

Memo for the Record;

1 October 1981

The attached are extracts from a typescript manuscript by Charles H. Hubbs, a former member of the Ranch Hand organization in 1966-67 in Vietnam. These are Major Hubbs' remembrances, recorded shortly after his return from Vietnam....apparently 1967 or early 1968. They are not footnoted or referenced. Hubbs, now LTC (Retired), has authorized the use of this information for scholarly purposes.

The typescript was apparently prepared for possible publishing in the popular press, and is entitled "Cowboy Zero One."

During the first hectic days after my arrival, I was in and out of airplanes so fast I wasn't catching the names of the crewmembers I flew with, particularly the Flight Engineers. These hardy enlisted souls (God love 'em) rode in the back of the airplane. The VC bullets passed through the aluminum skin of the airplane back there as if it were paper. To keep our courageous Sergeants alive there was a heavy steel box back there that they could duck into when the bullets started ventilating the airplane.

I was flying on my second or third mission and, as usual, Ralph the Gorilla was my instructor. I was in the right, or co-pilots, seat. I hadn't heard the sound of for-real ground fire up to this time, so when Ralph growled, "Get your head down, Junior," I got my head down. In fact I got it clear underneath the instrument panel. Now as one Major to another, I really didn't appreciate Ralph calling me "Junior." However, no matter what he called me if he felt it was prudent for me to get my head down, I was all for it.

This immediately posed a problem. It is difficult enough for the two pilots working together as a team to fly the 123 at 100 feet in close formation and it requires both pilots pay strict attention to all the details, but when one of the pilots puts his head under the instrument panel it significantly compounds the other pilots problems.

Ralph noticed this problem straightaway. His even-tempered reaction went something like this: "What the hell are you doing with your head under the instrument panel, you dumb S.O.B.? I want Junior, our Flight Engineer, to get his head down, not you stupid!" Ralph had a way of expressing himself.

This encounter resolved two problems. One, I would not try to fly the plane with my head under the instrument panel and two, my identity was established. I had no further identity problem after that. It was simple. Junior was in his steel box and I was dumb-dumb, stupid or any other descriptive term except Junior. I was a fast learner.

We wore two flak vests for protection from groundfire while flying. Actually, it would be more correct to say we wore one flak vest and sat on the other. The one we wore was for us. The one we sat on was for our favorite female back home. Most of our hits were bullets coming through the bottom of the aircraft. A great number of our female friends back in the States were deeply concerned about vital portions of our pink bodies

being unnecessarily damaged.

We had five airplanes and eleven pilots when I arrived. Believe me, one extra pilot is considerably short of the recommended pilot-to-aircraft ratio recommended back in the States and explains why I went to work so quickly. By the seventh mission, I had progressed from flying as the co-pilot in the last airplane to the pilot of the number two airplane. Ralph felt every pilot should be able to be the lead pilot in the first plane. Unfortunately, he expected a new guy to pick up his year of experience in one lesson.

We were in the number two aircraft and Ralph was in the right or co-pilot's seat. He was demonstrating his instant combat indoctrination course and explaining in his colorful way the dozen or so things I was doing wrong while puffing ferociously on his cigar. He always had a cigar going but none of us had the courage to tell him it was hazardous to everyone's health to be smoking in an airplane while VC folks were shooting holes in our gas tanks.

There was a lot of ground fire on this target and one uncommonly lucky VC gunner managed to put a .30 caliber rifle bullet right into our cockpit. It smelled the whole plane up with burning cordite. But the smell was nothing compared to the sound that bullet made when it hit Ralph. There was no doubt in my mind that the bullet had taken Ralph's head clean off. Of course I didn't look to see. When the round hit us I had been flying in very tight formation on the leader's wing. I was just hanging in there while the leader was very busy telling the world about some moderate ground fire we were taking. He was also damn near pulling our wings off with a tight turn to go back over the target again!

I was recommended for a medal for hanging onto the leader's wing and making a couple more passes, but to be honest, I didn't dare pull off from the leader's wing since I hadn't the faintest clue as to where in Vietnam we were.

I knew the throttles were being moved by someone other than me, but I just didn't think it wise to look over and see if Ralph still had a head. I already had a classic case of the scared-to-deaths and losing my breakfast wouldn't help. I did ask over the intercom if he was alive. This got me a week's ration of lusty, direct replies from an angry, bleeding gorilla.

The Flight Leader finally decided we had been shot at enough (I later learned the hour and a half we had been over the target was really four minutes) and he pulled off the target and climbed to 3500 feet. I finally got my courage up and looked over at Ralph. There he sat, cigar going a mile a minute and using an honest to God Texas-size Bowie knife to pick shrapnel out of a messy looking arm. That really got my attention. He flew one more mission with me that day before he went over to the medics to get his arm fixed. That's Mr. Tough in my book.

With our crew ratio of pilots to aircraft at such a low point, only one pilot could be off at a time whether it be sick or getting his sanity back away from Saigon for a few days. One day when we had a pilot off somewhere getting his head straight after two missions a day for 25 straight days, my co-pilot came up with a terrible case of diarrhea and no one to take his place.

Sick as he was he was strapped in and ready to go at take-off time. The Ranch Hands seldom aborted or cancelled a flight once they got the engines started. This is an outstanding tribute to the fine condition our maintenance folks kept our planes in, believe me. However, today the gods would smile favorably on my co-pilot who already had a pained look on his face and his legs tightly crossed.

As I reversed the propellers on a routine check, they stuck in the reverse position. This meant the airplane could only back up, I couldn't get forward thrust on the propellers. Admittedly the Ranch Hands and their planes were pretty tough, but even Ranch Hands can't fly backwards so I cancelled our flight. Overjoyed with the engine problem my co-pilot promptly retired to the john for the rest of the day.

One of the more interesting aspects of being a Ranch Hand flyer was the manner in which one equipped himself. For years I had dutifully stood in long equipment lines with batches of issue slips in hand while grumpy Air Force supply folks handed out my equipment. It was invariably too big or too small or the wrong quantity. The resourceful Air Commandos circumnavigated this problem.

