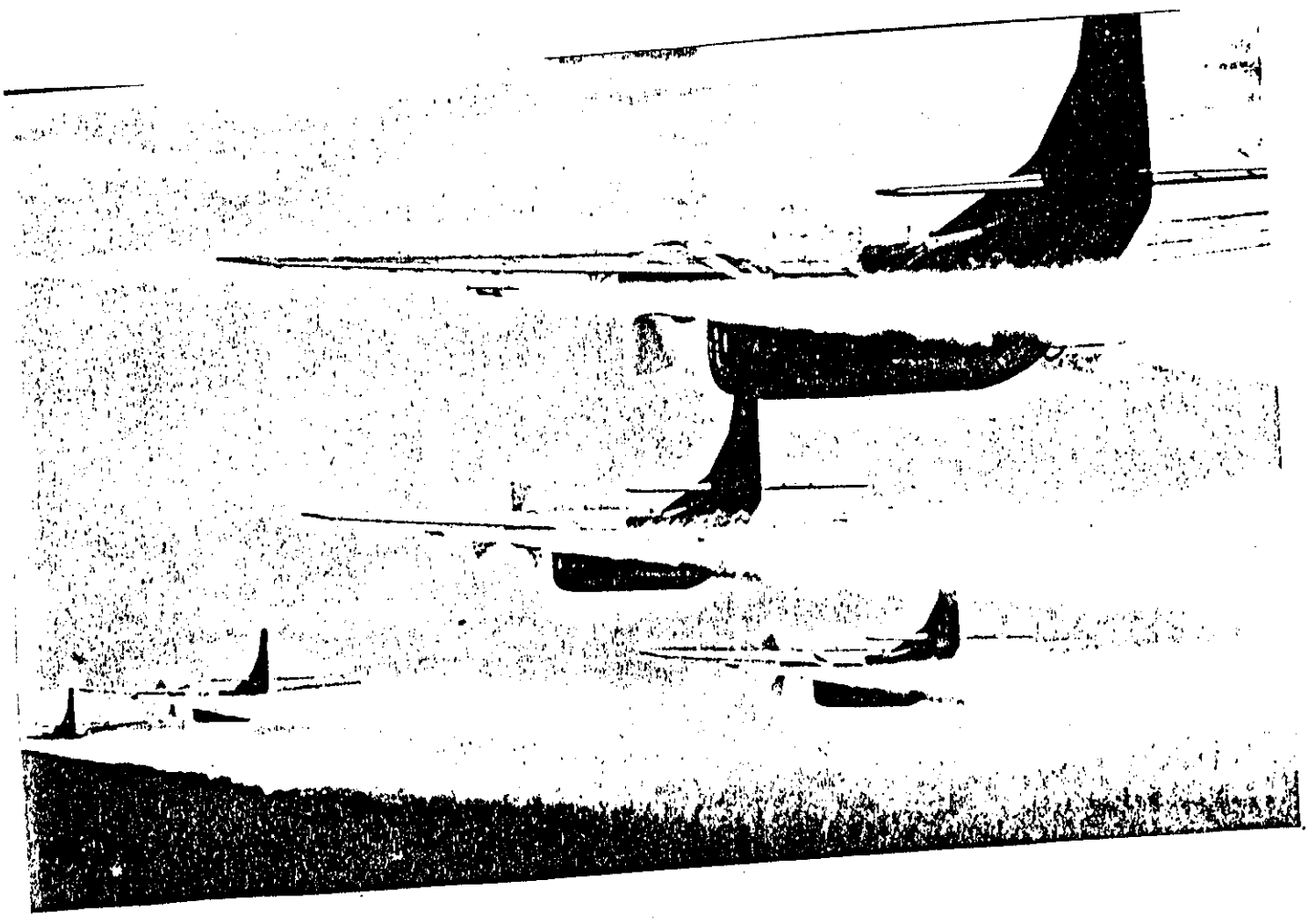
COWBOY ZERO ONE



Written especially for

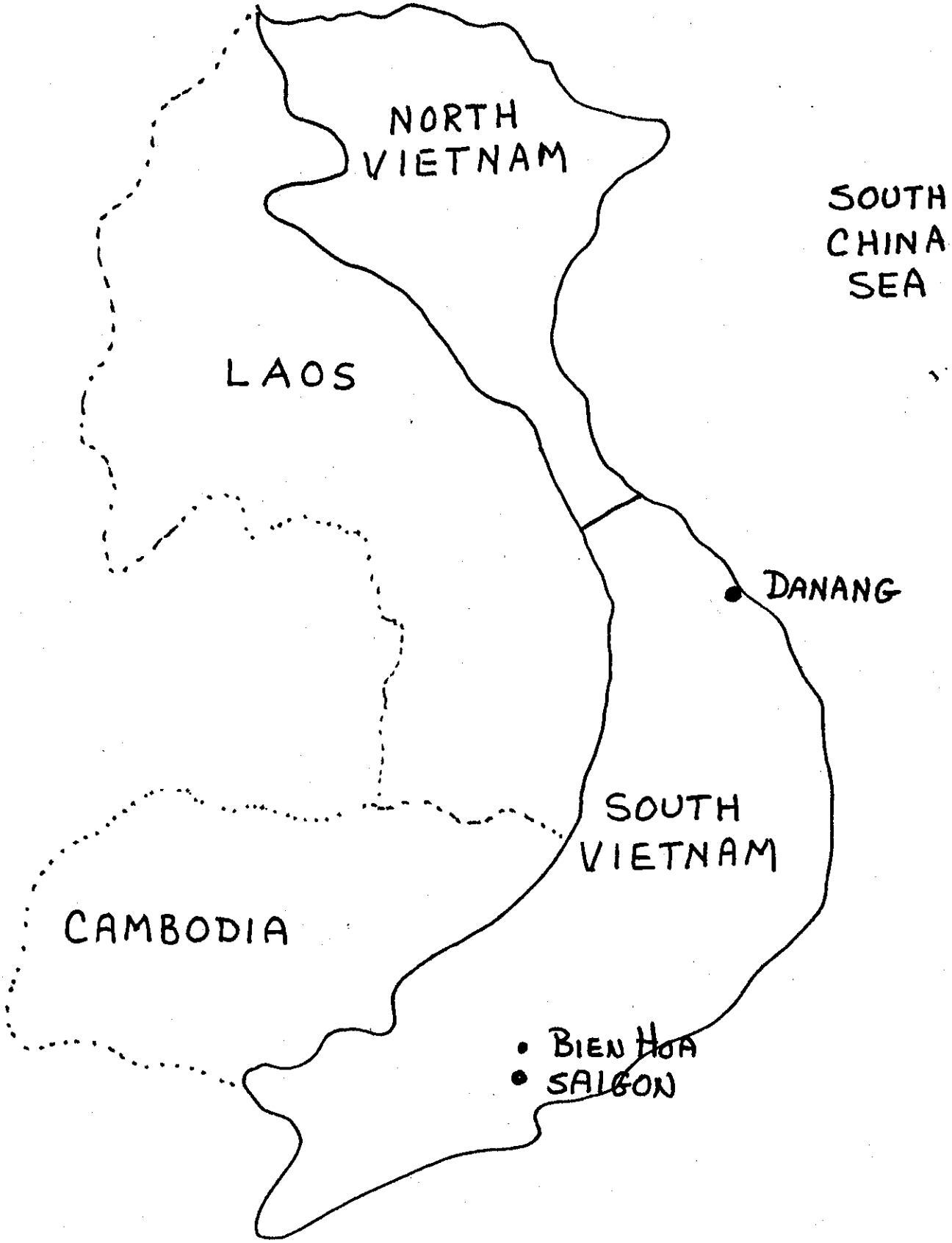
THE COWBOYS

THE TOP COVER

THE AIR COMMANDOS

&

THEM


NORTH VIETNAM
SOUTH CHINA SEA
LAOS
DANANG
SOUTH VIETNAM
CAMBODIA
BIEN HOA
SAIGON

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I was sitting on my favorite bar stool at an Air Force Officer's Club watering hole not long ago. I noticed a lean, hunched over pilot across the bar staring at me. He had the crow's feet lines around his eyes from looking into the sun for years and his face had a crinkly look. He also had a double martini in one fist and a cigar in the other, all the characteristics of a fighter pilot passing through the base.

