost owing to various causes during the Vietnam War. Of these, 210 were Air Force

My journal entry for 17 June 1972: *Hobo 43 wingie. Doz for a downed CH-53 north of Khong Sedone with Zeke as lead [This was not a SAR situation, as the crew had previously been recovered.] We replaced other Hobos who were working the area prior to our arrival We orbited over the CH-53 crash site while a team landed to check the feasibility of lifting it out We worked the Doz about 2 hours. Our plan was to get a quick strike, recover at Ubon to refuel and RTB [return to base]. Weather in the target area was about 6,500 broken. We worked a target east of the river near Khong Sedone. We did not observe any ground fire and were working from about a 6,000-foot roll in altitude. On Zeke's second rocket pass, he got hit as he was firing his rockets. I saw the heavy smoke*

THE DAY WE LOST "ZEKE"

DATE: 17 JUNE 1972
SORTIE #: 91
SORTIE LENGTH: 5.4
COMBAT TIME: 270.5
AIRCRAFT: A-1E-5 135-215

trailing from his aircraft. He said nothing. The FAC asked, "Are you all right?" The only thing I could say was, "Are you all right, pull out." He went in with the plane. There was a large fireball. I went back to the Doz frequency and told the other Hobos what had happened. Jim Harding was leading that flight and he came down about 15 clicks to the south to run any possible SAR. I had to RTB because of fuel and started heading for Ubon but saw that I had

enough fuel to make it home. I met the Sandys on my way home and told them there was no survivor. I was met in the de-arm area and was taken to the TUOC. I concluded that Zeke must have been hit in the cockpit and incapacitated. Airbursts would have been hidden above the clouds.

Obviously, this mission stands out in my mind today as much as any of those I flew 26 years ago. Sometimes I can't remember where I put my glasses five minutes ago, but this mission is as clear as if it happened yesterday. The first part of the mission was simply orbiting over the downed CH-53 and waiting,

waiting, waiting. After what seemed like hours (because it was!), we were released to contact a Raven FAC as the next Hobos checked in on freq. We were about three and a half hours into the mission at this time. The FAC said he had a target near Khong Sedone. I had worked this area the day before.

Zeke contacted the FAC, and he gave us the standard target brief to include the possibility of up to 23mm AAA in the area. Now, 26 years later, I do not recall whether the FAC had reported any active AAA positions, but I don't believe he had.

We had each made about five passes

A-1H 139-738 on takeoff roll from NKP. This is the Skyraider that Lt. Col. William A. Jones III flew on his Medal of Honor mission of September 1, 1968. Sadly, it was also the last U.S. A-1 Skyraider lost in combat in Southeast Asia when it was shot down on September 19, 1972.

losses and 64 were Navy. A total of 144 aviators with both services lost their lives while flying the Skyraider. The first Skyraider pilot to be lost was U.S. Air Force Col. Tom Hergert on March 8, 1964, and the last was U.S. Air Force Maj. Esequiel "Zeke" M. Encinas on June 17, 1972. I was Zeke's wingman for the mission on which he died (see "The Day We Lost Zeke").

The A-1 Skyraider was very much a throwback to former times. Its conventional gear, radial-engine configuration reminded many of the way aviation used to be—hence, the moniker, "Spad." But the Skyraider was not old technology. Even in 1971 when I began flying it, the airframes were not yet 20 years old, and the newest A-1Js, sent to the Air Force via the Navy, were but 15 years old.

As we neared the SAR area, we were monitoring the SAR communications on UHF and heard that the SAR force for Nickel 102 was withdrawing to Da Nang owing to deteriorating weather. Suddenly, we heard excited voices saying that someone had been hit and was on fire. I quickly recognized the guys in trouble as Larry Highfill and Tim Brady—the Sandys who were working the Nickel 102 SAR. Sandy 07 had been hit by ground fire and was desperately trying to keep the aircraft under control and get out of the area. I heard Larry report that the fire was getting hotter and that he was leaving the aircraft.

After a short silence, I heard Sandy 08, Larry's wingman, calling "Mayday, mayday; Sandy 07 is down!" Now Sandy 07 was also down in Ashau Valley. Since we were but 20 minutes from



the scene, we proceeded directly to the SAR location, which meant a more risky Ho Chi Minh trail crossing point. But the weather was on our side and would provide some cover for our crossing. We "towed" the Jolly Greens to the other side of the trail and then handed them off to another pair of Sandys.

We immediately called for Sandy 07 on the radio, but there was a great deal of confusion, since Nickel 102 was still up on the radio. Several flights of Navy aircraft were calling for Nickel 102 on "guard," blocking all attempts to communicate with either survivor. The standard rule for SAR was that you normally went after the guys who had been on the ground the shortest time. Nickel 102 would have to wait while attention shifted to Sandy 07.

Weather in the area was a bit of a problem because of towering cumulus clouds with tops above our maximum altitude capability of around 10,000 feet. It was a bit like flying through canyons of clouds as we weaved through them as if on an

and had just switched to rockets. No ground fire had been observed by any of us. We were in a left-hand wheel and were generally rolling in from the northeast through the northwest. As Zeke was on his rocket pass, all looked normal. The smoke started coming out of the rear of the pod at about the altitude I expected, indicating that he was firing his rockets. The next thing I saw was much darker, heavier smoke coming from what appeared to be the same location as the rocket smoke. From the time I saw this until Zeke's Skyraider impacted the ground, it was probably fewer than five seconds. We were firing our rockets at around 3,500 to 4,000 feet and bottoming out at about 2,000 feet. I watched his plane the entire way down to the ground, so I knew there was no extraction. This is not to say there was no attempt, but there was definitely no extraction. I immediately thought a hundred things at once—none of them particularly logical. I

wanted the FAC to tell me where the gun was so I could roll in on it and kill it. The FAC saw no gun—only the result of its work. After about two minutes, I realized fully what had just occurred and began to act more rationally. I called the other Hobos and waited until they arrived on the scene. I briefed them on the situation and turned for Ubon. I passed on my black assessment of the possibility of Zeke's surviving the crash; I was that sure. We didn't need any more A-1s downed while making low passes over a crash site that was not survivable.

I had never in my life felt such a sheer and utter sense of despair. Mostly, I felt a great deal of helplessness. It was not easy to concentrate on flying the plane during these moments. I realized there was no need to land at Ubon, as I had enough fuel to make it back to NKP. The 45 minutes it took to get back seemed an eternity. I met the Sandys en route to the possible SAR

and again gave them my negative assessment. Was I wrong in doing so? To this day, I believe my decision was correct. There was no hope of survival.

I had heard the phrase "Golden BB" in reference to the round that has your name on it. This situation fit that to a "T." The round had to have hit the plane for this to happen. Had it missed, the airburst would have been well above it and would have exploded harmlessly.

Much later, a ground team located the crash site and recovered Zeke's remains. Shrapnel damage to items in the cockpit indicated that Zeke had been incapacitated when a round of high-explosive AAA detonated very near the cockpit. Maj. Encinas was the final American A-1 pilot to die in SEA. The name of Maj. Esequiel M. Encinas on the Vietnam Memorial Wall is on panel 01W, line 043, reference number 148. God bless you, Zeke.



The author with A-1H 139-791. This photo gives an appreciation of the size of the Skyraider. The oil dripping on the 300-gallon centerline tank shows the pilot that this Spad is "alive" and ready to go.

obstacle course from hell. Joe and I were not having much success raising Larry on the radio. At times, his voice was clear, and then it would just disappear. I suspected we weren't too close to his position, as he reported that he did not hear us at all.

Then Sandy 03 started having problems with a rough-running engine. Joe decided to take it back to Da Nang, which was only about 35 nautical miles to the southeast. He joined the Da Nang Sandys who were orbiting feet wet (over the water) east of the SAR area, and they escorted him to Da Nang without incident. We talked over the situation and decided that I would continue the search, even though darkness was approaching. I thought Sandy 07 might be on the east side of the valley, as we had been searching on the west side up until this point. It was when I had turned east through a hole in the weather across the north end of Ashau Valley that I encountered the AAA gun.

Capt. O'Dean "Stretch" Ballmes, an A-1 combat veteran and my A-1 instructor at Hurlburt Field, Florida, told me two things as I was preparing to leave the States for Southeast Asia: "There is nothing over there worth dying for; and never duel with a gun." The wisdom of the former was debatable at best, but the truth contained within the latter was without challenge. The success rate of pilots who tried to battle it out with AAA weapons was not good. But I felt that I had to acknowledge their presence with a greeting of my own—if only on one short pass.

As I broke off the rocket pass without waiting to see the impacts, I flicked the "bombs/rockets" switch to the bombs position and hit the bomb button again to dump the empty launchers into the jungle below. Once the frangible nose fairing had been burst by the first rockets out of the pods, the flat "barn door" profile of the launchers served to slow the Skyraider even more, and that was not good.

On the other side of the valley, I turned south to resume the com search for Sandy 07. Once more, the traffic on the UHF guard channel (243.0) was so busy that it seemed I could not get a word in edgewise. I moved Larry over to "SAR Delta" 282.8 and immediately had much better success. As I headed south along the eastern shoulder of Ashau Valley, Sandy 07

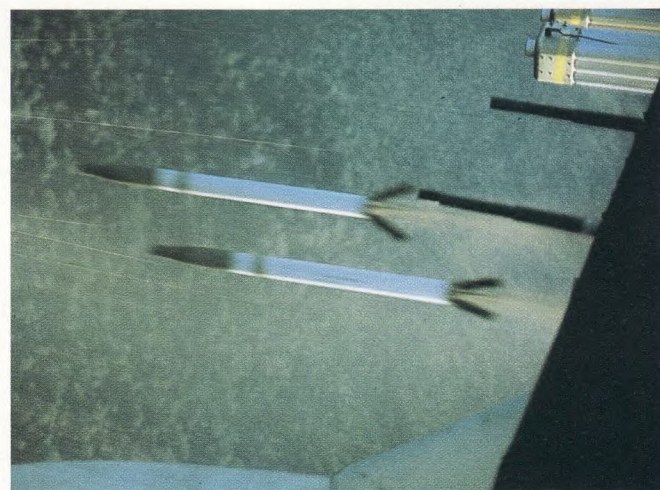
A pair of 2.75-inch folding fin aerial rockets (FFARs) leave the LAU-3 rocket pod that held 19 rockets. The red streaks are the burning exhaust particles of previous rockets.

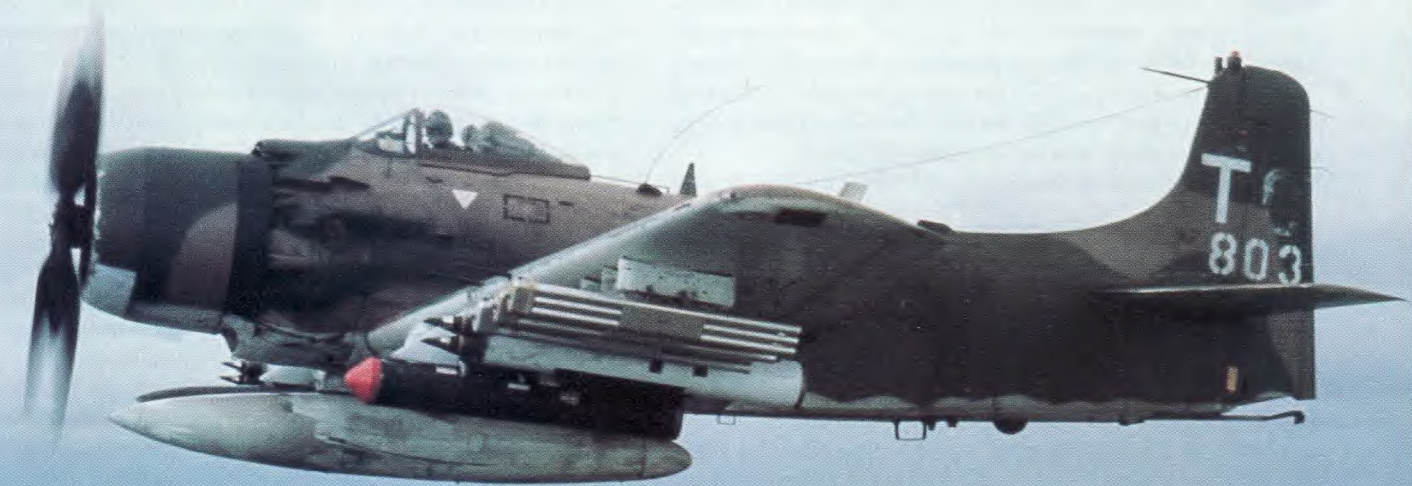
reported that he could hear an aircraft approaching; then he reported that he had me in sight. I looked around to take note of the land features and held my southerly heading. The call of, "You are over my position now" was music to my ears. He appeared to be just off the ridge that formed the eastern side of Ashau Valley, perhaps 200 feet below the ridge elevation. I reported to the other SAR forces that I had located Sandy 07 and checked on the status of the Jolly Greens. We had about an hour of daylight left, and I wanted to know whether a pick-up attempt was even possible. The response was that the Jolly Greens wouldn't be available for a pick-up attempt before dark. But first things first: I had to determine how close the bad guys were to Larry.

