

“Air Strike”

During the years 1965, 1966, and 1967 I flew missions over South Viet Nam as the systems operator on a small reconnaissance aircraft operated by the Army Security Agency. My day was spent patrolling the VC dominated areas and locating their headquarters by radio direction finding as they came on the air to report. During this time period, I think that short of nuclear weapons, I witnessed every type of air strike possible. Depending on the area that I was working, there could be a wide variety of air strikes going in around me. These could vary from the gutsy kids down in the trees in the light observation helicopters, who did their fighting at name calling distances, to the giant B-52s that passed overhead unseen, erasing entire grid squares, probably without interrupting their in-flight lunches. On one rare occasion, I even watched a C-130 (which we jokingly re-designated B-130s) drop a *30,000 lb. Daisy Cutter* to create an “instant landing zone” in order to insert or extract grunts.

One air strike stands out in my memory as the most beautiful display of air power that I ever witnessed. It was the spring of 1966, and we were transiting across northern Phuc Thuoy province en route to our assigned patrol area, when we came across a flight of propeller driven A-1 Skyraiders working over a target. At the time this was a backwater area, and the target was probably a “suspected vegetable garden”, or one of the other “priority targets” that absorbed tons of bombs every day.

It was during that magic time of day; just at dawn when the earth was still in shadow, but an aircraft flying a few thousand feet above the ground would be in full sunlight. There were three Vietnamese Skyraiders circling at an altitude above us. One aircraft would peel off in the classic wingover maneuver and begin his dive on the target. Almost as soon as the Skyraider had begun to dive, it would be out of the sunlight and in shadow and would begin firing its 20 mm

cannon at the target. Every time a cannon fired, it would leave a puff of smoke in the air. In the calm air each puff of smoke would be connected to the preceding puff by a thin string of smoke, giving the illusion that each gun was pulling a string of pearls. Although the tracers were not visible to me, the impact of the cannon shells was marked by an area of flashbulb-like flashes that danced around the forest. The cannon would stop firing, a bomb would separate from each wing, and the pullout would begin. The four strings of pearls would be replaced by contrails that began as a wisp of vapor from each wingtip and spread inward as the G-loading increased, until the whole wing was covered in vapor. Then, as the aircraft completed its pullout, the process would reverse until the final wisps of vapor disappeared from the wingtip. The bombs would hit, not with the usual flash and gout of debris, but, in the absolutely calm, moisture saturated air, a flash surrounded by an opaque, milky-white ball of vapor that spread outward and began to dissipate. First it would become a ring of vapor and then transform into a visual distortion of the air that traveled outward at the speed of sound until it was no longer visible. The whole process from the impact of the bomb to the dissipation of the visible shock wave lasted only a few seconds. By the time the shock wave of the bombs dissipated, another Skyraider would be rolling in for a repeat of the same beautiful show.

During the few minutes that it took us to fly across the area, the sun rose a final few degrees, and the sunlight reached the ground below us. The light changed, and the magic left the show. The most beautiful display of air power that I have ever seen became "just another air strike", and I continued on my way to another day in a long war.

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