I was mildly surprised when he walked over to the part of the bar I was defending from the Viet Cong and non-flyers. Normally, fighter pilots are clannish and tend to mingle with their own. Sometimes they will mingle with ladies rather than talk flying, which is a high tribute to ladies in general.

He slipped onto the bar stool next to me with a practiced smoothness acquired from many night flights in bars throughout the world.

"Aren't you one of those Ranch Hands I flew top cover for in Vietnam?", he asked. I gave him the "here it comes" look and took a long, slow drink of my Seagram's VO and water to avoid answering. He just shook his head and muttered, "You guys were the craziest bunch of bastards I ever flew top cover for".

These encounters are old hat to Ranch Hands. Every guy who was in the flying business in Vietnam has to retell some superinflated war story about how he was in this or that bar in Southeast Asia when this bunch of Ranch Hands did thus and so. Most of these stories are highly exagerated and only partially true.

It is true that old "Air Commando One", the founder of the Air Commandos and some other Jungle Jim types came up with a weird plan when they dreamed up Operation Ranch Hand, an outfit that was formed, fought and folded up all in the span of a half dozen years during the Southeast Asian war. The unit's mission was combat cropdusting!

The Ranch Hands were to fly unarmed aircraft at 100 feet above the ground and spray defoliants on the enemy trees (which are very hard to distinquish from friendly trees) while the Viet Cong gleefully shot hell out of you and your airplane.

Very few Headquarters folks knew (or wanted to know) anything about the Ranch Hands mission. It was a constant struggle between the Ranch Hands and THEM. THEM or THEY as Headquarters in Saigon was referred to were invisible. THEY were voices over a phone. THEY were letters or teletype messages. THEY never visited us let alone fly with us.

Our type of flying discouraged folks from voluntarily joining us on our twice a day combat missions. We had the dubious distinction of being the most shot at and hit flying unit in Vietnam. It all added up to some of those greatly inflated stories about us bending a few regulations selectively ~~so~~ so we could get on with winning the war. And, no one could seriously fault the Ranch Hands if they partied as hard as they flew. It was all very normal considering we were in a combat zone.

The Ranch Hands weren't as crazy as some folks have alleged and the stories circulated about their misconduct and general lack of interest in military conformity are products of Murphy's barroom broadening Law which everyone knows won't hold a Seagram's VO and water. Read on and judge for yourself.

CHAPTER TWO

ORGANIZATION

The unit was formed as Operation Ranch Hand and their combat call sign was COWBOY. The personnel were referred to as Ranch Hands or Cowboys by all who dealt with them. The operation began as a three ship experimental flight and grew until it became a full sized Air Force Special Operations squadron.

To become a Ranch Hand or Cowboy you had to be a double volunteer. A Ranch Hand not only had to be a volunteer for Vietnam combat, but had to re-volunteer to be a Cowboy. Generally speaking, you had to be a little squirrely to begin with to want in on this operation.

The Ranch Hands flew the UC-123, a twin engined transport that had originally been designed as a glider. It was a versatile and sturdy beast, but the slowest, dumpiest looking plane in the war. The ability of the 123 (one twenty three) as we called them to take heavy damage from ground fire and lumber home is legendary. It was an excellent selection for the spray mission. The mating of this ugly elephant-like aircraft with the Air Force crews, whose sanity was doubtful at best, gave birth to a saga which I will only touch on (to set the record straight at least for the year I flew with them).

Initially based in Saigon at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, the Cowboys were stationed right next door to (then) General Ky's personal South Vietnamese Air Force unit. General Ky was a close friend of the Cowboys. He admired small, elite, high esprite de corps flying units.

The Ranch Hands later moved to Bien Hoa Air Base about 20 miles from Saigon and concluded their era at Phan Rang Air Base in central Vietnam. The unit also maintained a detachment of varying size that operated from Danang Air Base in the mountainous region just south of the DMZ.