The Air Force had a regulation that made it mandatory that crewmembers wear flight suits or fatigues while flying. They also issued us long sleeved, heavy duty, hot regulation fatigues. The temperature on the flight lines in Vietnam often exceeded 120° and everyone hated the Air Force regulation fatigues. The Army, on the other hand, had fought jungle wars before and they had a

nifty set of lightweight fatigues made just for this business and climate. Like a lot of other good Army equipment though, they screwed the fatigues up by putting slanted, baggy pockets on them.

As soon as a Cowboy got settled he would head straightforth to downtown Saigon's World Wide Tailor Shop who had a mysteriously inexhaustible supply of Army lightweight fatigues. After a swift, professional measuring session with the newly acquired fatigues on, the Cowboy would be asked to "Come by next morning, please." Overnight the Army fatigues would be converted into a short sleeved, form fitting snappy outfit. Of course they would have extra pockets on each sleeve for cigarettes, a couple of pencil inserts, a myriad of unit patches, an American flag, name tag and if room was left, "U.S. Air Force" over the left breast pocket. There was considerable latitude in attaching the patches of your choice on this uniform and since you drew up your own patch on the spot, some rather racy patches blossomed forth on the new fatigues. It was quite fashionable in the early days to immortalize some Stateside anti-war personality with some obscene graffiti on a patch. I specifically remember a great variety of "Jane Fonda" patches with some interesting suggestions of a sexual nature.

Next, the Cowboy would have a custom ammunition and pistol belt made. Since I had not had the foresight to think I would be allowed to arm myself for combat as I saw fit, I only had the government issue .38 caliber pistol available to me at the time. This changed later, but for the time being I settled for a .38 pistol holster with 50 bullet loops that really looked snazzy. In fact, I was shiny bullets from bellybutton all the way around to bellybutton. Roy Rogers would have been green with envy.

To top off this sartorial scenario, a genuine "Made in Saigon" Australian go-to-hell bush hat with a purple hat band attached and your rank embroidered on the front was necessary. This assured you right off that you would never have an identity problem in any gin mill in Southeast Asia (or downtown Burbank or Timbuktu).

Ranch Hands also had to own a motorcycle of some sort. The few sane Cowboys owned 50cc Hondas - sort of low powered bicycles. The hardier types would acquire Honda 90's. Then there were the true suicidal types. They rode Honda 750's. You could drive one of those hummers straight up the side of the Empire State Building accelerating all the way. Rumor had it Ralph could flatten jeeps and small trucks with his 750.

What most of the jet cover folks didn't hear was the really nerve-rattling sound of ground fire. I heard the gun go off that fired every bullet that ever hit my aircraft. We flew with our windows open to reduce the glass fragments which really spattered around the cockpit when a window was hit. Our fighter guys usually came in for their runs from dead behind us and as I mentioned, they were smoking along at about 500 mph. We never knew when they'd come past and, of course, they usually started pumping out 20 mm cannon fire just as they reached us.

Boy, talk about a heart stopper. Try being a bit tense to begin with and knowing full well there's a VC below that has shooting you full of holes as his whole day's effort. Without warning, imagine four 20 MM cannons going off about 25 feet from your ear as your friendly fighter goes by and you'll understand what I mean by a heart stopper.

One mission we had a super eager fighter type who started dropping his little goodies a bit too soon and managed to effectively bomb my three ship formation. I was much too young for the Polesti oil field raid, but the stories of the anti-aircraft fire lead me to believe you could walk on it, it was so heavy. Well, if you don't believe an F-100 dropping his whole ordnance load right into your flight of three isn't a thrill, then I'd recommend Polesti. Out of three ships number two lost a windscreen and one engine, number three lost his windscreen and one engine. I was the lead aircraft commander and when the explosions ceased and the shrapnel quit rattling around inside the plane, I lost my interest in continuing that particular mission. We had over 100 holes in our planes. That kind of destruction would cause Saigon to ask a bunch of dumb questions. We wrote off the engines and windscreens to enemy ground fire. The fighter folks came up with a whole group of sheet metal specialists and by 0500

the next morning, it was business as usual for the Ranch Hands.

Except for the minor exception just noted, our fighters were our salvation. However, Saigon decided one time that we could get along very well without our top cover.

One of our more suave higher rankers made an emotional appeal to THEM and as a result it was decided a couple of full colonels from Saigon would go along on a Ranch mission to evaluate if we really needed top cover.

We had at that time a couple of areas where we could fly and without exception we could attract more ground fire in 30 seconds than a lot of guys ever saw in a year.

Naturally, we chose one of the hottest targets to get our "evaluator" colonels' attention. I was the pilot of the third ship that day and would carry one of the colonels so he could observe the operation from the rear.

He was a nice fellow, crinkled face, grey haired, etc. Just before cranking up the engines, Ralph whispers in my ear "be very gentle on that colonel you are carrying, he has a heart condition."

Great Scott!! Just what I needed. We press off and sure enough we had just started our run when all hell broke loose! Because we have no fighters as cover, the VC are using tracers and we all know that between each tracer you see, there are five non-tracers. The whole world in front of me is a bunch of tracers, all of which appear to be going right through Ralph, the leader's airplane.

All I'm doing is trying to keep my poor heart pumping and wondering in the back of my mind how do I explain a colonel from headquarters having a coronary in my cockpit.

great deal of activity about the place and that there seemed to be a great number of ranking Army officers in clean uniforms poking about, but we had come for our jeep. A young Army special forces type damn near took his head off on one of our propellers trying to get to the plane before anyone else could. He scrambled up to the cockpit and handed me a very cryptic note. All it said was "There is an Army Inspector General Team investigating us, get the hell out of here, we buried your jeep two hours ago."

All our trades weren't losers. We did not carry parachutes since a bailout at 100 feet isn't even a remote possibility, but we did carry more personal guns, ammunition, bayonettes, knives, etc, than any Air Force organization in the history of aviation. When I first arrived at Saigon the Ranch had a CONEX container (a metal watertight container the size of a small home) that contained at least 300 weapons (for the 12 of us). I personally carried the following: one M-16 automatic rifle with 300 rounds of ammo, a snub-nosed civilian .38 caliber revolver with 150 rounds of ammo, an Air Force issue .38 caliber revolver with 50 rounds of ammo, and a .25 caliber hide out automatic with 300 rounds of ammo. In our CONEX we had Swedish-K and American Thompson sub-machine guns, shotguns, carbines, M-1 rifles, magnums, Browning 9mm automatics, etc, etc. You name a weapon and one of our guys was carrying it. One flight mechanic had a 40mm grenade launcher in his bullet proof box in the back of the aircraft. Only one of our downed crews had to fight it out with the VC on the ground and they held them off long enough to be rescued - but that's Junior's story.