I immediately tried to pinpoint Sandy 07's position. Unless I knew exactly where he was, I wouldn't be able to return fire if fired on for fear of endangering the survivor. Larry had only intermittent visual contact with me because of the tall, dense, jungle canopy, so I used a combination of visual and electronic search methods to refine his position. To complicate matters, Larry reported that I was taking ground fire on most low passes. The fire, he reported, seemed to be coming from above his position, to the east.

Larry pressed and held his mike button, which allowed me to home in on his radio signal. I maneuvered to put this bearing on the nose and flew straight until he reported that I was overhead. I was close to being absolutely sure of his position but wanted to remove any doubt. Just north of his position was a slide area that was devoid of any vegetation. I asked him if he could see this area; he replied that he could not. I told him to keep his head down while I put a few rounds of 20mm into the clear area. He heard the impact of the high-explosive 20mm rounds and reported that he was about 20 meters south of that spot.

I turned my attention to the ground fire. On one of my "trolling passes," I saw an area with several bomb craters that was just about 100 meters east of, i.e., above, Larry's position. As





Capt. Buck Buchanan flies A-1H 139-803 over South Vietnam on July 5, 1972. In addition to the usual ordnance load, this Skyraider carries 5-inch Zuni rockets "procured" from the USMC A-4 Skyhawk squadron (also flying out of Bien Hoa) and 2.75-inch rockets with 17-pound warheads "borrowed" from the U.S. Army Air Cavalry unit at Bien Hoa.

BAILOUT FROM A BLAZING SKYRAIDER

For Larry Highfill, leaving the burning Skyraider was as easy as reaching for and grasping the extraction handle mounted on the seat between his legs and pulling it sharply. Barring malfunction, the Yankee Extraction System, designed by Stanley Aviation expressly for the Skyraider, was able to provide a "zero/zero" extraction capability. That is to say, escape at zero altitude and zero airspeed. But leaving a crippled Skyraider was not always so "automatic." The Yankee Extraction System was not installed in the Skyraider until 1968. By that time, only the USAF was equipped with the Skyraider in Southeast Asia.

On October 19, 1965, Capt. Melvin C. Elliott of the 1st Air Commando Squadron was flying an A-1E at night while supporting the besieged Plei-Me Special Forces camp in South Vietnam. During one of his weapons-delivery passes, Elliott was hit by enemy ground fire. Elliott writes:

As I pulled off the target, I noticed that things were quite bright. I looked at the left wing and it was ablaze. At this time, I called my wingman and notified him that I was on fire. The wingman

requested that I turn on my lights so he could see me. My thoughts at that point were, if he couldn't see me with the fire that was burning, he for sure wouldn't see the lights of the aircraft. At that point, I planned to maneuver over the compound and bail out. Before getting into position over the compound, the flares went out and it was impossible to see the ground. I continued in the orbit, at approximately 800 feet altitude awaiting the illumination of flares so I could see the ground. Before this happened, the controls of the aircraft failed and I notified all concerned that I was bailing out at that point.

As I was attempting to bail out of the aircraft, I became stuck against the rear part of the left canopy. My helmet was blown off immediately when I stuck my head out of the cockpit. At this point, the aircraft was out of control and was rolling due to the fire burning through the left wing. After freeing myself from the aircraft, I reached for the D-Ring, which was not in the retainer pocket on the parachute harness. However, I found the cable and followed it to the ring and pulled it. The chute opened and, shortly

after flares lit, I could see that I was going to land in the trees in the area.

If bailout could not be accomplished by a certain altitude in a descending Skyraider, the only options were a forced landing or ditching, if over water. U.S. Navy Lt. j.g. Tom Nelson had just such an experience. Following an engine failure at night while flying an AD-5 Skyraider, he ordered his two crew members to bail out; one did so in a short time, but the other balked when faced with a bailout over water at night. Nelson relates:

I experienced one night-ditching at sea, after engine failure. I survived, though I landed in the water without seatbelt or shoulder harness, which I had removed in preparation to jump—only to give that up and hold a panicky crewman in the plane after we were too low to jump. I did this on the gauges while flying with my left hand. I hopped out, amazed to still be alive, only to observe my crewman struggling to get free of the sinking plane. I abandoned my life raft, swam to him and helped him get untangled. A destroyer found us and picked us up.

"DOWN THERE AMONGST THEM"

I was pulling off this area following a low pass, I looked down behind me and saw a guy standing up in one of the craters and shooting at me with a rifle. The bomb crater he was in had a fallen tree across it that he was using for cover. I set up the switches and came around to attack with the SUU-11 minigun. As I neared firing position, the soldier again stood up and began firing. My 7.62mm minigun rounds completely covered the bomb crater, and I was not shot at again from that area. It rather reminded me of the cartoon that showed a mouse making an obscene gesture at a hawk, talons spread and descending for the kill, with the caption, "The last great act of defiance."

This was the one and only time during my entire tour of

As I was pulling off this area following a low pass, I looked down behind me and saw a guy standing up in one of the craters and shooting at me with a rifle.

duty in Southeast Asia that I actually saw the human form of an enemy on the ground as he was shooting at me. It was a very sobering experience—an image that has stayed with me to this day.

An important part of the Sandy's role as SAR on-scene commander was to predict the need for additional munitions and fighter support and request the same from King—the HC-130 command-and-control aircraft that not only provided aerial refueling for the HH-3E Super Jolly Green Giant rescue helicopters but was also the link with command headquarters in

Saigon. The Sandy's requests would be passed through this channel and eventually to the command posts of fighter bases throughout the theater.

Prior to leaving the area because of darkness, I briefed Larry on the plan to return the next morning and bring him home. There would be constant airborne forward air controller (FAC) coverage in the area all night, and Larry was told to report any and all signs of enemy activity to them.

As darkness fell, I left the area for the 20-minute flight to Da Nang, where I met with the other Sandy pilots and FACs who were familiar with the enemy's defenses in the area. We considered all options and decided on a plan that would enable us to

attempt rescues of both Nickel 102 and Sandy 07 on the same mission. We scheduled a "first light" effort for the following morning.

As I was the only Sandy pilot who had knowledge of Sandy 07's position and the threat sur-

rounding him, I would lead the first portion of the mission. On completion of that phase, the lead would be handed over to Capt. James "Red" Clevenger, one of the Sandy pilots who had worked with Nickel 102 prior to the shooting down of Sandy 07.

Four A-1 Skyraiders and two HH-3E Super Jolly Green Giant rescue helicopters took off from Da Nang AB, South Vietnam, just as dawn was breaking over the South China Sea on June 21, 1972. Fifteen minutes later, we were turning inland just south of Hue en route to Ashau Valley. We selected a location in high

SKYRAIDER PRODUCTION

Designed by Ed Heinemann of the Douglas Aircraft Co. in the mid-1940s, the Skyraider was produced in multiple variants in time to see action during the Korean conflict. There, it was the mainstay of the close air support as flown by both U.S. Marine Corps shore-based squadrons and carrier-based naval attack squadrons.

By the end of the Korean War in mid-1953, a large percentage of the production run of 3,180 Skyraiders had been completed. What remained to be delivered, however, were the 713 A-1H and 72 A-1J Skyraiders, which were to form the backbone of the Navy attack capability through the latter part of the 1960s, when the last Skyraiders were retired from Naval service. The 10 Navy attack squadrons equipped with these versions of the Skyraider during the Vietnam War years flew no fewer than 29 Yankee Station cruises in the Tonkin Gulf, beginning in

October 1963 and ending in April 1968, when VA-25 completed the last carrier deployment for a naval attack squadron equipped with A-1 Skyraiders.

The U.S. Air Force experience with the Skyraider began in mid-1962, when the Navy loaned it two A-1E Skyraiders

Commando Wing. Ultimately, the USAF would equip itself with more than 450 A-1 Skyraiders.

The Air Force's experience with the A-1 Skyraider was at first limited to the two-seat, side-by-side configuration of the A-1E. Beginning in 1967 as the

A-1H and A-1J, single-seat models were leaving the naval inventory, these newer Skyraiders found their way into four Air Force squadrons throughout Southeast Asia. During the peak years of 1969 and 1970, more than 100 Skyraiders equipped the 1st, 6th, 22nd and 602nd Special Operations Squadrons in Southeast Asia.

By the time I arrived at Nahkon Phnom RTAFB in October 1971, there were but 28 Skyraiders left in

the USAF arsenal in SEA. Through combat attrition, this number had been reduced to 19 by the time I left the squadron one year later.



A-1J 142-028 on Sandy alert at Bien Hoa AB, SVN. That's not oil on the ramp; a rain shower had just passed over.

for evaluation purposes. As a result of this evaluation, an initial batch of 75 A-1E Skyraiders were sent to Vietnam as replacements for the A-26 and T-28 aircraft used by the 1st Air

terrain that was relatively free of roads and left the Jolly Greens and Sandy 03 and 04 to provide protective escort. I proceeded into Sandy 07's area with my wingman, 1st Lt. Tim Brady, and made initial contact. Sandy 07 reported that all was quiet at the time, but that he was ready to get out of there. Tim and I made a few low passes to assess the threat and determined that it would be wise to sprinkle some cluster bomb units (CBUs) in the area where I had taken fire the previous day. With no enemy reaction detected, we decided the time was right to bring in the other Sandys so they would be able to get a feel for the location of the survivor and the potential threat. Tim went out to get the other Sandys and led them back to Sandy 07.

Still with no perceptible enemy reaction in the immediate area, I determined that the time was right to go for the pick-up. I orchestrated a "fast mover" air strike on the valley floor to divert the enemy's attention and led the Jolly Green toward Sandy 07, who was told to "pop his smoke." Tim scanned the area behind the Jolly Green for ground fire while the other two Sandys laid a smoke screen on either side of it to conceal the Jolly Green from the view of any remaining enemy gunners. Once the Jolly Green had Larry's smoke in sight, the four Sandys pulled up into a circular orbit called a "daisy chain" around the chopper. After what seemed like an eternity—but was actually less than five minutes—the Jolly Green reported that he had Larry on board and was ready to exit. I directed him to egress along the ingress route that had proven safe just minutes earlier. Once safely out of the immediate area, I gave the other Sandy element leader "on-scene command" while my wingman and I assumed the role of helicopter escort for the second pick-up.

Nickel 102 had been monitoring the first portion of the mission, so he was ready to assist in his own rescue. Red and his wingman, 1st Lt. Tex Brown, determined that the threat was minimal so they called for the chopper, just as I had only minutes earlier. Once the chopper was hovering, some light ground fire erupted to the east of the survivor's position. All four Sandys took turns hammering that area with 20mm and CBU-25, and I made my last two passes dry, since I had run out of all ordnance. This engendered a rather helpless feeling, but we had nearly finished with this double rescue. Nickel 102 was picked up, and we exited the area toward the coastline of the South China Sea. Once feet wet, we allowed ourselves to relax, and I had the biggest ear-to-ear grin. We had done it!

With both survivors safely on board the Jolly Greens, we escorted them back to Da Nang. There, we had a mini celebration on the ramp and were reunited with squadron mate and fellow Sandy Larry Highfill. We also met briefly with Lt. Cmdr. Jim Davis, the F-8 pilot who

was Nickel 102, before both survivors were whisked away for medical examinations.

This mission took place in June 1972, about nine months into my one-year combat tour in A-1 Skyraiders. These were my 92nd and 93rd combat sorties. I now had accumulated nearly 350 hours and was feeling very comfortable in the aircraft. By the time my one-year tour of duty was over, I had flown 140 combat missions in Southeast Asia and amassed 400 combat hours in the A-1.

I completed my tour with a mission on October 1, 1972, as flight lead of four Skyraiders on a Sandy SAR orbit in northern Laos. I took several photos on that mission, some of which appear with this article. At the time, I was obviously ready to head home to my family and taste some peacetime flying. It did not take long to realize, however, that my one-year tour in Thailand while flying the A-1 Skyraider was an experience that I would look back on as the most bittersweet of my life. ✚

Skyraider website

Byron Hukee, aka SpadGuy, has used the electronic media to capture the spirit and convey the atmosphere of the A-1 Skyraider at war. SpadGuy recounts all 140 of his combat missions on his "A-1 Skyraider Combat Journal" website. He operates two websites that deal exclusively with the Spad. Both can be found at <http://skyraider.org>.



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A-7D SLUF

In any of its variations, the A-7 has never been thought pretty; in fact, it had barely landed in Vietnam when its unique appearance earned it the nickname "SLUF," which stood for "short little ugly fella." The A-7D may best be described as a heavy-ordnance carrier, long-legged, close-air-support fighter/bomber. When armed with 1,000 rounds of ammo and eight Mk. 82 bombs, its external fuel tanks gave it a combat radius of 480 nautical miles.

Ugly or not, during the Vietnam conflict, it really carried the war to the enemy, and the USAF relied on it. On October 16, 1972, the 354th TFW flew the first missions out of Korat. Owing to the impressive record the A-7D established early on, it quickly became the weapon of choice among forward air controllers who needed to pound a target they had spotted. But its destiny lay in the search-and-rescue, or "Sandy," missions.

