

Air Strike

Reprint Options

By Richard McCarthy

During the years 1966 and 1967 I flew missions over South Vietnam as the systems operator on a reconnaissance aircraft operated by the Army Security Agency. My days were spent patrolling the VC dominated areas in a small aircraft equipped to do short range radio direction finding. As the radio transmitters of the enemy headquarters came on the air to communicate with their subordinate units, or to report to their higher headquarters. I would use radio direction finding to locate them. My patrol area could vary from the quiet border areas, where I might not see another aircraft, to the hotly contested areas Northwest of Saigon, where it seemed that we would spend most of our time avoiding other aircraft, or trying to stay out of the gun target line of the artillery that always seemed to be active. 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 varied from the gutsy kids in light observation helicopters, down in the trees and doing their fighting at name calling distances, to the giant B-52s that passed overhead, unseen, and erased entire grid squares, probably without interrupting their in-flight lunches. On one rare occasion, I watched a C-130 (which we jokingly re-designated B-130) drop a 30,000 lb. Daisy Cutter in order to create an "instant landing zone" to insert or extract grunts.

One particular air strike stands out in my memory as the most beautiful display of air power that I have ever witnessed. It was the spring of 1967, 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.

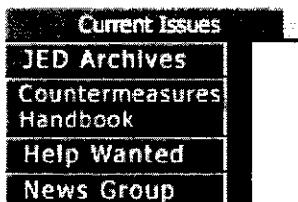
It was during that magic time of day; just at dawn, when the earth was still in shadow but an aircraft flying a few thousand feet above the ground would be in full sunlight. There were three Vietnamese Skyraiders circling at an altitude above us. One aircraft would peel off in the classic

wingover maneuver and begin his dive on the target. Shortly after the Skyraider had began its dive, it would be out of the sunlight and in shadow and it would begin to fire its 20 mm cannons 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 growing string of pearls thru the sky.

Although the tracers were not visible to me, an area of flashbulb-like flashes that danced around the forest marked the impact of the cannon shells. 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.

(For more on Richard McCarthy's experience as a COMINT operator in Vietnam, see ["First Person...Singular"](#) in the June 2002 issue of JED.)



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