I've mentioned several times that we flew two missions a day every day for about three weeks then you got a little combat kooky and it was time to go away for awhile.

Beak and Clyde flew together a lot and both were considered "magnet asses" because of the amount of enemy ground fire they attracted into the cockpit of their airplane. When everyone else was taking hits in the tail of their airplanes, good old Beak and Clyde would invariably a hit right through the windshield. Normally, that wasn't the end of the world, but it sure ruined your whole day. A .30 caliber bullet smashing through the windshield caused several million shards of glass to imbed themselves in all unprotected parts of our bodies.

In violation of the regulations, we flew in T-shirts which left our arms bare, but we did have a flak vest and a flight helmet with a clear visor to protect our eyes. When a windshield was shot out, your hands, arms and the lower portion of your face took a real beating from the glass splinters. In a few hours the areas where the glass hit your body would balloon tremendously. Shortly you had Ralph the Gorilla size arms and your face looked like you had a watermelon in each cheek.

The first time Beak and Clyde got a face full of windshield, the sly and cunning devils asked me for five days off so they could go to Tachi and heal up. Five days later Clyde was back and six or seven days after leaving, Beak got back. Beak had a real problem keeping track of time. Anyway, a few days later Beak and Clyde pulled up off a relatively easy target and the longest, luckiest VC shot of the war hit them right in the windshield at 3,500 feet above the ground - impossible!

After we landed, started up a party, sent Beak and Clyde off to the medics and restarted the party, I fully expected to get the "We need to go to Tachi to heal up" story. Wrong. All of a sudden they were both supermen. They wanted to stay at Danang and keep on flying. They were adamant about staying on the flying schedule. OK. So they flew for five days all battered and ugly but healing fast. On the sixth day, at breakfast, Beak spit out his daily quota of glass bits that worked their way out through his cheek and stated, "OK leader, now I want my five days off to heal up."

He told me later in the war that the reason he waited to heal up before going to Tachi was because the most miserable time he ever spent at Tachi was the time he went up there all shot up. He said he spent the whole time explaining his wounds and missed about 50% of valuable drinking time.

I think Beak's greatest contribution to the Ranch was made on another occasion when he got shot in the head. Now that may sound a bit unkind but as an objective flight commander, I found that Beak in his own way, really benefited the Ranch and me threefold with that maneuver.

First, for some reason or another (I believe it was to repair a case of bullet holes in an engine), we had been short one plane that day and Beak had missed out on flying his customary two missions. With his typical cunning, he cornered me in the bar and poured a gallon or two of Seagrams VO into me. He pointed out that I was now 30 missions ahead of him and that it was undemocratic of me to get that far ahead of him. I should point out here that if we were short an airplane for a days missions, you could bet the old flight leader wasn't sitting it out for the day. The younger guys could work out who didn't fly, but my democratic philosophy was after I got an airplane, then the rest of the flight came next.

Beak ultimately convinced me to give up my seat on a mission for the first time. He really wanted that mission.

The next morning, on the first pass over the target, a VC who must have placated all the devils he worshipped, managed to put a .30 caliber slug through Beak's windshield, through Beak's helmet visor, through his helmet and into Beak's head. The bullet lodged just under the skin having fortunately nearly spent itself before stopping in Beak's head.

Of course, Beak was flying with Clyde. Beak only got shot when he was flying with Clyde. Animal was the navigator on this mission. Clyde and Animal got the usual arms and face full of glass. Clyde calmly asked Beak, "to kindly pull the goddam airplane up" since they were now clipping the tree tops. Beak told Clyde just as calmly that he, Beak, "had been shot." Clyde did not perceive this as the greatest revelation of his life. With the plane taking more decisive bites out of the tree tops, Clyde replied that, "he, Animal and the airplane had all been shot, but that since nearly everytime he flew with Beak, this happened, would Beak please pull the goddam airplane up!"

Beak, being the forthright Texan he was, took umbrage at this. He reached up under his bloody helmet and pulled the rifle slug out from under his skin. Peevishly, Beak shoved the bullet under Clyde's nose and said, "see, I told you I was shot" and promptly collapsed over the control column which pushed the plane even further into the tree tops.

Animal, the navigator, pulled Beak off the control column and Clyde pulled the airplane up from the trees.

That was the first nice thing that Beak did for me and "C" flight that day. He got shot in the head instead of me - that's really protecting your leader - a very fine trait in young Officers.

While Beak was laid out on the floor, the wounded navigator climbed into the pilot's seat and Clyde was flying the plane from the copilot's seat. Clyde no longer believed Beak was just clowning around to get another five day pass to Tachi. Clyde was pretty busy flying the airplane and talking quite vociferously for him on several radio channels trying to get some help.

He really picked the right guys to help Beak. A Marine medical evacuation helicopter offered to meet the battered 123 on the end of the jet runway and airlift Beak to some superb Marine medics (they claimed) that were near Danang. Clyde and Animal managed to jointly squash the plane down on the end of the runway and Beak was winged away to the Marine medical station.

After a couple of false starts, Clyde and Animal slowly weaved the battered 123 all the way down the runway to the Cowboy parking area. By this time, the wing commander had been called on his walkie-talkie and told, "those damn Kanch Hands had landed on his beautiful two mile long runway, stopped in the middle of it, let off a passenger and then lazily down the whole two miles". At least six flights of returning jet fighters had to make low approaches and go around for another landing. That is a good way to anger pilots returning from missions. It also raises the ire of the wing commander who worries about details of that nature.

The wing commander and I arrived simultaneously at the Cowboy parking ramp. He had just emerged from his shiny blue staff car as I fell off my Honda which flipped out from under me when I hit the oil pouring onto the ramp from the bullet holes in the right engine. While I untangled myself from the Honda the wing commander was mumbling some

off color remarks about making optimum use of runway taxi time and some downright nasty comments on Majors who rode Hondas on the flight line and fell down.