During its first 10 weeks of combat, the 354th averaged 62 missions a day and suffered an astoundingly low loss

of only 0.03 percent. The lion's share of these missions was the task of the 3rd Tactical Fighter Squadron commanded by Lt. Col. Ed "Moose" Skowron. They escorted the big "Jolly Green" helicopters deep into enemy territory to rescue downed airmen.

Maj. Colin "Arnie" Clark spent more than nine hours orbiting an area in which an F-105 Wild Weasel crew had gone down. He logged one of the longest Sandy missions ever flown, and the crew were rescued—a feat for which Clark was awarded the Air Force Cross.

Before the A-7D's arrival in Vietnam, the A-1 Skyraider was the primary Sandy aircraft. By the early '70s, however, the A-1 was being phased out of inventory and turned over to the Vietnamese Air Force. The "short little ugly fella" was the perfect replacement. †

—Warren E. Thompson

Original Vietnam War color—
Photo by Ed Skowron; courtesy of
Warren E. Thompson.)





T-28 SORTIE



Three Detachment 1 T-28Ds with CBU and Mk 81 or Mk 82 with fuse extensions are on their way to the "customer's" target.

A RAVEN'S TALE

BY KARL POLIFKA

Imagine a deep mountain valley with jungle-covered slopes that cascade in dark green channels down to a solitary runway. Nights are spent in an old teak-timbered house that, since 1945, has seen every description of adventurer pass through its doors. At night, while I sip Johnny Walker Black and consider life and its variations, the fog sometimes rolls down the steep, looming ridges and blankets

the valley floor. It is Long Tiene ("long chen") near the Plain of Jars (PDJ) in northern Laos in late September 1969.



I have just returned from a mission in the PDJ and pause for a moment with my T-28D—Long Tiene, November 1969.



At dawn, nearly every imaginable aircraft engine sound, except that of a pure jet, will shatter the morning stillness. This valley is also called "Site 20 Alternate," or just "Alternate." Mixed with the howls of the Pilatus Porter turboprops of Air America and Continental Air Services and the coughing splutters of the "recips" of C-123 and Caribou is the distinctive sound of the 1425hp Wright R-1820-56S radial that belongs to the T-28—aka, the Tango.

Depending on your inclinations, the Tango could be just as exhilarating as any dance, maybe more so on an 8,000-square-mile dance floor seething with enemy troops and all the logistics flow to keep it going. Doin' this tango, however, is somewhat different: dancing shoes not recommended.

A narrow gravel parking area alongside the patchy asphalt runway holds the two T-28Ds and half a dozen O-1Fs that belong to the Ravens—volunteer USAF forward air controllers (FAC) in civilian clothes. There are also six or eight Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF) T-28Ds. Hemming the aircraft in on three sides are several hundred Mark 82 500-pound bombs—half of them fused—which is about a day's expenditure, given the three to five sorties flown daily by RLAF pilots. The bombs make some people nervous. In a rational world, their concern would be understandable. Because Long Tiene isn't a rational world, the fused bombs and concern are ignored.

The RLAF is often called the "A team," to

distinguish them from the "B team" who are contracted Thais who fly daily into Laos to augment the ranks of the beleaguered RLAF. RLAF pilots graduate from a six-month training course at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB)—taught entirely in the T-28

"Take out the third truck!"

B/C/D—and go directly into combat. Their school, Detachment 1 of the 56th Special Operations Wing, is on the Air America ramp. At its inception, the school was called "Waterpump" (across the ramp is a building housing the Joint Liaison Detachment, the center of CIA operations and logistics support for operations in Laos). Detachment 1 also repairs our T-28s (although Air America does some of the tougher jobs) and is the administrative home for the Ravens. They have about 70 T-28s on the ramp, a few hundred yards and a world away from the USAF Wing of F-4s and RF-4s on the main part of the base.



The parking area at Long Tiene with Raven or RLAF T-28s. The "tower" is to the left.

The Thais' contract, we have found, precludes their working in the presence of ground fire. This is a sweet deal for them, but it means that they are useless for air strikes in Laos, where there is nothing but ground fire. Our criticism of the B team's performance causes the straphangers in the Air Attaché's office (the "downtowners") in Vientiane to accuse us of having a bad attitude.

The T-28s, painted flat gray and spotted with mud and dirt, glisten with dew in the dawn's pearl-gray light. Their markings consist only of tail numbers. I might find Frank Shaw asleep under the wing of my T-28D. He could be napping after a long night of fixing airplanes, or he might have slept there in the gravel for hours. I owe my life to Frank many times over. He blinks the sleep out of a puffy face, follows me as I do a minor preflight and helps to strap me into the front seat, snapping the shoulder links of the Yankee Extraction System (YES) harness into place where it's hard for me to reach. (It was developed by the screwdriver company and is a wonderful ejection system for low-speed aircraft; it rockets the pilot through the canopy—shattered with a detonation cord—then pulls the chute open.) As I slip on a headset with a boom mike, I look left down the patchy asphalt runway to see tendrils of cloud and fog wisping off the valley's southern ridge. No problem for takeoff; weather is reported workable all around the Plain of Jars and is starting to clear rapidly everywhere. Good.

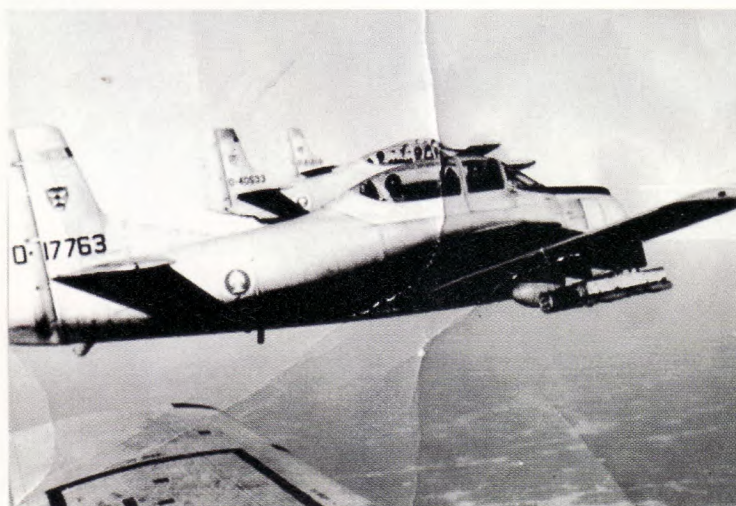
The CIA is known as "the customer," and last night, the gray-haired, blue-eyed chief customer gave me a special job to do before I got into the routine business of running air strikes all day. A special truck convoy was coming into Laos from North Vietnam on Route 7, crossing the border at about 0700. In the convoy of seven, the third truck, with all it contained, must be destroyed, he said. The customer was very precise and didn't explain what the truck contained. That was normal. It was just another day as a Raven—freedom of action in exchange for the exceptional risk of adverse terrain, inclement weather and the enemy.

I turn the tank selector on the left console outboard to the All position; throttle open about an inch, prop at Full Increase and mixture at Cutoff, generator Off, battery On. I glance down and nod at Frank who stands with a fire extinguisher halfway along the left wing. Yelling "Clear," although proper procedure, seems somehow out of place. He nods back. I lean forward and to the right, shoulder straps chaffing, and punch down with my right middle finger on the starter button on the forward right console. The starter cranks the fat 3-blade prop energetically with a

grinding whine that harks back to WW II. I count nine blades before switching the magnetos to On and then jab at the prime button with an increasing tempo using my right index finger. Not enough prime and the engine won't have enough fuel to start; too much and a stack fire will blaze into my face across the windscreen. With a cough and a shudder, the engine catches, sighs, belches some gray/white smoke and begins a jerky roar as I get off Prime while pushing the mixture to Rich, battery Off, generator On. I jockey the throttle until the engine smooths out; then I run the cowl flaps to full open and turn on the FM, VHF and UHF radios along with the ADF and TACAN/VOR. I check the instruments and give Frank the chocks-away signal. In more than 400 missions as a Raven, I aborted only once for maintenance. Frank and his guys are in this for more than the pittance they are paid.

The tower operator, a Laotian who speaks English decently and has a calm demeanor, sits in a tin-roofed box on stilts and confirms that Raven four-five can taxi. All other traffic holds as I lurch out of the parking area and trundle quickly along the bumpy asphalt runway to the

northwest end, cycling the prop en route to check its functionality. At the end of the runway, squatting in the shadow of a towering karst formation, I run a quick mag check and set the trim for takeoff. Air America and Continental Air hold their positions because the customer has decreed that all Raven movements are to be given priority. I enjoy this while I can; it won't happen after I leave the valley.



The T-28D is sort of

stumpy: 32 feet, 6 inches long with a 40-foot span. Having started its long life as a trainer, it's easy to fly. Being a product of North American Aviation, it is also tough, honest and built for the pilot. The D model, rebuilt from USAF 800hp A-model trainers (and some Navy B/Cs), has a reinforced wing that can carry up to 3,500 pounds of ordnance on six wing stations. It also has two WW II-era pneumatically charged, 600-round total capacity, Browning .50-caliber guns faired into the wings. Most Ravens carry four LAU-7 pods with a total of 28 white phosphorus 2.75-inch rockets.

The airplane lumbers down the runway and quickly gathers speed. I pull back on the stick at about 75 knots, and it flies off at about 80 to 85. I run the cowl flaps back to the trail position, reset the trim and contact Cricket—the Airborne Command and Control (ABCCC) C-130 that funnels some 100 strike sorties to the Long Tiene Ravens every day. Cricket acknowledges that I'll be, vaguely, "... east of Ban Ban" and will be ready to work some air in an hour or so. Level off, pull the mixture back to Autolean and set the manifold to 20 inches and the propeller to

2,000rpm, which will make the 966 pounds (161 gallons) I started with last as long as possible. Given the nature of the mission, three hours of fuel is about the maximum endurance. The morning starts to lose its pearly grayness and shows an increasing blue; I head for an area north of where Route 7 crosses the border and try not to look threatening while being able to spot the convoy from a reasonable distance. At the 140-knot cruise the Tango manages with external stores, it will take half an hour to get to the target area.

The big radial pumps out plenty of heat—enough to bring out sweat on a warm day. The supercharger is wired into the low blower position, since it isn't needed. Maps are for checking elevation and details, not for navigation—something that comes from knowing the area intimately and almost intuitively. The Plain of Jars slides past on the left—a place of danger and eerie isolation speckled with bomb craters. I and the others are now refueling and rearming off a French-built PSP runway in the middle of the Plain, the wreckage of airplanes from that time strewn about. Soon, Ban Ban valley appears at about 10 o'clock. Puffs of white smoke and dull-gray bomb detonations come from Phou Na Kok, a mountain dominating the pass where Route 7 exits Ban Ban. Vang Pao's troops and a CIA case officer hold the place against two NVA ground assaults a day. Ban Ban is a forbidding rectangular valley with a broad, flat floor across which run two major roads: Route 61 from the north and Route 7 from the east. The valley, practically boiling with hostility, is a very dangerous place. I alter course slightly to the right, cross Route 7 on the southeast side of Ban Ban where it runs north/south and edge over to a 50-square-mile patch of nearly deserted, relatively open real estate from which the road can be seen as it snakes eastward into North Vietnam. It is 0652, and no trucks are visible—time to look preoccupied for the benefit of the promised special seven-truck convoy, which must be desperate to make this run in daylight. I push the mixture to Rich, set the so-called combat power of 36 inches over 2,400rpm, and call "Hotplate," a Meo recon team in the area, on 125.3 VHF.

"Hotplate, Raven four-five. You hear my engine?"

The response is almost immediate. Supplied by Air America, Hotplate lives a perilous life on the run, constantly watching, reporting and being pursued. I don't want to hit him with my minor demonstration. "Ah, Raven, you way sout' a me."

Good enough. I click my mike button twice. Hotplate knows not to be chatty, or the NVA will DF him. I move my left hand to the arming panel on the lower edge of the instrument panel and switch the over-center Master Arm switch to On. A cross-and-ladder sight picture blossoms brightly on the sight's combining glass. I turn down the brightness, set in 42 mils of sight depression, toggle number-one station up to On for rockets and move the Guns switch to Safe. Pneumatics blow back the breeches on both guns and send a shudder through the airplane. I move the switch to Arm, and the first round in each belt is chambered with another surge of compressed air. A seam in the wing a couple of feet out from the fuselage is a handy reference mark for a 30-degree dive angle. Sliding up to the left seam 3,000 feet below are some old hooches long abandoned by villagers caught in the crush of war.

Sunlight streams over the ridges and dapples the green fields and jungle.

I roll the Tango to nearly inverted and pull until the gunsight cross slides under the center hooch. Then I roll to upright, let the cross climb up to the hooch and correct for the surface wind that I saw moving the trees. With the sounds of wind and engine tugging at my senses, the air-speed climbs toward a release at 250 knots. There! Experience says I've reached release speed, angle and altitude; now my right thumb presses the button on top of the stick and one WP rocket with its 28-pound warhead swooshes out of the number-one LAU-7 pod. The rocket, almost instantly supersonic, reaches the hooch in a couple of seconds and hits its front porch, obliterating the old structure with an 80-foot flaming burst of phosphorus that burns at several thousand degrees. I pull up in a gentle 3-to-4G pull, turn right and look over at the road a couple of miles away.