The planners set some rather unique prerequisites for the Ranch Hand pilots. They actively sought former jet-fighter pilots to fly these propellor driven behemoths. The mission called for flying at the relatively slow combat speed of 150 mph, straight and level at 100 feet above the ground while great groups of extremely hostile Viet Cong shoot at will at the planes and crews. To add to the fun, the mission called for flying wingtip tight formation with fighter type pylon turns at the end of each run and many repeated passes over the target. Just one good deal after another.

The 123 lacked hydraulically boosted flight controls and flew with the ease of a Mack truck without power steering, but the planners easily solved that. The co-pilot in the right seat would run the throttles while the pilot in the left seat would wrassle the plane around and over the trees in close formation. The two pilots had to act as one man and to have the same instincts and reactions as Siamese twins.

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CHAPTER THREE

VOLUNTEERING

I was stationed at a posh Florida air base in late 1964 when the action in Vietnam emerged from the small scale category to an acknowledged shooting war. I had been a jet pilot all of my career and cornering a flying job in Florida was a superb pleasure. My great quest in life was to fly the F-104 Starfighter, a needlenosed, Mach two aircraft with wings only seven feet long. It was a fighter pilot's dream.

I wasn't flying the F-104, I was flying the T-33 jet trainer, the world's slowest jet. My best flying buddy, Bud Day, would drop in every so often and save me from complete insanity by taking me for a spin in a two seat F-100 Super Sabre fighter. I also wangled a few backseat rides in the F-105 on a local project that had us bombing an empty twenty man life raft out in the ocean. However, you can't see anything from the back seat of an F-105 so that was as exciting as kissing your sister.

To insure my frustration level stayed at a high pitch the Air Force posted a detachment of F-104's to our base. However, they belonged to another Air Force unit and flying them was out of the question for me. The F-104 commander was an outstanding flyer and barstooler named John "Kim" Kimmerly. I immediately bought him several hundred red labels and waters to get his attention. Kim thought Officer's Clubs were built primarily for fighter pilots to have fun at anyone's expense. Even on our relatively staid base, Kim kept the club jumping and we soon became close friends with our friendship firmly cemented in bar flying, Seagram's VO, martinis and Red Label scotch.

Kim was itching to go to war and fly some fighter combat and he was eager for some company. Every night at the club he would lure me into sipping up a quart or so of Seagram's VO and tell me how we were going to be fighter aces. VO is an excellent way to get my attention, but Kim knew how to get to my heart. Kim knew I wouldn't go to Vietnam until I had flown the F-104. I had told him dozens of times how Bud Day and I had spent the last two years making numerous flights to George Air Force Base in California on weekends trying to bum a ride in the F-104. Bud and I had many promises and many hours in the air traveling to and from California, but we never got a flight in the F-104.

Kim finally got so desparate to fly combat he made me an offer I couldn't refuse. If I would volunteer for a Vietnam fighter assignment with him, he would bend a regulation or two and let me fly his F-104. I accepted right on the bar stool.

Except for having to make two passes to get a satisfactory landing, I had done it all. Mach two, looked down on the earth from an altitude higher then I'd ever been and the F-104 was even better than I had dreamed a fighter could be.

Our next move was to beat the rush in volunteering for jet fighters in Vietnam. There was no doubt in our minds that a couple of spectacular jockeys like us were a shoo-in for instant combat orders. We figured we'd spend a couple of weeks getting primed up on shooting guns and we'd be downing MIGs in a month or so.

We were wrong. My orders were obviously wrong. My orders were for C-123 training, a multi-engine propellor assignment. Kim's orders were far worse. He was assigned to a desk job in Saigon. Kim submitted his resignation from the Air Force to be effective on the day he completed his one year in Vietnam. As bitter as he was he would still go and do his year. He did leave the Air Force at the end of his tour.

The personnel system had struck again costing the war one of the most outstanding fighter pilots I've ever known.

I had considered resigning also, but a night on the town comparing the cost of Seagram's VO at civilian prices convinced me I would have to make a radical adjustment in life style if I quit the Air Force. I reluctantly prepared for C-123 training, but not without a fight....