Before I could really get in gear (stand up) the wing commander climbed up to the cockpit. Before he got to the top of the steps he met Animal emerging all bloody from the pilot's seat. "Are you the pilot", he asked. "Nope. I'm the navigator" was Animal's reply as he shoved past the Colonel. This caused a funny little tic to start on the Colonel's cheek. He then tried Clyde in the copilot's seat. "Are you the Pilot," a little more hopefully this time. Clyde gave him a long, cool New England look, wiped some blood off his face and said, "Nope." The Colonel really had a glazed look by this time. Just then, Beak's helmet rolled out of the cockpit. There was a bullet hole right through the visor, blood all over it, the earpiece was shot out and Clyde, as impeccably cool as a New England preacher, pointed to the helmet and said, "There's the pilot."

Score two for Beak. That bird Colonel wing commander suddenly had acquired an entirely new insight in Ranch Hand operations. The next morning the Cowboys were issued a brand new jeep, we received unlimited support for the rest of the tour and I made a friend for the rest of my career in the wing commander. Top cover that was formerly hard to come by was now available anytime, anywhere in overwhelming numbers. How many fighters would I like today, when, where and how much fire power would I like loaded on them? Good grief! I could even schedule their bomb and ammo loads. Support-wise it was the ultimate turn around for the Cowboys.

Beak still had one more score to ring up for the Cowboys this day. He had been airlifted to one of those places where they take care of front line Marine injuries. We rushed to a telephone to see if our wounded warrior was going to live or go to wherever crafty Texans go when they pack it in. The Marine reply to our phone call was a terse, "send some wheels over here for him - he's all yours." Great. Beak was apparently up and about and probably fretting that he was late for his party.

Ike raced off to pick up Beak while our flight surgeon converted the bar into a mini emergency ward while he doctored up Clyde and Animal between drinks. When Beak arrived we were introduced to front line Marine medical support. He triumphantly entered the O-Club with a bandage wrapped haphazardly around his head - the spitting image of the Spirit of '76. He was still bleeding profusely from the wound. We unanimously agreed

the Marine front line treatment book probably reads, "To treat a head wound, pour on sulfa, wrap the head with a sloppy bandage and declare the patient "ready for duty!"

This obviously called for a celebration unparalleled in "C" flight lore. We had gotten a late start - it was 1030 in the morning. The first thing I did was call off flying for the next day in order that we could have a spectacular bash. Somehow, I forgot to tell Saigon, our fighter cover, our Forward Air Controller and the VC that I had cancelled flying and the next day the fighters and FAC's all flew around in big circles sans Cowboys. That got me another call from THEM.

Each morning we were given an intelligence briefing on the enemy in our target area. This also included an estimate of the ground fire we could expect. The morning of Beak's infamous shot in the head we had been briefed that it would be, "a milk run, really easy" since there were no VC reported in the area and no reports of ground fire."

About 10 o'clock that night the party was really getting up a head of steam and several cowboys were dancing a polka on the champagne soaked dance floor. If you thought it strange that two hairy chested, six foot plus, 225 pound Cowboys would dance together, I suggest you reserve your comments. At this time our vaunted intelligence briefing Officer sauntered into the bar. Now this is how those inflated stories about the Cowboys got started.

Every fighter jockey, FAC, Cowboy and anyone I forgot that was in the bar knows that Beak broke the intelligence Officer's arm in two places as a result of the champagne making the floor slippery. The whole combat world knew Beak was a peachy polka dancer and it had to be an accident that while dancing with the intelligence briefer, Beak wouldn't have deliberately thrown him 20 yards into a cement wall.

Score three for Beak. It was amazing how our intelligence briefings suddenly disclosed whole hordes of anti-aircraft guns and lots of bad folks in our target areas who would shoot at you. We had known this all along but we couldn't convince the briefers. As of that night that problem was resolved forever.

Just so you don't think that was the end of the evening for Beak, he racked up one more conversation item before turning in. He was already a mess. The "revolutionary war" Marine medical treatment had left the left side of his head a mess. His arms and the bottom half of his face were already swelling noticeably. In fact, the only part of him that showed that was remotely normal was the upper right side of his face. But not for long.

Beak leaped on a Honda to head for the tent and a well-earned rest. Being Beak, he missed the turn at the corner, hit the Air Police guard shack a mighty lick and naturally banged up the upper right side of his head. Five days later he asked for a little leave up at Tachi and damned if I didn't let him go.

THEY told us we had a headline making mission coming up but it was super secret. It was so secret we considered shooting the courier and burning the message before we read it. It was getting harder for THEM to rattle us up anymore, so we read the message. When we found out what our secret target was, we unanimously agreed to get ourselves mentally prepared. In other words we went to the Club and had a secret party.

It really was a big deal since THEY ordered the rest of the Ranch Hands in Saigon to put together six extra planes and about sixty people to support us on the mission which was to be run out of Danang.

Our extra Cowboy support folks were told they would be leaving Saigon at once. These folks sat near their planes at Saigon for five hours in the 100 plus ramp temperatures before they were told the mission was called off. Before they could unpack THEY told them to launch their people and planes immediately for Danang. The extra Cowboys were to arrive at Danang, perform a quick refueling and off to the target we all would go.

After the Saigon group arrived, we hurriedly refueled their aircraft and all of us spent the next seven hours sitting on the hot ramp until the mission was finally called off due to bad weather. That was a very long day for a lot of Cowboys.

The weather stayed rotten for the next eleven days because of a monster typhoon in the China Sea. By now our "secret" mission had attracted between forty and fifty news media people from four countries. They knew more about our mission than I did - so much for the secret portion. The world of the Ranch Hands for that eleven day period as we waited out the typhoon consisted of hordes of bored reporters, TV cameramen and radio commentators crawling all over us.

They were so hard up for news copy to send to the States that if a Cowboy went to the john there was bound to be a guy with a microphone right at his side. They didn't film us in the john, but they did take enough film of us eighteen hours a day to have recorded World War Two in its entirety.

We had Canadian and French television people, ABC, NBC, CBS, some others I've forgotten and the BBC. Oh yes, even the Christian Science Monitor folks were there. Some of these folks were acting like they were actually going to fly on the mission with us. I attributed this

absurd pipedream to the ever increasing amount of booze that was being consumed during the foul weather period that cancelled flying day after day. I was stunned when a reporter I had a lot of faith in told me straight out that THEY had informed the press that the Cowboys were in fact going to take civilian newsmen on the mission.