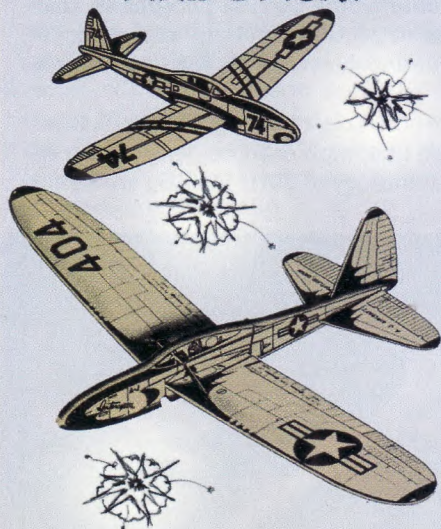
There, on time, seven trucks race down Route 7 at an almost dangerous speed of 45mph or more. They appear to be unimpressed by a solitary T-28D, beating up some



unknown target off to their right. I now reverse the turn, roll back in on the burning hooch, set the mils to 10, pick up speed in a steep dive, bottom out at 100 feet AGL and maybe 400 yards from the hooch and pull the trigger. The two .50s roar with stunning ferocity for a couple of seconds, and the ball-ammo tracers disappear into the center of the flames. I pull up over the hooch in a lazy chandelle to where there's some visibility. The trucks are still barreling along the road and are starting to slide behind the rising terrain that leads up to a 6,200-foot mountain, around which Route 7 turns northward. I get the plane down on the other side of the slope, hide the sound of a single, non-threatening T-28D and let experience say where they'll be when I pop over the ridge to hunt down the



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third truck. Engine heat pours back into the cockpit; treetops flow past with a glassy green blur just beneath the gray wings; the ridge beckons and recedes, and there they are—about 500 yards ahead. I push over, stay close to the ground and get level; the third truck is about 1,200 feet out. Twenty mils ought to do it.

Station one is still selected. The cross drifts up over the third truck, which is closer now, maybe 1,000 feet away; green AK tracer slashes from the trucks behind it. I've screwed up! I'm 45 degrees off-axis shot, but I take what I've got and fire another rocket. It's going to be a miss ahead; one second gone and I'm 250 feet closer. I kick the rudder and center the needle and ball. It looks good, and I fire twice. A second later, two WP warheads slam into the third truck, which, a half second later, disappears in an inferno that nothing can survive. I pass over the blazing hulk at 20 feet, drop into the valley beyond, turn left beyond their sight, pick up some speed and go back for more.

The picture on the road has changed dramatically in the 45 seconds it takes to rack the Tango around uphill and put it flat on the road to chase the trucks. It's spooky down here among them and not a life-extending action. The treeline and dirt road rush past in a blur; my eyes only focus ahead through the windscreen. The engine bellows with the power of a bygone aviation age. The third truck is a hulk, but the other six are running wildly down the two-lane dirt road or looking for a place to hide. No chance to get them all.

Number seven doesn't see the Tango, which is almost level with its tailgate. I fire intuitively now: a two-second burst from the .50s shudders the airplane, and a bushel-basket-size blue flame sprouts from the gun barrels. The orange tracers reach out and chew the truck to pieces, flames spouting from its ruptured fuel tank. I pull up and over, keep the prop off the dirt, miss the fireball and look for number six, which is hurtling down an incline and into the trees; never mind. Number five tries to pass number four; a rocket hits short and blinds the next shot. I fire anyway and miss again. Damn! Their resident gunners along the road have the range now. Their 12.7mm and 14.5 ZPU tear past in odd green/white sheets that streak out from the treeline. A bulky, oblong truck is coming up fast when a trigger pull sends it two seconds of .50s, tearing the truck from aft to front. The truck slows and burns as I pull up over it. That's one for the customer, and two for me.

The temptation, if I had the airspeed, would be to do a big, happy chandelle up and away from the ZPU and 12.7mm. Three or four guns are trying to follow me now, and pulling up and turning would give them a planform to hammer—not a good idea! But, my airspeed has bled off to about 150 knots, and my only option is to creep away and stay low. I angle off the road, apply ticks of ailerons and rudder left and right to turn and deceive, climb 500 feet up the hill to stay on the treetops and sense the tracers that rip past with a Niagara of noise I can't hear. In a dozen seconds that seem to last an hour, I crest the hill and dip down on the other side. I fly away and start a climb, all while checking the engine instruments for anything amiss.

As I light a cigarette, I watch my hands shake a little and check the time. It's almost 0720. Still climbing, I turn south and am safe for the moment. I look over at the three funeral pyres on Route 7, imagining questions I might ask myself later. Now, I "safe" the guns and rockets, retard the throttle and prop back and return the mixture to Autolean.

"Cricket, Raven four-five has a rendezvous at zero-seven-zero at seventy off 98."

"Roger, four-five. Pintail, four fox-fours, at oh-seven-forty-five. They'll be on two-three-seven-zero strike freq."

It's going to be a long day. †

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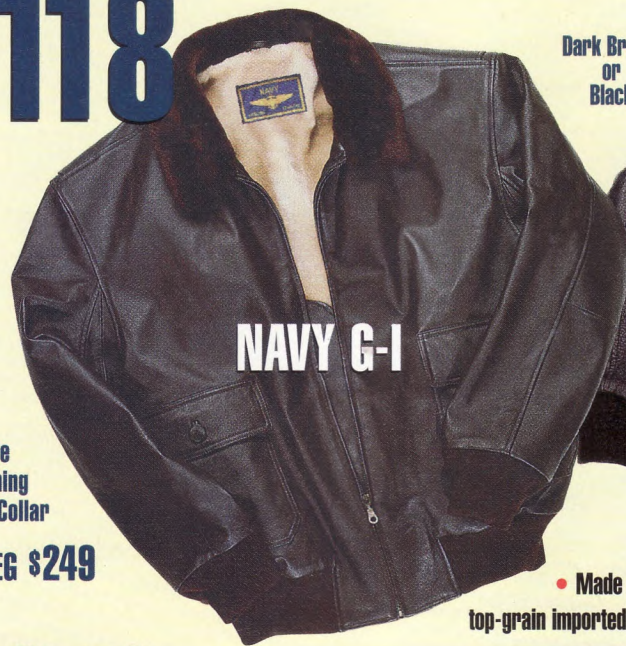
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Man on the

Roger Locher's rescue from

BY JEFF ETHELL AND ALFRED PRICE

"Oyster Two has contact!" "Oyster One has a contact zero-five-zero for fifteen!"

"Oyster Three is contact, Bob!"

"Right, we got 'em!"

"Oyster One on the nose, twelve miles, fifteen [degrees] high, overtake nine hundred [knots] plus!"

Anxious eyes scanned the skies south of Hanoi for

visual contact. It was the morning of May 10, 1972 and the neighborhood was anything but friendly.

In Oyster 3, Phantom RIO Chuck DeBellevue picked up MiG transmissions on his Combat Tree equipment and informed his pilot that he had a positive hostile identification on the planes in front: "He's squawking MiG! He's squawking MiG! Stand by to shoot!"



F-4Ds of the 390th TFS inbound to target area with a full load of ordnance—North Vietnam, February 1970. (Photo by Ken Smith courtesy Warren Thompson.)

Run!

North Vietnam



Maj. Bob Lodge, pilot, and Capt. Roger Locher, RIO, prepare for another mission over North Vietnam in their F-4 Phantom.



MAN ON THE RUN!

There were similar clipped instructions in 555th Tactical Fighter Squadron F-4 Phantoms Oyster 1 and 2 as the back-seaters locked on their radars and made the final switching for a head-on attack with Sparrow missiles. With the nearest MiG almost in missile range, Oyster 1's pilot, Maj. Bob Lodge, eased his Phantom into a shallow climb. The Phantoms on either side followed. Meanwhile, Tommy Feezel in Oyster 4, still some distance behind, was catching up fast.

With his radar locked on the target eight miles in front, beyond visual range, Lodge squeezed the trigger and a Sparrow surged out trailing smoke. The missile, 12 feet long and weighing about 450 pounds, accelerated from its launch speed of 600 knots to 1,800 knots in 2.3 seconds. Then, the motor exhausted its fuel and cut out. The missile should have coasted the rest of the way to the target, but it was a dud and, for some reason, it exploded when the motor cut. Lodge squeezed his trigger again and a second Sparrow roared toward the same target.

Lt. John Markle in Oyster 2, slightly behind Lodge and 600 yards to his right, also fired a pair of Sparrows and had one fail: "Our first missile apparently did not get rocket motor ignition. The second missile came off the

aircraft and turned slightly right as it climbed. We continued to maintain position on Oyster One in an easy right turn, slightly nose up. As I checked the missile's progress, the trail showed a slight left turn toward the radar target."

Capt. Steve Ritchie in Oyster 3, 3,000 yards to the left of Lodge, also launched a Sparrow, but its motor failed to ignite. Tommy Feezel, coming up from behind, saw the missile fall away from the Phantom "like a bomb."

Of the five Sparrows launched, only two functioned as advertised. But when everything worked, the missile's 66-pound warhead was devastating. The recorder in Markle's plane captured his reaction as he saw his second missile strike home: "Oh, right! Now! Good! Wooooohooo!"

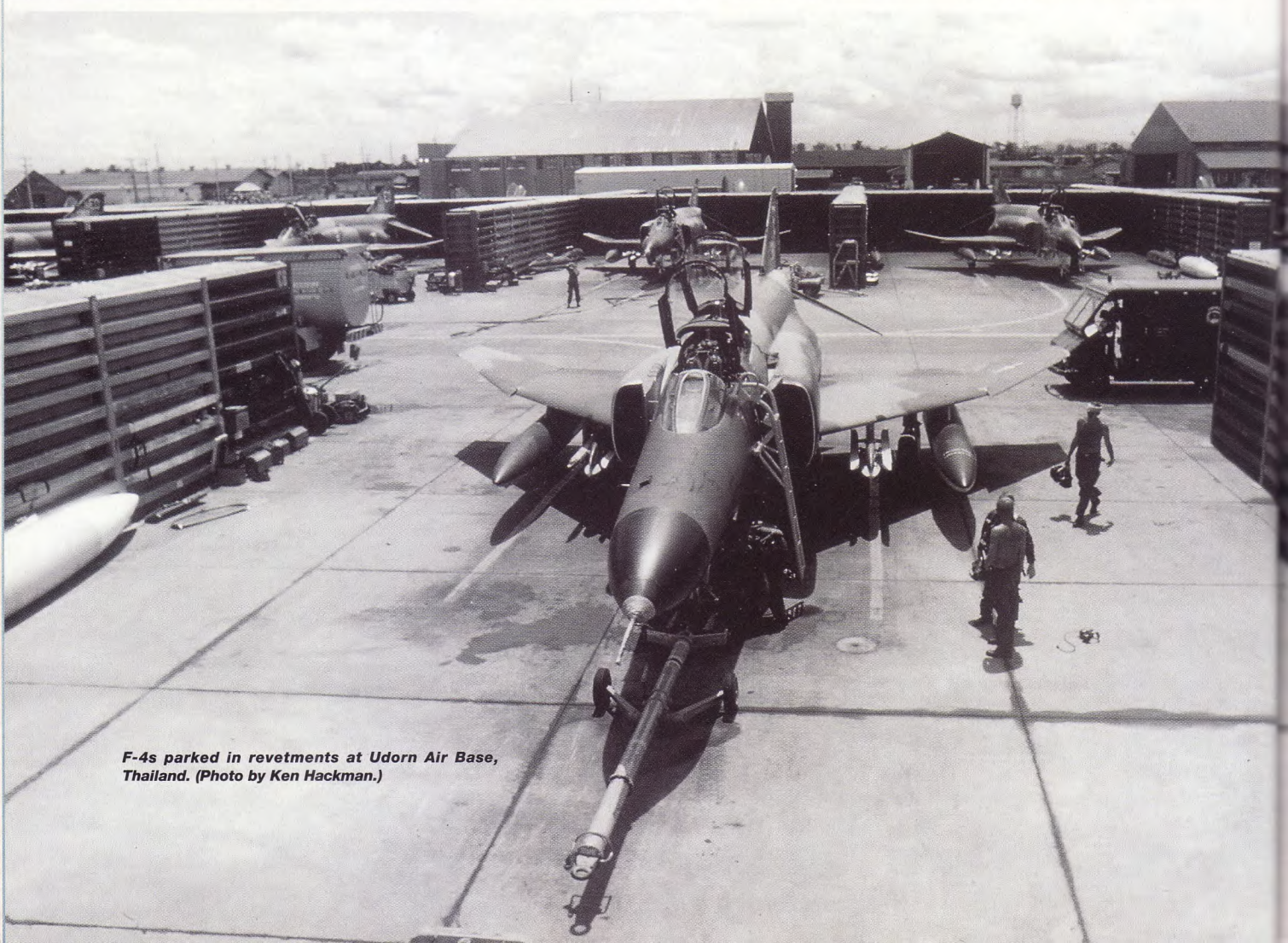
Then, on the radio: "Oyster Two's a hit!"

