One Long Day
By: Richard McCarthy

The mechanical jangle of the alarm clock drags me from sleep as I fumble to shut it off, in order to avoid disturbing the sleep of the other operators that I share my hooch with. I put my feet on the floor, light a first cigarette and enjoy the pre-dawn quiet of "The world's busiest airport" as I begin the dressing process.

The beauty of a tropical morning and pride of position make even this pre-dawn get-up something to enjoy. It is early 1966, and I am part of what we considered the most elite unit serving in Viet Nam. We are a small sub-unit within the Army Security Agency's 82nd Special Operations Unit, operating in Viet Nam under the cover name of 3rd Radio Research Unit. The 3rd RRU is a signals intelligence unit and the specialty of my small sub-unit is airborne radio direction finding. We simply call ourselves "The Air Section". Today, our job would be called part of the "Intelligence Preparation of The Battlefield". Using small aircraft as our platform we are able to give the tactical commanders a current location of the major VC headquarters sometimes twice daily. We are all proficient in Morse code, radio direction finding, and intimately familiar with the VC's communications network. Every man in The Army Security Agency was selected for above average intelligence and has volunteered for at least a four-year enlistment. We of the air section have all served at least one previous tour in Southeast Asia, volunteered for a minimum one year extension, as well as flight duty, and have had our application vetted by our peers. As one of the command's better intelligence sources we carry a large responsibility, and we are very proud of our position.

Dressing is very simple. When you are anticipating spending a half a day wedged into an olive drab airplane bouncing around in the tropical heat, unnecessary layers of clothing are not what you need, jungle boots, socks, and a set of jungle fatigues, sheath knife on the belt, and that's it. Then, it's off to the shower point for a quick shave and tooth brushing, then off to work.

Davis Station, our cantonment area (named for the first acknowledged casualty of the war, SP/4 Davis, a fellow ASA soldier) is located at the extreme West end of the main runway at Ton Son Nhut, and our operations building, a converted French warehouse, is located near the mid point of the runway, about a mile away. The simplest way to get to work, and my favorite, was to walk down the parking ramps. Directly behind Davis Station, were parked the A-1 Skyraiders of Premier Key's personal squadron, followed by a unit of American RB-57 Canberras, and then lines of VNAF (Viet Nam Air Force) transports. There were C-47's and Beechcraft C-45's, and the occasional Curtiss C-46 that had probably made numerous trips across the hump in an earlier war. Crew chiefs of several nationalities are busy preparing their birds for the days work, and the morning quiet is often interrupted by the screech of an inertial starter, followed by the rattle and belches of a radial engine coming to life.

Arriving at "the hangar" (our name for the converted warehouse that is 3rd RRUs operational headquarters) I check out my security badge and go back to the room used by the Air Section. As can only happen in an elite unit at war; preparation for the mission appears casual but is deceptively thorough. The previous day I had researched the known VC transmitters in my patrol zone and noted their last used frequencies, scheduled times for their next contact, and call signs, as well as preparing a complete set of tactical maps for my patrol zone and adjoining areas. My flight bag always contains the tools of my trade, pencils, tablets, protractors, survival kits and a plentiful supply of loaded M-16 magazines. Today I will be working the Rung Sat Special Zone, which is the designator for the Saigon River Delta. It is an area of mangrove swamps, twisty narrow waterways and very little solid land, inhabited mostly by Bien Xuyen river pirates and the occasional small VC sapper unit. Although the area is not known for large units of VC it is important because, the main shipping channel between Saigon and the sea runs thru this swamp. I sip my morning cup of coffee and discuss the days mission with my pilot and co-pilot. Today I will be flying with a major in the left seat (whose experience I will appreciate in a very short time) and a senior ARDF operator will be flying as co-pilot. We gather up our gear, exchange our security badges for M-16s and make the 200 yard walk to our airplane.

We are using a Beechcraft Twin Bonanza executive transport, known to the Army as a U-8D, and now converted for our use it is called a RU-8D (Reconnaissance, Utility, model 8, mod D) or simply a "D model" to us. What was a sleek executive transport, hauling flag rank officers a few years ago is now an antenna bedecked, overloaded warhorse. The wingtips have

been extended 36 inches, dipole antennas extend three feet above and below each wingtip, a longwire antenna extends from each wingtip back to the tail, and various communications and navigational antennas project from the fuselage. The pilot performs his external pre-flight inspection as I stow our equipment, then we each take our respective seats in preparation for the mission. My seat is directly behind the co-pilot with the mission radios on my left, a mechanical inverter that emits a high-pitched scream, directly behind my seat, and no room to move my feet. I will sit nearly immobile for the next four hours. The pilot starts the aircraft, and calls ground control for taxi instructions, as I pass the appropriate maps to the co-pilot, and perform checks on the mission gear.

Preflight checks complete, flaps at takeoff setting, we line up on the centerline of the runway, and the pilot brings in the power. Each, un-muffled, supercharged, 460 cubic inch engine is turning 3200 RPM and boosted to 42" hg as we begin our takeoff roll. The aural experience of taking off in a RU-8D can only be compared to standing in the parking lot of a biker bar at closing time on Saturday night. It was loud! At 60 mph the pilot makes the nose light, at 90 mph, and over a mile down the two mile long runway we lift off. As we establish a positive rate of climb, the co-pilot retracts the gear, the pilot retracts the flaps, and brings the power back to climb setting, and I prepare to start work. Today, instead of the usual right hand turn out, we break left and depart over the slums surrounding Cho Lon. We are already within range of my patrol area as I balance a legal pad on my knees, ready to take notes, and begin searching the frequencies for VC transmitters.