The best Air Force Information Officer in the world was Lieutenant Colonel John Whiteside. John was down in Saigon fighting the war and the brass in his special world of news media madness. I had been stationed with John before and he had gotten me more national coverage than some movie stars get. When John set out to get some publicity for someone he could really turn the tap on. At one point in my career he had me featured nationally in so many papers, TV and radio segments and magazines that I actually began receiving fan (and kooky) letters.

I really believed in John. He and I had shared a thousand or so drinks in variety of gin mills. He was no shrinking violet, but a rather fiesty bar partner, never letting size influence his decision to attack a disagreeable problem (or gin mill patron).

John understood my problem and commiserated as best he could, however, he couldn't help. The decision had been made so far up the line that only God was left to appeal to. I didn't know God personally, but I sure knew some of THEM that were trying to play the part in Saigon so I reluctantly called THEM.

I dramatically emphasized the point that I did not want, nor did I need any civilians on our planes on an obviously hot target. THEY replied that, "yes, the Cowboys would fly civilians", but they showed some smarts by acquiescing to my plea to limit the number to one reporter and one cameraman.

THEY concluded the phone call with one of the bigger THEMS telling me "Don't get any of the civilians hurt on this mission - it would be bad for publicity." My reply, one of the few I ever made to a Saigon pronouncement was, "Great Scott, don't tell me, tell the VC, they're the ones who are shooting at the airplanes!"

"C" Flight was selected to make the first run on the target and the reporter would be John Hart of CBS television. I assume John drew the short straw or whatever reporters do to get a red-hot mission. He was as pleased as a speckled pup that he was going - I figured the monsoon season had addled his brain.

We were pleasantly surprised to find that John Hart really knew his business and it was a pleasure working with a professional like him. We could get very little done during the monsoon which in one day alone poured 11 inches of rain upon us. (When I lived in Albuquerque their whole year's ration of rain was about nine inches.) John set out to get his back up material early. Then all he would need would be the actual run and he could go on to reporting the rest of the war.

For five days he had us go through the whole mission including wake up, breakfast, briefing, aircraft preflight, start, taxi, takeoff and landing. All of which was dutifully performed by "C" Flight.

There were two serious drawbacks to all this uninvited international publicity. First and paramount to us the VC would not only know we were coming, but also where and when. We needed all the surprise we could get. Once, earlier in the war, someone had thought that sending a psychological warfare aircraft in ahead of us to tell the VC over their loudspeakers not to shoot us would be a keen plan. All that got us was a wide awake bunch of VC with lots of extra clips for their machine guns. That really prepared them to do us great harm. We scrubbed that idea in short order.

The other drawback to the publicity was that I suddenly noticed I no longer had a slightly out of control "C" flight any more, but I was leading John Wayne, Sidney Portier, Kirk Douglas, Burt Lancaster, etc. With a microphone and a camera on them for 11 days my flight had become the biggest has actors in the world. The go-to-hell hats were at rakish angles, swaggers replaced normal walking and speech patterns were suddenly instant Hollywood. They were even telling the camera guys how to film them at the bar.

The TV crews filmed a Ranch Hand Dining-In, but that portion of the film was providently lost on the cutting room floor. That party was so full of character actors that Saigon would have sent all of the Ranch back to the States in a straight jacket if they had seen it.

The monsoon finally went somewhere else to rain all over people and the weather cleared beautifully for us. We got out three ship formation off the ground with John Hart and one cameraman. John was in my aircraft and the TV cameraman in another - sort of like having the president and vice president fly in different aircraft so that if one crashes you still can salvage something from the other aircraft if it makes it.

We strongly suspected that with all the fanfare of the previous 11 days the VC would have the world's largest concentration of anti-aircraft fire and their top gunners waiting for us. I was pleasantly surprised twice on that first mission.

We were able to get about three minutes into the four minutes we were going to be over the target before the ground fire began. I must admit it was a relief for once to hear ground fire. I just knew with the world watching our super Ranch Hand image would be completely destroyed if we had a no hit mission.

Meanwhile, John was doing his commentary into his tape recorder as we flew over the target. He was in the back standing up in the steel box the flight engineers worked out of. The box only came up to your waist if you stood up. The ground fire started and I immediately heard two quick hits somewhere in the aircraft behind me and I strongly suspected they were close to the center of the aircraft where John was doing his on-scene combat report.

I was concerned for John's well-being because if John got hurt, you can be sure Saigon would see that I was hurt too. I called the flight engineer on intercom to see how John was reacting to bullets and other war related items like getting airsick. My flight engineer had an admiring tone to his voice when he told me we had taken two .30 caliber slugs through the fuselage both of which hit about two inches from John's head and then ricocheted on off to wherever ricochets go, but John kept right on talking into his microphone and slowly crouched down - he hardly batted an eye.

72-100

About eight months later GGI very graciously provided me a copy of what was finally shown on world-wide TV and I can vouch John's voice never waivers when those slugs nearly took his head off. "Beautiful! That's our kind of war reporter. Some of them didn't like to leave Saigon and get out where the action was. One thing, though, John did overdo the buildup on me in his reporting and it kind of sounded like I was the commander of the whole cotton-picking war. That explains the chilly atmosphere in the Saigon phone calls I got for the rest of my tour. Thanks John.

We had a real zinger of a mortar attack one night. I had never been under fire in a mortar attack before. The Florida natives had been very friendly and never fired mortars at our Stateside Air Base, so I was understandably concerned when we heard of mortar attacks on bases near us.

Being concerned about mortar attacks is like being concerned about crashing in an airplane. Everyone knows it will happen to somebody else but never, never to you. We had a large concentration of friendly artillery that had been moved in close to our base and when they began firing out at the VC the first night it was really tough on us flyer types. We just weren't used to big guns constantly firing very near to us. It only took a few nights though and we were sleeping soundly once again in spite of the cannon fire.

When the first enemy 122 millimeter mortar round hit, we were all sound asleep and even though our own artillery was booming away, I knew what that inbound round was. I hit face down in the dirt of the mortar bunker before the debris thrown up in the air by that first explosion came down on the shelter roof. What really amazed me considering I was never trained in ground war tactics, was that I had leaped out of bed from a sound sleep, in a pitch black room and I had an M-16 machine gun, a pair of boots and a flashlight when I dove into the bunker.. On a normal morning I had trouble finding the alarm clock. I consider my grabbing up of the bare essentials as I did while moving at an estimated 300 MPH in my race to the bunker to be one of the most significant feats of my adult life.