Lodge replied, "I got one!"

Steve Eaves, Markle's back-seater, confirmed the leader's kill. "Roger, he's burning and he's going down one o'clock!"

Capt. Roger Locher, Lodge's back-seater, saw two explosions a long way in front, and as he got closer, he caught sight of two North Vietnamese fighters tumbling from the sky. "The MiG-21 Markle shot down was the closer. It did a cartwheel and went underneath

"One or two seconds later, wham! We were hit. I looked up and saw the MiG [the MiG-21 in front] separating away. I thought we had midaired because that was exactly my interpretation of how a collision would feel. We both said 'Oh sh*t!' but my 'Oh sh*t!' was because the guy in front was getting away from us."



F-4s parked in revetments at Udorn Air Base, Thailand. (Photo by Ken Hackman.)

us about half a mile in front, in a ten-degree dive. A few seconds later, I saw the one we hit going down in a sixty- or seventy-degree dive. Its left wing was shot off; it was in a pretty fast roll to the left, on fire and trailing smoke. The guy had already ejected."

The two surviving MiGs continued their headlong charge and flashed close over the Phantoms as the latter swung right to get on their opponents' tails. One MiG pilot misjudged the rate of closure on Lodge's turn and narrowly missed colliding with Oyster Leader. When Lodge rolled out of the turn, he was only 200 feet behind the MiG, and from the rear seat, Locher had a close-up view. "We were in his jet wash. There he was, burner plume sticking out; the shiniest airplane you've ever seen. He was going up in a chandelle to the right; we were right behind him."

The MiG in front of Lodge was too close for a missile attack and his Phantom didn't have guns, but Lodge eased off his turn and the enemy-fighter's range was opening. Soon, it would be in position for a missile shot.

The combat was going well for Oyster Flight when, suddenly, the tables were turned. Zooming up from below to gatecrash the fight came a pair of MiG-19s—probably flown by Lts. Le Thanh Dao and Vu Van Hop of the 3rd Company. They curved after Lodge's F-4 as Markle, to Lodge's left and in no position to engage them, shouted a warning. "OK! There's a bandit; you got a bandit in your ten o'clock, Bob, level!"

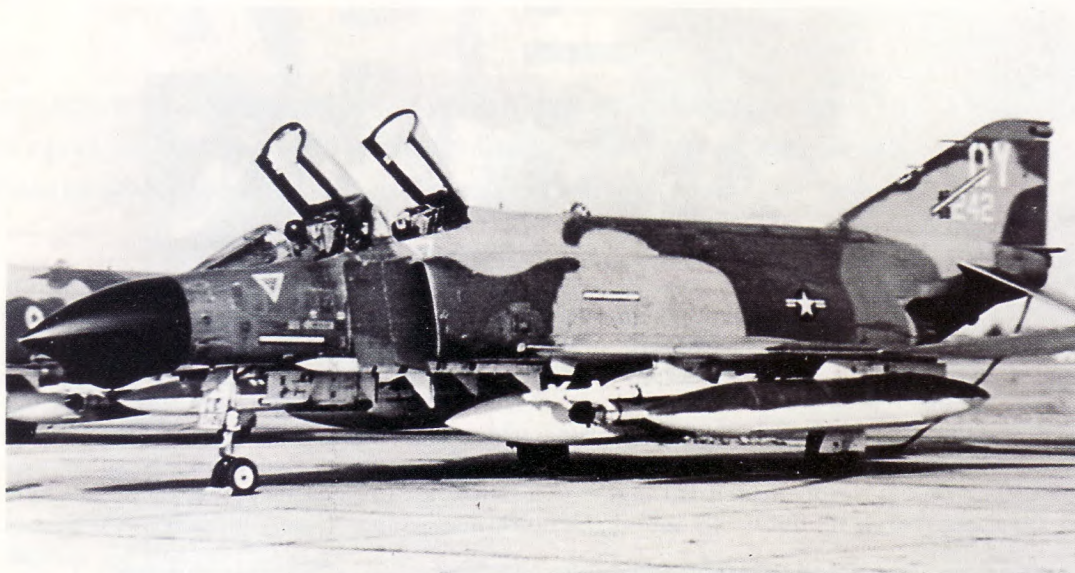
In a sweeping left turn, the MiG-19s passed behind Oyster Leader, then began closing in from his right.

"Bob, reverse right, reverse right, Bob. Reverse right!"

"The bandit's behind you ..." [the rest blotted out].

Lodge thought the MiG-21 in front had opened the range sufficiently for a close-in shot. Locher remembered: "We were ready to blow this guy away when I heard John telling us to reverse right. Then I saw another MiG-21 overshoot to the left, about one thousand feet away.

"Oyster One padlocked!"



A 555th Tactical Fighter Squadron F-4D Phantom II.

"Padlocked" meant Lodge was concentrating on the MiG in front, and immediately afterward he launched a Sparrow.

From the leading MiG-19, a string of fiery grapefruits bridged the gap between it and Lodge's Phantom. Again Markle's voice came over the radio: "He's firing; he's firing at you!"

Locher describes what happened next: "One or two seconds later, wham! We were hit. I looked up and saw the MiG [the MiG-21 in front] separating away. I thought we had midaired because that was exactly my interpretation of how a collision would feel. We both said 'Oh sh*t!' but my 'Oh sh*t!' was because the guy in front was getting away from us.

"The next thing I knew, we were decelerating; I think the right engine had exploded. We ended up doing some really hard yaws to the right." From that moment, the Phantom was doomed.

Locher remembers, "Bob said, 'We don't have any hydraulics.'"

The pilot's measured words brought home the harsh reality of their situation; the fighter was not going to get them home.

The back-seater was still pondering the implications of what he had heard when a yet more immediate danger manifested itself: the blaze in the rear fuselage had begun to eat its way forward and, roasted by the heat, the transparent plastic of the canopy over Locher's head was slowly turning an opaque orange. Smoke started to seep into the cockpit.

Seconds later, the Phantom was upside-down and falling fast. "We were under negative G at the time. My ass was off the seat; I was pinned against the top of the canopy."

Locher grabbed the handle between his legs with both hands and pulled hard. "I saw the canopy go, then I went out under negative G. There was a lot of wind blast; I started to see again. Then thwack! The parachute opened. And zoom! Past me went two MiG-19s."

The other members of Oyster Flight watched in dread fascination as Lodge's plane went down, but no



"I had to decide whether we should risk the loss of maybe half a dozen airplanes and crews just to get one man out. Finally, I said to myself, 'Goddamn it, the one thing that keeps our boys motivated is the certain belief that if they go down, we will do absolutely everything we can to get them out.'"

one saw Locher eject or his parachute open. The back-seater was fired downward, and smoke from the burning aircraft screened him. It appears the pilot, Bob Lodge, was still in his cockpit when the Phantom dived into the ground.

Locher was dangling from his parachute for only seconds before being thrashed by the branches of 40-foot trees as he fell through them. Once on the ground, he frantically undid the quick-release and

coming from the direction in which his plane had crashed. It was the posse sent to bring him in. Dead or alive.

Lodge quickly dropped into a small depression and covered himself with leaves, brush and rotting vegetable matter. "They had a good search party of adult men; starting at about noon they searched fairly thoroughly. People yelled and screamed to get me to move, and once every fifteen minutes, somebody fired three rounds from an automatic rifle into the ground."

Locher thought it would be only a matter of time before he was found, but until somebody stood over him with a gun, he resolved to remain still. "If they wanted me, they would have to stand on me. I grew up in Kansas and spent a lot of time hunting pheasants. A lot got killed because they got nervous. They would sit among cover on the ground, and you could walk past without seeing them. But if you stopped for a cigarette, one might flush out from just behind you, three feet away, and you would get it. Had it sat tightly, it would have lived." Roger Locher had no intention of imitating the birds' error.

At dusk, the searchers assembled noisily and went home. Stepping quietly in case someone

had stayed behind, the fugitive moved a few hundred yards before dark. Then he picked out a relatively soft piece of ground, stretched out and began his first fitful night's sleep in North Vietnam.

After first light on the second day, the airman had barely covered a few hundred yards when the searchers returned and again he burrowed into a patch of rotting foliage. "They had the whole village out to look for me—even women and kids. Fortunately, they didn't bring dogs or they probably would have found me. Some little kids came within thirty feet of me, but they were there to get away from the adults and take it easy. After about an hour, they went back to join the search party."

Capt. Patty Schneider, one of the intelligence officers at Udorn, was distraught when she heard that Roger Locher had been shot down. They had never dated, but now she realized she had fallen in love with him. "We always seemed to end up together at parties and he

Two young girls are the observers in this Hanoi antiaircraft battery.

scrambled out of his harness. Then he tried to pull the rest of the parachute down from the trees. The canopy was draped over several branches, however, and resisted all attempts to jerk it clear. He then tried to disconnect the survival pack from the parachute harness. But his fingers didn't want to work. They simply refused to obey his brain's commands (he thought his spine had been injured, but it was, in fact, a symptom of shock following ejection and would soon wear off). There was no alternative; the parachute and the precious pack had to be left behind to betray his point of arrival.

Locher took out a beeper radio. "This is Oyster Zero One Bravo. I'm on the ground. I'm OK." Then, fearful the transmissions might betray his position to the enemy, he switched off and set out at a brisk trot to distance himself from the parachute. He had covered about half a mile when he heard a babble of voices



would usually walk me to my barracks. When I had good or bad news from home, he was the first one I told. I decided that when he came back he wasn't going to get away from me again!"

Yen Bai. Roger Locher was alive, but famished. "My stomach was growling; I was always thinking about eating. I found a few dariens—small pods about the size of an apricot that contained edible kernels. Another fruit looked like a pithy cherry; it, too, had an edible inside. And there were weed shoots. They had no taste; they were just bland—blah. And that was it," the airman recalled.

Day followed day in a regular pattern: get up at first light and walk a mile or so away from the rising sun and then hide; at dusk, walk a few hundred yards toward the setting sun and bed down for the night.

On the 13th day, Roger Locher's desire to make progress overcame some of his initial caution and nearly cost him his freedom. That morning, he was trudging west, buried in his thoughts, when he suddenly realized he had blundered into a village. There were people all over the place, and if he went out the way he had come in, he thought he was sure to be seen. The airman crawled into a patch of foliage, covered himself with brushwood and leaves and resolved to stay put until dark. Everything went well until late in the afternoon.

"The kids were bringing in the cattle, and this water buffalo must have smelled me. He stopped, standing on one of the saplings covering me, and refused to go on. The kids shouted and hit him, but he wouldn't budge. Then one of the kids went running off to the village. I thought they'd seen me and were going to get dad with his gun. A little while later, the kid came back with his bigger brother who hit the animal hard enough to make it go. As they went off, I looked up, and there was the butt of the water buffalo, the first kid, a second kid and a little kid who ran after them, tripped and fell down, got up and ran on. The animal had knocked the camouflage off my right leg; if they had been looking for me, they would certainly have found me. It's a good thing water buffaloes can't speak!"

The airman replaced the camouflage, waited until dark, then crept quietly away from the village.

During the morning of June 1, a thunderous "whoosh" rent the air: the SAM battery near Yen Bai had launched a missile. The significance of the reverberations did not escape Locher: "If they were firing, there had to be American aircraft nearby. I monitored Guard frequency on my radio but heard nothing. So I waited about five minutes, then I came up: 'Any U.S. aircraft, if you read Oyster One Bravo, come up on Guard.' "



Framed by the U.S. and Thailand flagpoles, the "Jolly Green Giant" helicopter carrying Locher prepares to land at Udorn.

To the south of Yen Bai, Phantoms of the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing were on the way home after bombing a target near Hanoi. One of the flights was using the call sign Oyster on that day and by a remarkable coincidence, it was Oyster 2 that picked up Locher's transmission.

Lt. Jim Dunn (who flew an F-4 chaff bomber

during the May 10 mission) heard Locher's voice come through weakly. The survivor's use of the same Oyster call sign

struck Dunn as "kinda spooky." He informed his flight leader, but by then, Oyster Flight was beyond range of Locher's transmitter. So another flight was asked to reply to the call.

At this stage, the downed airman's aim was simple: he merely wanted to say he was still alive. Fletch Flight (an F-4 unit on this occasion) made contact, and Locher repeated the earlier call and gave more detail. "About five minutes later, Fletch Leader came back and said, 'We passed the word, and the Jollys and Sandys are on their way.' That put a big weight on my shoulders. I thought there was no way a rescue force would come in so far for me, but I didn't tell them not to come!"

Udorn, Thailand. The news of Locher's radio call left Patty Schneider euphoric. "My knees went shaky; I couldn't concentrate on my other work anymore." Tapes of conversations between the F-4 crews and Locher were brought into the Intelligence Center, and she was one of several present when they were played and replayed. "We listened to see if it was his voice and if he was under duress. We were all of the opinion that it was his natural voice and he did not seem to be under duress," she recalled.