Slightly over thirty minutes later, I am head down searching thru the crackles, pops, hisses, and assorted civilian and ARVN transmissions as I search for VC transmissions on my short wave receivers when, I am interrupted by the co-pilot. He gives me a terse "shut em down Mac" with no explanation, and goes back to looking up frequencies for the pilot. As I look over his shoulder I notice several things: The first is a discrepancy in the power settings of the engines. The right engine is developing much less power than the left engine! Even in my inexperience I know that this can be very bad. The original U-8 would fly on one engine, but the RU-8 was another story. With the added drag of the antenna array, the weight of sufficient fuel to fly a four hour mission, mission gear, and the crew, as the pilots liked to state "one engine developed just enough power to get you to the scene of the crash!" I also notice that the pilot has lined up on the airport at Vung Tau about fifteen miles away over some swamp and quite a bit of open water in preference to returning a nearly equal distance over mostly swamps and the outer slums of Saigon to return to Tan Son Nhut. I'm really starting to appreciate those gray hairs above the Major's ears. We make a tense, but uneventful straight in approach and landing to the military airfield at Vung Tau and are directed to transient parking. As soon as we are parked, the pilot and co-pilot go off seeking maintenance, and to make an effort to notify our unit. As the most junior of the crew I get the task of guarding the aircraft and classified material on board. I spend my time standing on the wing enjoying the beautiful tropic morning, the sea breeze blowing across the peninsula, and watching the last armed Mohawk squadron in the Army doing quick turns as they support some grunt unit in contact. The Major returns with the word that parts are being flown in from Ton Son Nhut, and an explanation that the engine problem was due to a magneto coming apart, which explained why our supercharged engine would only develop partial power. The pilot and co-pilot again wandered off in search of food and shade with a vague promise or bringing me some food on their return. Soon a truck from the transient maintenance arrives and a SP/4 mechanic begins doing things to the right engine. As I'm standing and watching, a maintenance Sergeant arrives and proceeds to "rip me a new one" for standing around watching while his guy does all of the work. After his angry outburst subsides a bit, I manage to explain to him that I know absolutely nothing, zero, zip, zilch about fixing broken airplanes, but am there for the sole purpose of preventing either he or his mechanic from learning the secrets contained in my flight bag, or poking around amongst the secret goodies installed in the airplane, he apologizes, and I go back to observing. Miraculously,

as the mechanic is buttoning up the cowling, the pilot and co-pilot arrive with another Army tradition in hand, the mess sergeant's answer to all unscheduled requests for sustenance, thick slices of ham and American cheese slathered with mayonnaise, smashed between two slices of white bread, and wrapped in a paper napkin. It was delicious, even when washed down with warm canteen water but would ride in my stomach like an anvil as soon as we were in flight. They also bring the unwelcome news that, in spite of the fact that all my planning, frequency lists, callsign lists, and contact schedules are now out of date, we will still be patrolling for another two and a half hours in order to get credit for completing the mission.

Shortly, we have given the airplane a thorough pre-flight check and I am experiencing my first takeoff from a PSP runway. PSP, that stuff that was developed for putting down quick runways on Pacific islands during WWII is perforated steel planking about two feet wide and ten feet long that hook together with tabs. It's really effective but a takeoff from a steel runway is something that you won't soon forget! As you cross each plank it gives from the weight of the aircraft and you can hear the clank of the connecting tabs, and of course it follows the contours of the earth so it's usually pretty rough. The dash was a blur! I know that the Major took off from feel, because there wasn't a single instrument in the dash that was readable. The exhaust bellowed, the whole airplane shook and bucked, the PSP clanked faster as we accelerated, we pitched and heaved our way down the runway, and soon we're airborne again.

Shortly after we are airborne and barely out of the traffic pattern, I can tell my luck for the day is getting better. I am hearing the beeps and chirps of what is to me obviously a VC transmitter. I don't have the current callsigns but it sounds like one of Uncle Ho's more useless minions. He had a codename, which is still probably classified, so I'll just call him Alpha. Anyway he is a coast watcher, whose only purpose in life is to report the activity in the shipping roads off of Vung Tau. Why they didn't simply subscribe to The Saigon Post, which gave the same information in more detail I'll never know. I checked that the target was workable by switching to the directional antennas and then sent the signal over the intercom as I began to copy what the target was saying. The way our system worked was: I had two sets of antennas, one directional and one omni-directional. Using the directional antennas you could not hear the signal when the target was either directly in front of or behind the airplane. The co-pilot would look over the side of the airplane and note our location on the map as the pilot yawed the aircraft from side to side to determine the exact compass heading where he could not hear the signal. He would then call "mark" to indicate that the co-pilot should mark our position, and then call the compass heading for the co-pilot to write down next to the position. This was called a "line bearing" or in our jargon a "shot". We would then make a 90 degree turn, fly for a few seconds and repeat the process. With four good "shots" we could plot the location of the enemy transmitter with a high degree of accuracy.

By the way it plotted out, this was ol Alpha. About an hour later, the heat of the day has created some good thermals; it's plenty hot, the ride is rough, that ham sandwich isn't doing too well, and might decide to come back up soon, when, I pick up another target, this time a road watcher that reports the convoy traffic between Vung Tau and Long Bien. We'd barely quit working the road watcher when I picked up a VC military transmitter. Finally! It was nice to keep tabs on the low level guys like the road watchers, but our primary concern was keeping track of the VC military units. This guy turned out to be located a couple of miles out in the swamps. He was probably forced to re-locate due to the increased American military activity in the area.

That's it for the day! We've been out nearly twice the planned time, lost an engine, made a precautionary landing, got the engine fixed, verified the location of two VC intelligence sites, discovered the new location of a VC military headquarters, and through it all I've managed to keep that cheese sandwich down. We're getting low on fuel, and I still have at least two hours of reporting to do when we get on the ground. It's truly been one long day!