I would suspect the Russians do so well in the Olympics by having their runners practice with mortar shells landing behind them. It certainly does get one moving smartly out of the starting block.

Once we got in the Bunker there was a lot of huffing and puffing at first, then when that initial spasm abated everyone started flashing their lights around to dispel that creepy feeling that all those other people in the bunker were VC infiltrators. Once everyone was identified as friendly there was about two minutes of high squeaky voices and much nervous laughing and joking about mortar attacks. When that show of bravado was over we all hunkered down with our backs to the sandbag walls and doused all the lights.

The bunker had never been used since we had arrived at that base and it had that old musky mine smell to it. It was dead quiet in the bunker with each of us probably getting a deeper appreciation for what the British folks went through during WWII air raids. Our hearts were just getting down to a reasonable rhythm when a most frightening thing occurred.

It was a very low voice, no one ever admitted to whose it was, but the voice from back in the bowels of the dark bunker asked, "I wonder if there are any snakes in here?" Twenty five or so terrified Cowboys exited the bunker in a split second.

I'm not real sure a snake can do you a lot of harm, but I'm positive a 122mm rocket can. Yet here we were. Twenty five guys had just vacated a perfectly good bunker designed to withstand 122mm mortars and headed out into the open. Cooler heads prevailed and a guy I thought should be recommended for the Silver Star went back into the bunker to make a snake search. About that time another mortar round hit near us and we re-entered the bunker en masse. We were believers that 122mm rockets and mortars were more deadly than snakes. I noticed though that with all the assurances our newly appointed Snake Control Officer gave us that the bunker was free of creepy crawly things, there was sure a lot of folks swatting fiercely at imagined things crawling on our near naked bodies.

The mortar attack was over in about 15 minutes. It got eerily quiet outside.

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Everyone wanted to get out of the bunker. There were some fierce fires burning on the base so we all climbed up on top of the bunker for a better view.

Some small arms fire began at the other end of the base and suddenly one of the base security sergeants raced up to the bunker. He was probably a very nice person most of his life, he may have even have had a mother, and he probably ^{HAD BEFORE} never really cussed an officer out in his whole military career. I suspect he just got all caught up in this war thing because he cussed and threatened the hell out of 25 officers on the top of that bunker. He did it in a superlative manner I might add.

He left no question in our minds that he absolutely, positively and definitely meant for us to "get off that Goddam bunker roof, get inside that Goddam bunker and sit down and shut up." He even made some most unflattering comments about our mental processes specifically "what kind of dumb bastard would get up on a bunker roof when the VC were overrunning the place?" We held a conference in the bunker and decided that just as soon as the all clear sounded we'd just walk right out of that bunker in spite of that sargeant.

Tet is the oriental new year and it was a strange game for us. There was a truce and everyone quit fighting. As long as it was not a combat mission we could fly anywhere and no one would shoot at us. I made several flights during Tet and it seemed like the war never existed.

There still was a great deal of hazard involved in Tet despite the fact the VC had quit shooting at us. It seems the one thing the friendly South Vietnamese had in quantity was ammunition. They also had the insatiable compulsion to shoot their guns off into the air in huge volleys to celebrate the Tet New Year. The only bad part about this seemingly harmless play is old Newton's law. If you figure on a good night, the Vietnamese shot 200,000 bullets up in the air you can nearly bet even odds that 200,000 bullets had to come down. The score at our base alone for Tet was one American wounded, four American airplanes with bullet holes. The only time we ever wore steel helmets and flak vests on the base was during the Tet truce to protect us from falling friendly bullets.

Our flight mechanics really had a tough job. They stayed hunkered down in a steel box until the ground fire started, then their job was to stand up and throw smoke grenades out the open doors to mark where the VC gun positions were. It does seem rather funny that we put them in bullet proof boxes to protect them, then have them leap up and throw smoke grenades when the shooting started.

Another Ranch Hand told me that on a pass one day, he got a real wild yell from his flight engineer. The engineer said he had just been shot in the heart by a .50 caliber bullet. The aircraft commander made a maximum power climb off the target and kept talking over the interphone to his engineer, offering him encouragement and to hang on. The flight engineer answered all ^{his} calls. When the aircraft was high enough to be out of the majority of small arms range, the co-pilot ran back to see what he could do for what he assumed was a mortally wounded flight engineer.

The concerned pilot kept calling over the interphone asking the copilot how the flight mechanic was doing. He couldn't hear the copilots' replies because the flight mechanic kept jabbering away.

At this point the aircraft commander made a slick deduction - Chief, he says, if you've been shot through the heart by a .50 caliber how come you're still talking to me? After a few seconds ^{of} silence the Chief says, you know you're right. Pretty soon he called back and said, "That damn .50 caliber shot my left nipple clean off and I thought it went right through me. I'll put a bandage on it and let's get back on the target!"

Not all hits were funny, and old Clyde had an experience that ended up sending him home from the war for too many purple hearts. He already had taken several windscreens in his face unintentionally while flying with Beak and he had enough wounds and scars to last a life time.

He and another cowboy had just pulled off a relatively quiet target and were climbing out for the trip back home when an armor piercing .50 caliber came up through the cockpit floor. We had a piece of boiler plate on the floor, but that armor piercing hummer went through it like it wasn't there. It did two things, it hurled a piece of boiler plate the size of a silver dollar right into the co-pilots flak vest directly over his heart. The core of the bullet continued on into Clyde's ankle and followed his leg bone right up to his knee. The first indication I had of trouble was Clyde calling over the radio that he was hit and both he and the co-pilot were wounded. I asked for their condition and Clyde said he was hurting pretty bad, and the co-pilot was slumped forward with a piece of shrapnel sticking out his chest.

Pretty soon Clyde's voice started getting weak and that meant we'd soon have two unconscious pilots and the flight engineer wasn't quite ready to try the "learn to fly while doing it" course.