CHAPTER FOUR

TRAINING

I tried everybody and everything I could think of to get the assignment changed. There was no way. I could understand why none of my fighter pilot friends would change assignments with me. At that point in the war, the fighter pilots were fed up with peacetime flying restrictions. They had been chomping for some action since Korea and not one of them would give up his fighter cockpit assignment this early in the war. Later things would change, but not in 1965.

I was unsuccessful in getting the assignment changed, but I made so much noise about wanting to fly fighters that I was offered the opportunity to re-volunteer for "Operation Ranch Hand" the cargo haulers version of fighter flying. I re-volunteered.

The C-123 training school was located at another beachside Florida air base and lasted four months. I took my 1951 Ford hardtop to ease the hardship. Things went better when you had a car, especially when the swinging town near the base had five miles of gin mills scattered along the beach. The car helped me to equitably distribute my money among the natives.

The old '51 Ford hardtop had a bunch of miles on it and a bad case of the rusts. Ocean salt spray had eaten out big chunks of the fenders and body, but what the hell, the tires were in good shape. I had made about a hundred miles toward the training base and was cruising about 70 or 75 when the car's roof simply separated at the top of the windshield and folded back over the trunk. That was quite a shock. My hardtop was now a convertible. The gas station guy didn't make things any better with his running commentary and giggling as we bent the roof forward, drilled holes in the roof and the windshield and then used coat hangers to wire the roof down. The rest of the trip was blessedly uneventful.

Although I was bitterly disappointed and depressed by being selected for C-123's rather than fighters, the sign over the main gate of the training base caught my eye at once. It welcomed me to the home of the Air Commandos. Funny, I had never heard of them, but there was a real mystique and a ring about the name and my mind began racing.

I conjured up visions of smudge faced English Tommies with submachine guns and sharp knives. Suddenly I saw myself in a pair of camouflaged fatigues, two ammunition belts bristling with bullets crossing my chest as I stood in a bamboo bar somewhere in the South Pacific. My tommy gun lay still warm and smoking on the bar. I was being congratulated by beautiful native girls for my heroism in singlehandedly saving the tiny native village nestled on the pure white sands of a deep blue lagoon.

Fortunately my brain got back in gear and I realized I was a pilot and what hotshot pilot would run around in the jungle playing foot soldier? As the day dream faded I was still stirred by the name Air Commando and their motto "Anytime, Anywhere".

My fantasies continued as I met more and more Air Commandos during my in-processing. These guys were for real. They wore camouflaged fatigues and flight suits, carried big, sharp knives, wore oversize moustaches and looked to be very proficient at anything they might set their minds to.

My first bar encounter with the Air Commandos came immediately after I had checked into the base and dropped my bags off at the bachelors quarters conveniently next door to the Officer's Club.

It was at the bar that I quickly determined the Air Commandos were all right. They came into the bar wearing anything they cared to wear. It certainly wasn't like my base where the uniform dress code was strictly enforced. Also, they sort of did whatever they felt like doing, be it

rough housing, gambling, breaking glasses or making questionable suggestions to the lovely young waitresses who seemed to enjoy this rowdy atmosphere. A rather uninhibited group to be sure.

Being the FNG, which I later learned meant Frappin' New Guy, I lost my first Seagram's VO and water when two gorillas snatched a baby faced navigator off his bar stool and with one great heave threw him the length of the bar on his belly taking my drink with him. I learned quickly and made it a point to snatch up my drink when a body was about to hurtle down the top of the bar in a blazing belly slide.

I would be introduced to other neat body destroying bar tricks as I became more commandoized. For the time being though, I kind of liked these strange new folks. I even began to believe that being an Air Commando might not be as glorious as being a fighter pilot ace, but what the hell, the company wasn't bad at all. In fact, I had already asked the waitress where I could get a camouflaged flight suit and did she know a tailor who had one day service?

The C-123 training was set up primarily to check out pilots who would fly as cargo carriers. The inglorious title of "trash haulers" was tacked onto this group. Their mission was to carry anything, anywhere, and their loads might be people, live pigs, grain, ammunition, paratroops or whatever. They had to be able to land on some of the shortest and most dangerous runways in the world. Quite a few trash hauler C-123 aircraft wound up as burned out hulks in the many mine fields surrounding these mini-runways when they couldn't get stopped in time.