Roger Locher in the helicopter cabin only minutes after he had been picked up after 23 days in hiding in North Vietnam.

Saigon. It was one thing for a bunch of relatively junior intelligence officers at Udorn to establish the identity of an airman down in North Vietnam and conclude that he was not speaking under duress. It was quite a different matter to secure authority to mount what would now have to be a major operation to get him out, involving risk to a large number of planes and crews. That particular buck stopped on the desk of Gen. Vogt, the Seventh Air Force Commander.

"I had to decide whether we should risk the loss of maybe half a dozen airplanes and crews just to get one man out. Finally, I said to myself, 'Goddamn it, the one thing that keeps our boys motivated is the certain belief that if they go down, we will do absolutely everything we can to get them out.' If that was ever in doubt, morale would tumble. That was my major consideration. So I took that on myself. I didn't ask anybody for permission, I just said, 'Go do it!'"

Like many a senior commander before him, John Vogt had made a brave decision and now had to live with it. If losses were incurred during the operation, there would be no shortage of Monday-morning quarterbacks to tell him how he should have handled the problem differently.

Thailand. While the downed airman pondered his chances of rescue, he had no idea of the size of the effort sparked by his radio call. Gen. Vogt had willed the end; he also willed the means. That day, all Air Force operations scheduled against North Vietnam were postponed, and the forces released were made available to support the rescue.

Soon after dawn, two helicopters and four A-1s took off from Nakhon Phanom for the three-and-a-half-hour flight to Yen Bai, accompanied to northern Laos by the HC-130. Then the huge supporting operation began to take shape around the rescue force. Sixteen Phantoms were to attack Yen Bai airfield, crater the runway and prevent MiGs based there from interfering with the rescue. Another 16 Phantoms were to hit antiaircraft gun positions in the area. The rescue force and the bombers, plus their attendant F-4 escorts, radar-jamming EB-66s, F-105 Wild Weasels and KC-135 refuelers, totaled 119 aircraft. About as many planes would take part in the rescue of Locher as had been involved in the original May 10 attack on Hanoi!

As on the previous day, when a much smaller rescue force had been beaten back, Capt. Ron Smith was in tactical command of the four A-1s and two helicopters heading in to collect Locher. The helicopters and a pair of A-1s lay back, while the two leading A-1s, piloted by Smith and his wingman, continued to the rescue area.

Locher had correctly answered his authenticating question the day before, giving his mother's maiden name, but there still remained an outside possibility that the helicopters were heading for a trap; the airman might have been answering with a gun pointed at his head. So Smith had a new question, devised by an officer who had attended the same college as Locher.

Locher described what happened after he made radio contact with the rescuers. "Ron Smith said, 'Hey, Oyster, I got a question for you and you'd better answer it right.' I'd been studying my other three questions all



Shortly after his rescue, a clean-shaven Locher poses with Steve Ritchie (left), Patty Schneider and Chuck DeBellevue (right).

night, I knew the answers to those. But this wasn't one of them. He said 'What's Kite's?' Kite's? Everybody at Kansas State University knew the drinking haunt frequented by students. I said, 'It's a place to drink beer.' He said 'Drink what?' 'Beer!'

He said, 'You sound like the one I want.' I said, 'You're damn right I'm the one you want!' Locher's snap reply and indignant quip established beyond doubt that there was nobody telling him what to say.

Sitting on the hillside, the downed airman heard the whistle of distant jets, then the wail of sirens at Yen Bai. Four F-4s rolled in and attacked the south end of the airfield; another four went for the north end. Simultaneously, more F-4s dive-bombed antiaircraft batteries in the area, causing secondary explosions that sent columns of smoke high into the sky.

Ron Smith also saw the attack: "Everything was going like clockwork. As I crossed the last hill before the Red River, with my wingman, the bombs went off at Yen Bai."

A few minutes later, Locher heard an A-1 roar past. By the time the second A-1 came in, he had his signal mirror pointing at the approaching aircraft. The A-1 pilot saw the bright flash of the sun off the mirror, called "Tallyho!" on the radio and began to circle the survivor.

The pick-up went exactly according to the book but, as "Jolly" pilot Capt. Dale Stovall explained, the same could not be said for the first part of the egress back toward base: "It took less than two minutes to get Roger on board the helicopter, and then we were all on our way over the ridge line. Jerry [Capt. Jerry Shipman, pilot of the backup helicopter] was waiting for us, and we started back in formation. Every village had been alerted, and we started taking small-arms fire on the way back.

"As we came over a ridge line before we dropped into the Red River [Valley], we had the surprise of our lives. A train coming down that railroad from China had seen



Locher immediately after his rescue. On the left is Gen. John Vogt.

the smoke at Yen Bai and had stopped exactly at our crossing point. We came over the ridge line in formation, and sitting in front of us was a fourteen-car train. Two cars had sandbagged gun positions, similar to what you see in the WW II movies. Their gunners were looking down the Red River Valley. They tried to get their guns cranked around to fire at us.

"The rescue helicopter swept in behind the A-1s as the gunners were trying to get a shot at them. Meanwhile, I was trying to jink and the Sandies were all hollering and yelling as they strafed the train. It was like a kids' parade. We went right over them and pressed on at low level across the valley."

Locher sat in the fuselage of the helicopter, completely ignoring the war raging around him. Someone had passed him a box of C rations, and like an orphan who had found the key to the treats cupboard, he gobbled cookies as fast as he could.

When he could get no more into his mouth, he stuffed them into his pockets. "I still didn't think I was getting out of North Vietnam, and I'd be damned if I was going to go down a second time without eating!" he explained. He worked his way through a can of apricots and everything else within reach before his stomach, unaccustomed to such largess, issued a stab of protest.

A large crowd was waiting at the airfield to greet him,

and the reception committee included Gen. Vogt, who had flown in from Saigon especially for the occasion.

When Locher stepped from the helicopter, loud cheers rose from the several hundred service people standing on the ramp. Patty Schneider watched excitedly as the gaunt, unshaven, filthy, ecstatic man she loved shook hands with the general and his friends.

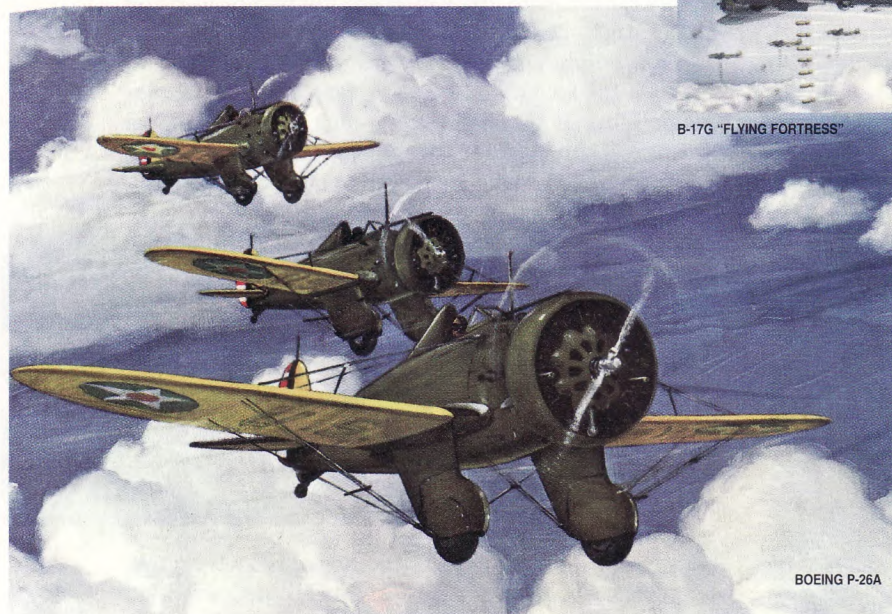
Weak from lack of food, Locher walked like an old man; he had left the base weighing 180 pounds, now he was down to 150 pounds. Willing hands helped him into the waiting ambulance. It was the moment Patty had prayed for, yet now she was at a loss as to what to do.

"All the other guys knew how I felt, but Roger really didn't. When he got in the ambulance, I didn't want to get in. I felt I had no right to be in there; we had not dated or anything. But the other guys pushed me toward the ambulance and said, 'Get in there!' So I did. That was how Roger found out he was special to me."

Patty Schneider and Roger Locher were married about a year later.

Roger Locher's feat as an aircrew survivor who remained unassisted and at liberty for 23 days in enemy territory and initiated a successful rescue established a record for the Vietnam War. It ranks among the most successful combat evasion episodes in history. ✚

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A Bird Dog FAC in Raven Territory

BY KARL POLIFKA

Minutes after sunrise, with small patches of fog still sticking like dirty cotton to deep green-black mountains, the howl of an Air America Pilatus Porter turboprop signals the start of another day in the “secret”

CIA case officers and logistics specialists are “the customer.” Air America and Continental Air Services haul cargo and troops. Gen. Vang Pao’s outnumbered Meo guerrillas fight for their mountains and their way of life against an invading

Treetop Warfare

war fought so bitterly in the mountains of Northern Laos. This “non-war” raged throughout the country whose neutrality had been agreed to a few years earlier.

army. United States airpower and the little-known Royal Lao Air Force (RLAF) and its U.S. advisors provide the margin of survival—if not victory—for the Meo

PHOTO COURTESY OF WARREN THOMPSON

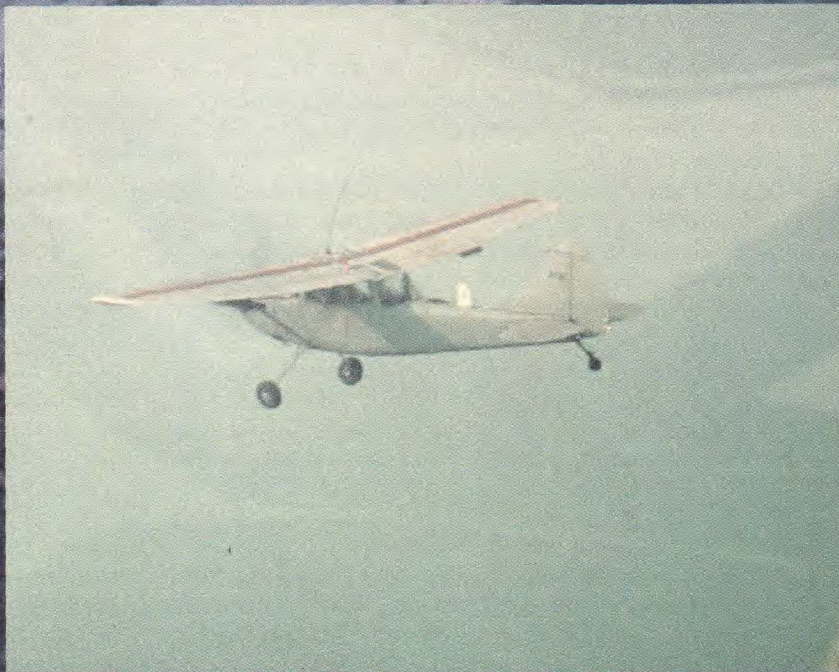
The red stripe on this O-1 means it was a Raven's plane—somewhere in Northern Laos in early 1970 (photo courtesy of Mike Byers).

(also known as the Hmong). The direction of airpower falls to a handful of volunteer USAF Forward Air Controllers (FAC) living with Lao forces. Their call sign was Raven, and none of the survivors will ever forget their experience.

Adrenaline woke a Raven up along with that morning howl of engines. It kept him tightly focused through long and dangerous days, and it made him concentrate so he could absorb the detailed intelligence provided by the CIA every night. It also kept his hangovers manageable. That *focus* made the O-1 Bird Dog an airplane he wore, rather than flew.

The day's first flight starts with the only really important O-1 preflight item: check-

ing the security of the oil-filler cap pinned to the filler pipe. An unpinned cap will vibrate loose and the oil will vent, unseen, out of the bottom of the engine compartment. Engine failures, of course, always occur over very forbidding country, full of an enemy eager to meet a Raven and collect the price on his head. The crew chiefs work their hearts out to make every plane as good as it can get.





An O-1 refuels and rearms on the Plain of Jars in late 1969 (photo courtesy of Mike Byers).

fire and keep on flying. Fifty-caliber and upward was, of course, a different story. The limiting indicated airspeed of 166 knots could be exceeded by 20 percent (as I did one day) and survived, if the airplane was recovered with care. Almost comical overloads occurred from time to time. For instance, when I was in Vietnam (at Nha Trang), I loaded an enlisted guy into the back seat plus an aircraft generator, three jeep generators, several carbs, a case of oil (I think) and a bunch of brooms and aircraft cleaning brushes that hung out the rear window. I think it was the brushes that got the squadron commander's attention (he didn't have operational control); he chased me down the runway in his jeep, waving and yelling. I couldn't get the tail up, but with 10,000 feet of concrete, I had plenty of time to let it fly itself off. Though no STOL airplane, the Dog could handle rough short strips that O-2 or OV-10 pilots encountered only in their nightmares. Last, ground fire could be heard as supersonic rounds snapped past the airplane—a marvelous advantage in that you knew you were being shot at and roughly from where.