The next voice we heard was that of the co-pilot. He was conscious and said he was flying the plane. Clyde was unconscious. By now we were near the field and I had every kind of emergency support in the lower half of Vietnam standing by. The plane with its'

wounded crew made a reasonable approach to the field and the last voice we heard calling on the radio as it landed was Clyde's. We landed right behind them and there were enough emergency vehicles around to outfit a medium sized nation. I rushed over and the medics were putting the co-pilot on a stretcher and heading for an ambulance. Clyde was standing there completely ignored.

I knew Clyde had been hit also and that he was in shock. I grabbed a flight surgeon told him Clyde was wounded also. The Doc says, "Clyde's hit too?" Hell, the Copilot only had a piece of shrapnel stuck in his flak vest, never went into his skin. I've been working on the wrong guy!" Tough Clyde walked to the ambulance, but that was his last walk for many weeks. When he got well enough to walk on crutches, we sent him home. He had been hit hard too many times. The dumb smack didn't want to go.

We finally convinced him to go by telling him he would only be allowed to fly on very quiet targets if he stayed. That's the worst thing you could do to a cowboy so he went back home as the Doc had recommended. When he starts telling his war stories to his kids years from now they'll think he's as full of crap as a turkey. Maybe this recounting will give him some credibility.

When South Vietnamese civilians would be airlifted by an Air Force cargo plane they would rub what they called "Buddha Juice" all over themselves which they claimed protected them from ground fire, crashing and other serious catastrophies while flying.

We were getting hit so often one period that we seriously considered rubbing Buddha Juice all over ourselves. We actually got some, but after one whiff of Buddha Juice we smartly discarded that idea. Had we rubbed that stuff on us we'd have been banned in every bar in Southeast Asia. Erase that thought immediately, we had an image to keep up.

During the period that we were taking an abnormal bunch of hits from ground fire there was a television commercial being shown in the States that showed an aircraft windshield being shot at with a machine gun and the bullets were bouncing off the airplane windshield. The gist of the commercial was you should use Aerowax because the windshield on the airplane is made of the stuff that is in aerowax.

You guessed it, we must have received 20 cans of aerowax from concerned friends in the States in the next couple of weeks. We tried it on the windscreens, all over the airplane, on our helmets. I didn't catch anyone drinking it but I'm not sure someone didn't try that also. No luck, we decided maybe we should write the Better Business Bureau since it was business as usual with us, the bullets kept coming in.

Our first enlisted hero was "Junior", a good old Southern Sergeant Flight Engineer who particularly seemed to attract bullets. Junior was on our first plane shot down. With typical cowboy cunning the aircraft crash landed right in the middle of the VC folks who shot it down.

Junior was a slow talker, but he sure made some fast moves that day. He untangled himself from the destruction in the back end of the plane, grabbed his M-16 Automatic rifle and ran around to the front of the crumpled plane. The pilot was O.K., but the co-pilot was trapped in his seat and the engine next to him was on fire. While the pilot worked on extricating the co-pilot, Junior ran back in the plane and grabbed a fire extinguisher.

About the time "Junior" began fighting the engine fire that was endangering the co-pilot, the VC opened up on the downed plane and crew. Junior picked up his M-16 and played ground soldier for a spell shooting back at the VC. Then he picked up the fire extinguisher and played fireman. Next he grabbed the co-pilot's M-16 and traded some more bullets with the VC. He went back to fighting the fire and pulling on the co-pilot. When the VC ground fire got severe again he grabbed the pilot's M-16 and went back to his ground soldier routine.

Junior's three role playing episode could have gone on for a long time since the VC would'nt give up and Junior was really getting the hang of fighting a ground battle by that time.

Fortunately, a long range reconnaissance team of Marines in a flock of helicopters saw this weird one man war going on below them. If you know Marines, they love a good skirmish so they simply set their choppers down all around the crashed plane, much in the fashion of the covered wagon and Indian days and really crunched the VC's fighting spirit in about the time it takes to say 20,000 rounds.

did those things everyday - maybe they did. Junior got the Silver Star, volunteered for a second tour and promptly got shot down again. When his second tour was over he decided he'd go back to the States for a breather. We were all scared to death he'd volunteer for a third tour and we'd get another plane shot down.

When Junior, our magnet-assed flight engineer got shot down the second time his aircraft went right into the jungle and totally disappeared. No fire, no smoke, not even a hole in the thick jungle. It was as if they had been swallowed up without a trace. Very spooky. We figured they were clobbered. Not so, for in just in a minute or two, the crew camp up loud and clear on their survival radio and although no one was hurt, could we please send a rescue helicopter as soon as possible as they were mighty concerned about snakes. The way the rest of us circling around above them felt was that if you can crash in a nearly impenetrable jungle, come up with only scratches you are so lucky that snakes would seem to be a non-problem.

We were naturally ecstatic that our crew was O.K. so we raced over to the Rescue folks place of business to await their return by rescue chopper from the crash site. It was a joyous reunion. We packed everybody in a hastily borrowed GI truck and headed for the O-Club for a super "shot down and rescued" party.

I was riding my motorcycle behind the truck. The weather was clear, the road was bone dry, it was only 0930 in the morning and I was cold sober. I'll never know how I managed it, but when I let the clutch out to whizz away from a stop light at the main intersection of the Air Base, the front end of the motorcycle went straight up in the air and I went backwards on my butt. The motorcycle, not content with unceremoniously dumping me on my duff in front of God and everybody then fell right on top of me doing great

harm to my ribs and other things including my pride. The most embarrassing part was when I got the stars out of my eyes while lying on my back, I looked right up into a staff car license plate about six inches from my forehead. The staff car had been right behind me and sure enough with my excellent sense of timing I had smashed into the earth directly in front of a staff car with enough General's stars on it to start a new galaxy. I believe the broad daylight prat fall off my motorcycle in front of the super General triggered the program to get all servicemen in Vietnam off of motorcycles. The General had a pretty good indication from the safety and accident briefings his safety officer gave him daily that the U. S. had more casualties from motorcycle accidents than the war. My fantastic acrobatic trick in full view of the world more than likely was all the convincing he needed to determine that Hondas could be harmful to your health.