Even though trash hauling was not the Ranch Hands mission, they received the same initial training the cargo carrier crews received. The Ranch Hands had to learn how to fly the C-123, all the emergency procedures and finally both day and night short field landing techniques. The latter was an excersise in stark terror. The instructors actually had us land an unlighted airplane on a postage stamp dirt strip lighted only by a handful of red flashlight bulbs. Whew!

Three other students and myself were assigned for tactical flight training to "Doc" Weaver. Doc was fresh back from Vietnam. A hardcore combat veteran complete with oversize moustache, Aussie go-to-hell hat, camouflage flight suit and a vocabulary of uncomplimentary Vietnemese terms we would soon learn. He had personally earned more Air Medals than some entire squadrons earned in WWII.

Doc was an anachronism. Under the camouflaged flight suit and go-to-hell hat was one of the top ten water color artists in the country. A poetic, artistic soul who was one hell of a combat flyer and a flamboyant barstooler. Fortunately for us he also had a great sense of humor and a large ration of patience. We were to press his patience level severely during training.

The emergency procedures on multi-engine propellor airplanes amazes me. In a single engine, single seat jet if the engine quit I simply pulled one brightly painted handle which ejected me to float down in my parachute. A simple straight forward procedure.

In the prop jobs there were handles and buttons for mixture controls, propellor controls, throttles, propellor feathering etc, etc. Since there were two engines on the C-123, there were two of everything previously mentioned. I had a lot of trouble establishing a good attitude about emergencies and was particularly deficient in learning what handles to pull in what order and when.

Early in the training, while shooting practice landings at an auxiliary field about 20 miles from our home base, Doc threw his daily dose of simulated emergencies at me. After demonstrating my knack for forgetting which handle to pull when, Doc called for another student riding in the cargo compartment to come up to the cockpit to replace me.

As I settled myself in disgrace in the cargo compartment to study, my replacement was strapping in up front. He was an old time propellor experienced gorilla and he was a big guy. Both points were in his and our favor since just as we got about 50 feet in the air on our takepff everything went to hell. The right propellor ran away (became uncontrollable) creating a condition that normally prevents continued flight.

Doc looked like Arthur Fiedler conducting the Pops in a lively chorus of the Sabre Dance. His hands were flying everywhere, pulling this, pushing that to no avail, while the whole time the big guy was holding the C-123 out of the trees with brute strength (if I had been in the seat we would have crashed long ago).

We never got more than 50 feet in the air. The bad engine had pulled us in a complete circle just above the tree tops. We actually circled the control tower- looking up at it all the way- finally keplunking the faltering 123 back down exactly where we took off from.

Since we were some 20 miles from home base we would have to leave the plane to be fixed and catch a ride home in a GI truck. I decided before we left to give the folks who fix airplanes something to talk about. I always felt people who fix airplanes needed something to brighten their days. I grabbed a bunch of shrubs, twigs and tree limbs and stuffed them in all the places I could find, like the landing gear, the pitot boom sticking out in front of the airplane and even under the windshield wipers of the plane.

A nosy Safety Officer saw my handiwork and decided we really had been blindly flying along crashing through the tops of the federally-protected nearby pine forest. His phone call to the home base sure got Doc a whole bunch of grief from his superiors. They were not greatly amused, nor were they ever really sure that Doc's version of the incident was the way it it happened. Anyway, it didn't really matter since a big wind came up that night and blew the plane over on its side because it wasn't tied down correctly (Doc got blamed for that too). The wind caused one heck of a lot more damage than flying through the pine trees would have done.

Later the same night, I was in the O-Club surrounding a quart of VO and telling one of Doc's combat buddies what I had done and how much trouble Doc was in. I knew this guy had spent a year in Vietnam with Doc and I figured a good buddy like that would want to help him. Sure enough, he

jumped right up saying he'd make a phone call that would fix old Doc right up.

About an hour later Doc came into the bar looking like he had the world on his shoulders. He handed us a telegram that said the Headquarters staff in Washington, D.C. had heard all about Doc's day and they were considering what disciplinary action to take against him. It was signed by a 3 star general.