The FAC was the key to most airpower use in Southeast Asia because he found and marked targets and then controlled the tremendous firepower that was at his disposal. He had to know the area, interpret available intelligence (easy in Vietnam, where most of it stuck like glue to the Saigon area), understand the strengths and weaknesses of the various fighter/attack aircraft and units and maintain situational awareness of the air and ground tactical situation. In addition, he had to keep track of the weather and be adept in working strike aircraft through it, keep track of friendly and hostile forces, marking desired ordnance delivery points as accurately as possible, controlling each strike aircraft pass by pass, conducting bomb damage assessment (BDA) and staying cool. All of the above might be occurring simultaneously, using all three radios. Staying cool was perhaps the toughest role.

The O-1, of course, had disadvantages beyond the issue of speed. Among other things, the vacuum-driven attitude

indicator was not very reliable. I believe I got as proficient at needle-ball-and-airspeed as, say, Jimmy Doolittle. The sole piece of navigation gear was a fixed-card ADF—useful for tracking to a beacon or listening to commercial radio (in Vietnam), but sporty for shooting a published approach (if there was one). The 12-channel, crystal UHF radio was a disgrace—easily replaced by a tunable Wilcox the Air Force was unwilling to buy. Forward visibility in heavy rain was zilch. This was scary in the mountains in daytime when, totally blind, the wind would push the airplane out of a cloudburst to reveal a wall of jungle off one of the wings. It was a test of faith during night landings at unlit airfields such as Long Tiene. Fortunately, Air America had added instrument eyebrow lights to a few Raven O-1s—far better than the dismal original ultraviolet setup. With the Dog's airspeed and turn radius, jinking through ground fire was—barely—better than flying in a straight line. Nothing, however, quite prepared you for the weather, terrain, operating conditions, or ground fire that characterized Laos.

Long Tiene, then referred to as “the secret base,” was home to Gen. Vang Pao, the charismatic leader of the Meo clans that had united under his leadership to fight the Pathet Lao (PL) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces that sought to dominate Laos. This intertwining of their desires with U.S. foreign policy objectives probably would not have changed the eventual disastrous outcome for the Meo.

Meo units frequently made contact with NVA/PL units and hold them in position until a Raven could deliver part of a continuing stream of daytime airpower that included A-1, F-4, F-105, contract Thai pilots in RLA/T-28D and the occasional USN bird. Night air support was provided by Lao AC-47 gunships, U.S. A-1 and A-26 aircraft directed by English-speaking Meo called “forward air guides.”

Two large houses were perched on a modest hill a few hundred yards from the northwest end of the runway at Long Tiene. The newer, up-slope, house was inhabited by about 20 CIA case officers and support people and a family of pet bears (in a cave with bars). Floyd, the senior male

bear, had a drinking problem. The older house, where the Ravens lived, was a gray, weatherbeaten teak structure with six bedrooms. Scrawled in the concrete of one of the showers was "1944"—perhaps a reminder from Force 136, which had jumped into the valley to harass the Japanese so long before. Houseboys kept the place clean, killed rats and boiled water in a futile attempt to kill parasites.

By sundown on an average day, the four or so pilots would have landed, turned the airplanes over to the half a dozen maintenance guys and gone to the house to get cleaned up and have a few drinks of, usually, Johnny Walker Black. Most of the pilots, however, were expected to eat "dinner" at Vang Pao's house. Vang Pao's evening meals were an occasion for him to hold court, hearing summaries of unit actions, dispensing or withholding praise, making his will known. He was a small, round-faced man; intelligent and personable.

The two or three Ravens who attended each night usually said little during the pre-dinner drinks (CIA-supplied White Horse scotch in shot glasses) and chitchat, although Vang

"Roger that," and begin a grinding climb to 6,000—about 2,500 feet above the average PDJ elevation.

It's cool up there, and it gets quite cold in the winter. The almost endless variations of mountain and jungle are now familiar ground; pop out of a random cloud and Scar will comment, in his 40-word English vocabulary, where you are within half a mile in an 8,000-square-mile operating area. The 2,500 AGL altitude is about max effective range for 12.7mm (.50-caliber) but well within the ZPU (14.5mm Soviet heavy MG) and 37mm envelopes. Dead Ravens don't work air strikes. There will be plenty of time for heroics as this day goes by.

It takes about five minutes in the area to visually locate the supply dump the CIA had talked about on the previous night—much more difficult without their precise information. The O-1 is a rudder airplane. Trim it slightly nose high, and make turns with rudder only. This allows the use of both hands for reading the 1:50,000 maps you live with, taking notes, eating your lunch, or whatever.

Red Dog checks in about 40 miles out, and a familiar ritual begins.

"Raven four-five; Red Dog is four Thuds inbound to zero-eight-zero at 30 off 98. We got 32 Mark 82 [500-pounders], eight CBU 24 [670 bomblets each, dispensed across a 300-meter circle], 4,000 rounds of 20 mike mike, copy?"

Turn the airplane, look disinterested (to the bad guys), think. "Roger, Red Dog; scattered cloud at five, scattered higher; target is a supply dump in the trees along the southern PDJ. Target elevation is 3,750. Winds are north at about five knots. Expect heavy small arms and automatic weapons fire; 37-mil in the area. Best bailout is channel 98, 27 miles west. We'll work the bombs first; instantaneous fusing, CBU last. Run a random pattern. Copy?" Check

your watch, light a cigarette, fumble the canteen out and have a drink. The Thuds ought to be here soon. Start a gentle descent to about two grand. Scar squirms and tightens his harness. He has survived four crashes or shootdowns over the years and knows all about borrowed time. He has preceded us into the realm where bullets are seen as well as sensed, where an over-focused mind sees the nuances of the immediate future, where distant objectivity in a brutally lethal process maintains self and sanity. Scar is a professional, and so are we.

"Red Dog copies. Red Dog, green 'em up; instant on the fusing; take spacing. Com'n' up on you, Raven." Voices from the fast movers are detached, calm.

I look up and southward. The Thuds will be at about 13 grand. They can't get much higher with a full load. There they are—four shark-like silhouettes. I check orientation to the target again. "Red Dog, I'm your 11 low, target just behind me, rocking my wings now." A pronounced rocking of wings confirms that they have the right FAC.

"Got you, Raven; ready in 20 seconds."

"Roger, in to mark; I'll hold southeast." The school solution for target marking in Vietnam was to pull the nose up and roll gently into a descending turn, the throttle pulled to idle. The sudden quietness of the engine announces to the



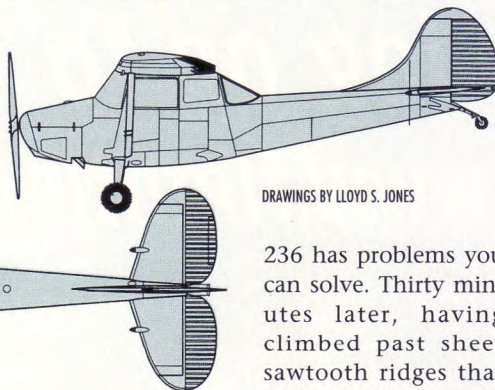
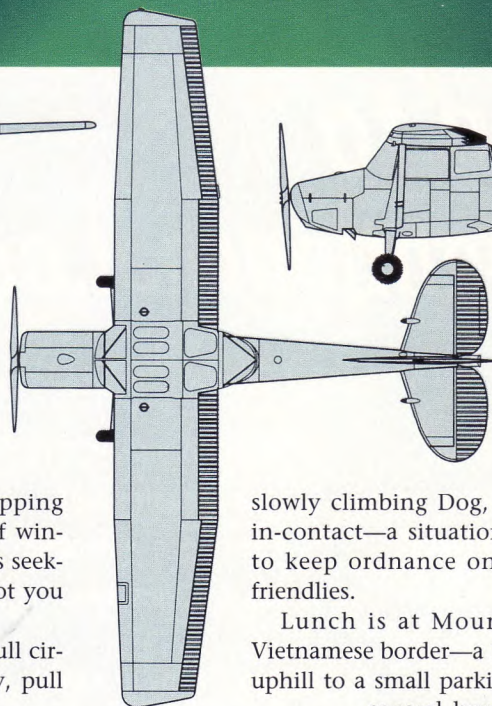
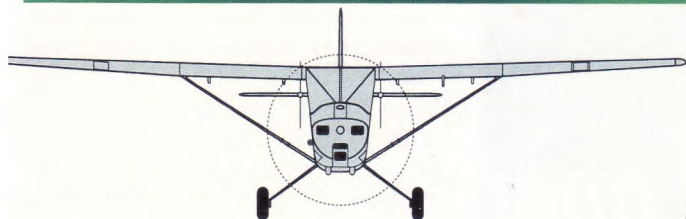
A FAC in an O-1 flies over the Plain of Jars in mid-1969 (photo by Karl Polifka).

Pao was always solicitous of their views. Dinner for them was at the main table along with Vang Pao, his principal advisers and CIA. Most Ravens, and most CIA, stuck to the rice and vegetables, the meat dishes being a bit too exotic. By eight at night, almost all the Americans would return to their houses up the hill. At least a couple of Ravens would spend another half an hour or more in a concrete CIA communications building reviewing very extensive intelligence holdings and discussing tomorrow with the customer.

Dawn, and that engine howl, always came too early. Soon, you would be back in that O-1, the engine vibration numbing you slightly, your mind racing ahead, pulling together all the knowns and probables of the day to come. Your mind, if you were good, was figuring and adjusting all of the time because the FAC job was, above all, a thinking job. Thinking, deciding and ultimately playing God because it had to be done.

En route, I'd tell Cricket I would be working the southern PDJ and the Xieng Khouang ("zing kwong") area—080 radial at 30 nautical miles off Channel 98, and I would be on station in 15 minutes. This TACAN rendezvous is pulled off a 1:250,000 map. They acknowledge and say that Red Dog flight of four Thuds (F-105) will be inbound in about 20 minutes; if you can work them, meet on 236.6 UHF. I

Pulling off left, down at about 200 feet, the ground and raw slashes of cliff are terrifyingly close. There is an overwhelming sense of ZPU or 37mm rounds about to shatter the Bird Dog into slivers of old aluminum.



DRAWINGS BY LLOYD S. JONES

bad guys the start of a strike—something that gets you a face full of lead in Laos. A split-S to about 30 degrees, nose low, engine thundering along at 2400rpm, left hand up to select a rocket on the simple arming panel; “swoosh” goes a WP that blossoms white. Pull off toward the southeast as blurs of jungle whirl by, rounds snapping past; you crane your neck looking through the roof window for the Thuds, eyes darting to see muzzle flashes seeking you. “Red Dog, 100 meters south of my mark; got you in sight, cleared hot.”

The Thuds are spread so that they cover nearly a full circle around the target area. They roll in sequentially, pull off target and rejoin the circle for another pass, making things tougher for the defenders. Two of lead’s 500-pound bombs make a dull orange flash deep in the trees 50 meters south of the smoke. The dull *crump* of the detonation is heard over the engine noise.

“Lead’s off left.”

Two is starting a roll-in, waiting for the word. This is a mental job above all: keeping the fighters on a target they can’t see, dancing around ground fire coming from unexpected places. Crush the cigarette out in the ashtray; drink some more water. “Two, 100 meters south of lead, cleared hot.” He disappears visually—a common but dangerous occurrence, near midairs being too normal. You pick him up as he releases; he’s going to be long. The dark shapes of two bombs at 500 knots cross your vision lazily. They enter the trees a good 300 meters east. Two compounds his error by pulling off right, heading toward you. Before you can say anything sassy, your heart convulsing at the midair potential, there’s a brilliant orange fireball and a concussive explosion that moves the Dog sideways, the windows flexing, your ears feeling the pressure. Fuel dump! Scar pounds your back. At least he doesn’t barf, as some do. Red Dog Two passes a couple of hundred feet over your head—no time for sarcasm. The rip-saw sound of 12.7 comes from the north. Time for some CBU to shut down the defense.

Pass by pass, for 17 minutes, Red Dog expends. Shift the aim points, control each pass, keep them and yourself out of trouble; get the enemy. Red Dog is at last done but still in UHF range when you pass the BDA (bomb damage assessment). Cricket calls on VHF, “Customer requires assistance at Site 236.” Translated: a CIA case officer working near Site

236 has problems you can solve. Thirty minutes later, having climbed past sheer sawtooth ridges that seem to reach for the slowly climbing Dog, you’re working a troops-in-contact—a situation requiring real precision to keep ordnance on the enemy and off the friendlies.

Lunch is at Moung Moc near the North Vietnamese border—a 1,200-foot dirt strip rolling uphill to a small parking area beyond which are several hundred feet of cliff straight down. Refuel and rearm the airplane. Talk over the local situation with the customer. Air America drops double-sacked loads of rice from 500 feet, the bags *whomping* down at the other end of the strip. Take off and work two more sets of fighters and head home. Your pretty normal day isn’t quite over. There’s a bad tactical situation at Xieng Khoung, and the Raven who’s on site is about out of fuel. You’ll take over because you have the

fuel and rockets he doesn’t have.