There was another cowboy who had a magnet in his ass that attracted VC bullets. He wasn't in my flight, but when I was checking out we flew in the same formation for three days straight and three days in a row he got creamed by groundfire. I wasn't ten feet from him and never took a hit. So for the next three days, after we would have our mission briefing, and as we were walking to the planes, he asked me to change planes and flight positions with him. For the next three days I would follow his shot up airplane to some auxiliary field where he would land his battle-damaged 123 and I would fly him and his crew back to our base in my unmarked, unhit airplane. He finally got sent home after acquiring too many purple hearts when an oversize chunk of shot out windshield couldn't be removed from his eye.

first started three ship formation pattern on a target. The VC would shoot at the leading airplane, but by not leading him enough as you would when shooting flying ducks. The hits usually were in the tail section of #3, the last plane in the formation. Since we had to get back and do each target again after 90 days, the VC got to practice pretty much by the calendar. The more times we went back the better the aim.

Initially, if you hadn't had your share of hits for the week (and cowboys were really wierd about that) you would fly #3 (last ship) on the new targets for a couple of days and you could really catch up your hit count in a hurry. As we continued to hit the same targets those previously inexperienced VC gunners soon became real pros. They not only could riddle the lead aircraft but they were getting the shots up into the engines and the cockpit - that got our attention.

For a short time when we were the bastard outfit and had no permanent bunks of our own, we were billeted with some really hairy chested folks - the Jolly Green rescue guys. Now there's a job that took it all. Fantastic people. One night the jollies all came in laughing and giggling. Not too much of their work was funny so we asked what had them all chuckling.

The told us they had come to a hover over a downed airman when out of the woods raced a VC complete with his Russian AK-47 machine gun. He pointed his tommy gun at the chopper, moved the muzzle about 30 yards in front of the chopper and hosed off his whole clip well out in front of the hovering chopper. The door gunner smartly chopped down this clown with a fast burst from his mini-gun. The pararescue-man on the ground made a fast search of the body, leaped on the hoist and away they went. When they got clear of the groundfire, they

Read the rice paper drawing the ex-VC gunner was carrying. It showed a jolly green helicopter and in clear VC it said to shoot down helicopter, aim gun 3 plane lengths ahead of it. Somebody in Hanoi forgot to add the helicopter must be moving for this strategy to work.

There were 3 valleys that ran out of the Ashau Valley and sort of formed a chicken's foot. We had good old "C" flight set up to do their war thing in one of the valleys early one morning. We had a red hot flight of B-57's for top cover. After rendezvous and a short briefing over the radio the cowboys went down onto their target. [The VC were really laying in the bushes for us that morning. I took a .50 caliber right through the engine nacelle but the engine continued to run just fine. Being a superior combat flight commander I analyzed the situation for one tenth of a second and made a battlefield decision that the valley in question would be immediately removed from our list of targets for that morning. [Even though I showed a high degree of intelligence in getting C flight smartly out of that valley, I wasn't ready to call the war off yet. Our fighters were having their usual good time going after the VC who had shot us up. I asked them to save their ammunition since I had skillfully deduced that if all the VC were in Valley number one, then Valley number two would become our target for today. [We lumbered into Valley number two and discovered that all the VC who missed the turn into Valley number one were in Valley number two. They were also a much superior group of gunners than the Valley one group. Their first burst of ground fire hit two of our three aircraft. One bullet did the wierd things that bullets do and neatly clipped a radio wire antenna right off [at the forward connection on the number two aircraft. This allowed the long wire to trail behind the aircraft since it was still connected to the tail of the airplane. [We were flying in close formation and as I looked back at the planes behind me it looked just as if the second airplane was towing the third aircraft. I'll bet the VC are telling that story to this day about how the Ranch Hands were so tough that even after you shot their airplanes up they would throw a tow line to the shot up airplane and tow him back over the target.

giant trick again and scratched Valley number two from the target of the day list. At this time I instantly computed the odds on all three Valleys being full of VC. We had an excellent intelligence briefing that morning and by my calculations we had already discovered more VC in valleys one and two than there were in all of Vietnam. Therefore, Valley number three had to be relatively safe. Wrong again. [We made one heart stopping pass through Valley number three which contained even better gunners and more of them. The VC in Valley number three were wide awake since we had made quite a bit of noise with our activities in Valleys one and two. I headed the cowboys for home. This was not our day. We had a swinging "this is not our day" party at the club. Our top cover pilots added a great deal of local color to the party when they joined us later. They had had a superb morning with 3 Valleys full of VC to beat up on.

It always amazed me how happy we made our fighter pilot top cover by trolling along low and slow attracting VC ground fire. After the VC would shoot at us and expose their positions then the fighter pilots could shoot at the VC. That makes a fighter pilots' whole day. We sure made a lot of fighter pilots happy over there.

At one time, I went 68 missions in a row without taking a hit. I mentioned earlier that cowboys were weird about keeping their hit count up. I began scheduling tougher and tougher targets. This resulted in greater numbers of volleys of ground fire directed at my flight. All that resulted in was the other two aircraft getting the daylight shot out of them. [Soon I began to find it difficult to get anyone to fly with me. I tried swapping aircraft positions at the last minute, even seats with other pilots, nothing worked. No self respecting cowboy wanted to fly with a guy who didn't take hits.

This was bad, I was getting a reputation of no-hits. This is not good for a Ranch Hand's image. I even considered shooting some holes in my airplane on the way back from a mission to get our morale up. I discarded that idea figuring I would probably hit the only vital spot in the plane.

I could only find one flight engineer to fly with me on a regular basis and he had 7 kids at home. The other flight engineers forced him into it, they had seen pictures of his kids and said he owed it to them. No one ever mentioned their families - it was very spooky in that regard.

Because our crews had to think exactly the same when the two of them were flying one airplane simultaneously, ^{they} the match up of the crews to the individuals. Thus, when my string of no-hits got to the ridiculous point, they began drawing straws to see who had to pass up getting hit today and fly with me.

Finally, in desperation we flew a mission into the Ashau Valley where there was a target. If we had an engine shot out, which was an all too common experience, we could not get out of the valley. The mountains were so high around the valley that our airplanes could not climb over them with an engine out. Although there were 3 small airstrips in the valley, they were all mined. The VC totally controlled the area. Our emergency plan was to fly around the valley on one engine until Rescue Forces could fly in. We would then crash land in the elephant grass. Anyway, that target solved my no-hit problems and after getting thoroughly shot up, things got back to normal for "C" flight.

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