Three hundred friendlies are advancing, steadily, line abreast, from the ruined town toward a large karst formation; beyond that is a smaller karst formation, and beyond that, the entrance to a large cave. Behind the first karst formation are two BTR-40 Soviet armored personnel carriers (APC), each sporting twin 14.5mm heavy MG—easily enough firepower to wipe out the friendlies and you, too. The friendlies won’t get on the radio and seem oblivious.

Late in the afternoon, the descending sun casts very sharp shadows across the valley floor. Almost impossible to see objects in shadow unless you descend into the shadow—down to about 500 feet AGL at times. On one of these swoops, a 37mm near the BTR-40 opens up, hosing away from a slant range of less than 1,000 feet. To make things more interesting, a large number of enemy troops on the cliffs above the cave begin to shoot down at the O-1. Your throat is dry from talking, from seeing things unravel. You begin to doubt the outcome. Scar goes to work trying to contact Ly Leu, Vang Pao’s son-in-law and a superb T-28D pilot.

A few minutes later, Ly Leu shows and leads his flight of three T-28D in strafing and rocketing the enemy on the cliffs. I give him general direction on VHF while coaching in

Cessna L-19E Bird Dog

Wingspan: 36 ft.

Length: 25 ft., 10 in.

Powerplant: 213hp Continental O-470-11

Performance: maximum speed—115mph at sea level

Maximum ceiling: 18,500 ft.

Range: 530 miles

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TREETOP WARFARE

a single F-4 released by a FastFac. Ly Leu works in a clockwise pattern on the clifftops while Lincoln (the F-4) comes down the long valley leading from the PDJ to Xieng Khoung. The 37mm whacks away, and everyone takes huge volumes of small-arms fire. We are on borrowed time, the note coming due, the interest too high to survive. Lincoln, inexplicably, drops 300 meters short from low altitude. The friendlies, inexplicably, keep advancing.

Bobin, two F-105s, check in. Lead's tone of voice says the old pro is here. Bobin is in at 1,725 and progressing up the valley at some 500 knots indicated—more than 800 feet per second. The slowness of time in combat makes it seem as if he's crawling through the shadows, dust and slashing white light. The wait is excruciating; the bad guys can't miss me forever. Rolling in to mark at minimum range when Bobin is a few seconds out is the only option left. The light/dark contrast is extremely disorienting and must be far worse for Bobin at their speed. Pulling off left, down at about 200 feet, the ground and raw slashes of cliff are terrifyingly close. There is an overwhelming sense of ZPU or 37mm rounds about to shatter the Bird Dog into slivers of old aluminum. I look left in time to see Bobin skip two Mark 84 (2,000-pounders). Two tons of steel and explosives ricochet gracefully off the valley floor in a gentle arc that ends at the base of the karst where the enemy hides. The two APCs, the 37mm and the bad guys disappear in a shattering blast of smoke and fire. Karst chips rain down in a valley stunned to silence. Scar and I are quiet as we head home, another day leading to the next.

Nothing I have just described could have been done, or done nearly as well, in any airplane except the O-1. To me, and to most of the Ravens who flew it, the O-1 will always be one of the great airplanes of all time. ✈

General Electric 7.62mm Minigun

During the Civil War, muzzle-loading, single-shot rifles produced more casualties than all the 20th-century wars involving the U.S. combined. Some estimate that in Vietnam, even with much more accurate, long-range weapon technology, it still took more than a thousand times more bullets to inflict a single casualty. Blind, suppressing fire with the likes of the General Electric Minigun was one reason that number was so high.

Capable of cranking out as many as 6,000 rounds per minute, the Minigun is a different kind of weapon from the usual machine gun. For one thing, it has five barrels that are rotated past the firing point in the receiver at a high speed by a compact electric motor, making the entire unit so small it could fit into an eight-inch-diameter, three-foot-long mailing tube.



When Miniguns were fired at night, it looked as if a laser gun were being shot from the ship. The weapons' powerful kick would yaw the plane to the left, so while firing the guns, the pilot had to hold right rudder or use differential thrust to stay on target (photo courtesy of Norm Taylor).

Because it fires so quickly, it can't depend on normal springs for anything because they can't cycle fast enough, so everything is driven mechanically, including the firing pins. This makes the inside of the gun a marvel of reciprocating and rotary motion.

When it's firing, it doesn't

sound like a firearm, as the individual explosions blur into a smooth, resonating hum that is just short of being a roar. At the end of the barrels, the muzzle blast forms a constant ball of fire that tapers out to a laser-like streak of light made by the tracers. The links and empty brass pour out of the bottom of the gun faster than if dumped from a bucket and magically appear in a pile if they are not captured in a bag.

The Minigun's biggest drawback is that it is a fairly short-range weapon. The cartridge used, the 7.62 x 51mm NATO (known to civilians as the .308 Winchester deer cartridge), is actually a rifle round that was introduced in the M-14 infantry rifle and M-60 machine gun. Less powerful than even the .30-06 round of the WW II M-1 Garand, it loses efficiency at ranges above 1,000 to 1,500 yards. However, with the gun's capability to simply shred whatever it hits with an enormous number of bullets, it was, and is, an awesome weapon.

—Budd Davisson

December 17, 1935, and has been proving itself ever since. Basically speaking, low and slow was the way the program was headed. Again, that fit very well into the simple theoretical concept that was then rapidly gaining speed.

To fly a circular path around a target requires a constant angle of bank to keep on a fixed point on the ground—a pylon turn, if you will. Someone far older and smarter than the average new flight-crew member determined that angle of bank to be 45 degrees, plus or minus a few degrees among friends. Logic then said why not put guns in the Goon parallel to the wing, roll smoothly into a 45-degree left bank and shoot all day on a single point? The Goon's best airspeed—

slow—was perfect for this maneuver. But, true to any simple theory, it ran into complications when the thrust/drag/lift/weight and the other “stuff” that basic pilot school teaches reared its ugly head to complicate the scenario. The Goon did not function well at a 45-degree angle of bank (a marvelous understatement) and, regardless of what the scientific studies showed, pilots did not function well when they fired the guns while looking over their left shoulders—something about an unnatural act. Remember the original simple concept: roll smoothly into a 45-degree banked turn, acquire the target by looking over your left shoulder, and fire the gun(s) by kind of pointing the wingtip at the target. All in all, it still looked good on the simplicity chart.

Enter the copilot. His job was to arm the system with a master arming switch and then sit placidly by while the intrepid aviator in the left seat, looking at times like a little kid on a tricycle, tried very hard to use rudder, ailerons and elevators to maintain level and controlled flight and keep the gunsight fixed on the target—all while looking over his left shoulder. As might be expected, there were times during this ballet-like performance when the Goon's pointy end did not go in the intended direction. When sensing that controlled flight was departing from his visual and instrument references, the copilot's job was to “safe” the guns by turning off the master arming switch and then, in a calm, reassuring voice, to tell the pilot to “*Recover!!!*” The resulting unusual attitude recovery maneuvers were usually accompanied by the back-end crew's questioning the pilot's basic flight abilities, his parentage and his parents' legal state of matrimony at his birth.

Assuming that the basic flight crew could overcome all of the disruptions to civilized flight so far offered as a challenge, two more “areas of concern” were added. First, since the Goon was slow and decidedly vulnerable at firing altitude, it was decided by someone who didn't have to fly the weapon system that this firing maneuver should be flown at night and at an altitude that was “in the envelope” for ground fire. The altitude was almost a given: fly at an altitude from which you can see the target, have fairly precise control over those 18,000 rounds a minute of 7.62mm that were being spewed out of the Miniguns and yet be high enough to reduce your vulnerability.

Propaganda said that the rounds from the three guns, fired from a 3,500-foot altitude, would impact in roughly a 45-foot circle. This may have made the friendlies feel better about life, but to watch the waver in the tracer path would indicate that the dispersal pattern was perhaps also dependent on the skill of the pilot—with side credits to include weather, terrain, target definition, etc. Thus, contrary to what may have been published, the “exact” firing altitude became a flexible figure that was determined by these facts as well as by enemy fire and the urgency of the target (troops in contact were given the highest priority—and the lowest altitudes).

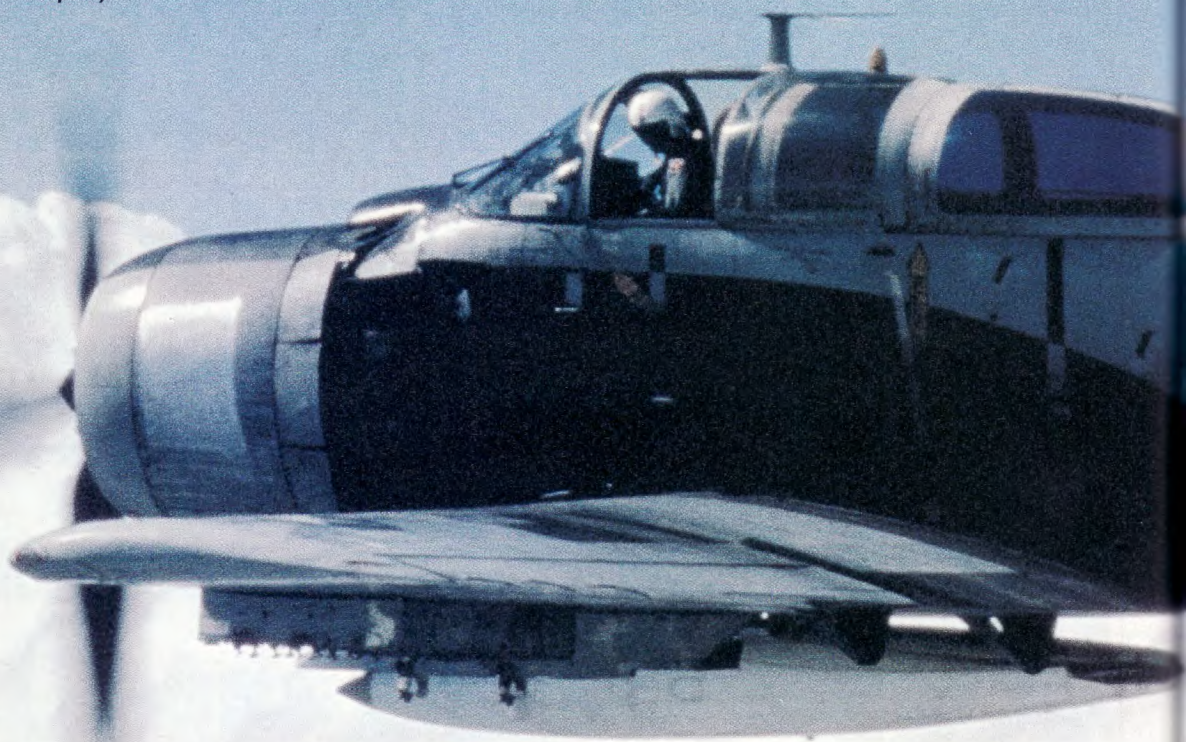
The last pieces in the puzzle for the flight crew were the flares. Obviously, if you were tooling around in the dark looking for things that go bump in the night, you might want to see them and know what you were shooting at. Also, there were times when all the friendlies wanted was enough light to see those same night creatures. The flares originally selected were USN Mk.24s—2.5-million-candle-power, 21-pound, three-minute-burn-time flares developed by the small boat-and-barge component of our armed forces.

Vietnam POWs

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 Wares, USAF, tells us about the mission as he saw the events unfold from the cockpit of his A-1E Skyraider.

isson 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.



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

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).

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

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.

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.

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.

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 ordinance short to get anyone who might have already crossed it. In the process, he took out a few blocks of housing between



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

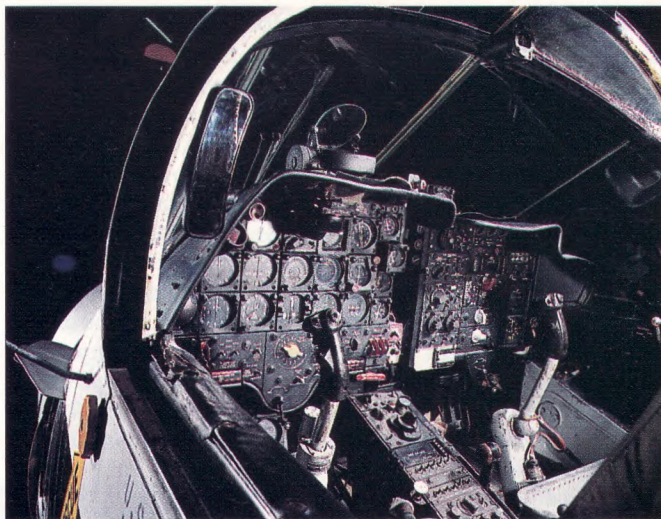
Now the sequence of events is all jumbled in my memory. At about the time as Simons and the troops got back to the camp, the first SAM took off. You cannot miss a SAM launch at night; it lights up miles in all directions. The first few launches were called—"SAM, SAM, dive, dive"—but there were so many 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 lightening-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

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.

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."

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.

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



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).

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 pukers 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. †

"Shot down over Italy,"

I was captured and beaten before finally being liberated. But what really made me mad, was coming home and discovering someone in my own unit stole my jacket!"



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