Now I really felt bad. I'd done in my own instructor, probably ruined his career. I re-read the telegram several times and suddenly it came to me. The telegram had been sent an hour ago and it had been sent from Florida not from Washington. Now I knew what the phone call was that Doc's buddy had made.

I slipped off the barstool, grabbed a sweet young waitress and headed for the club manager's office. I jotted out a short message, convinced the waitress she could imitate a Western Union ladies voice very easily and then called the club telephone paging number. When Doc's buddy answered his page, the waitress did a superior job of reading a "telegram" advising him of his immediate reassignment to a non-flying desk job with a Navy unit stationed on a womanless, remote arctic island.

After watching Doc's buddy run from the club screaming obscenities at all personnel officers in general, I rejoined Doc at the bar. Once I had explained to Doc that the telegram he had received was fake and that I had retaliated in kind for him we had a couple of laughs and a couple of hundred drinks. Doc even let up on me a little on emergency procedure training after that episode.

If I didn't mention it before, I went through parachute jump training before I volunteered for Vietnam. Few pilots were jump qualified in those days. Some say it was because the extra flight pay was higher than the extra jump pay and you were allowed to draw only one not both. Others say pilots disliked anything to do with jumping because it indicated you had lost your airplane (the Captain and his ship syndrone) and had to leave it. This might infer you had been shot down by a better enemy pilot and no self respecting pilot would admit to that! I personally feel most pilots abhorred and avoided jumping because they feared injuring themselves in a parachute landing and messing up a good flying career.

Anyway, I was a jumper and we often took parachutists along on our training flights so they could practice jumping into the parachute drop zone on our base. As I mentioned Doc had a great sense of humor and joined in gleefully with a bizarre idea I came up with at the bar one night.

The next group of jumpers to request we drop them later in the week was an Army green beret squad. The day before the mission I went to our parachute loft and picked up a main and a reserve (spare) parachute which I stowed in the cockpit of our plane.

On the morning of the jump, instead of Doc briefing the flight crew and the jumpers, he let me do it. By regulation the Aircraft Commander must brief on emergency procedures and when jumpers are on board the jump order signals must be covered in specific detail. I was very specific in my briefing to the Army jumpers that under no circumstances were they to bail out until the aircraft commander told them they could go. I repeated this several times.

We took off with Doc and I in the cockpit and another student pilot and the jumpers back in the cargo compartment. We headed straight for the drop zone. The drop zone was a tiny dirt landing strip and some plowed ground carved out of a heavily wooded area. If you didn't go out exactly on target you would wind up in the trees.

As soon as the gear was up I wiggled into my two chutes and the other student pilot lowered the rear loading ramp which the jumpers used as a jump platform. When we hit the drop zone, without any warning, I came barrelling out of the cockpit, ran past the startled berets and bailed out. I was really getting the hang of this Air Commando thing now.

On the way down I checked around the sky and there were chutes all over the sky and berets still pouring out of Doc's plane. Of course they were well out of the drop zone and all heading for the trees. Looking at it strictly from a regulation point of view the aircraft commander had not told them to jump so it must be assumed they took it upon themselves to jump out making it difficult for them to criticize the Air Force for putting them in the trees - right?

Doc wheeled the old C-123 around and made a magnificent short field landing on the dirt strip. While he wheeled the plane around for a takeoff I threw my chute and myself onto the loading ramp and we departed in great haste before the irate green berets could climb down from the trees. We drank up all the VO in the club that night.

The '51 Ford hardtop was running fine, but the door on the driver's side became so badly rusted it fell off in the busiest intersection in town one night. Most of the other motorist were quite polite while I retrieved the door and hefted it into the back seat. Later, down the road I thought of a real good reply to the wise acre who made some really smart-ass remarks while I was loading the door into the car. An understanding mechanic at the all night gas station only made a few disparaging remarks as he welded the door back on (in the permanently closed position) and I don't think he really giggled too much when I crawled in through the window and drove away.

About a week later I was on my favorite barstool in the O-Club and two young lieutenants were buying me VO and waters at a great rate. I suspected they were figuring on working for me someday when I made General and they wanted to get their brownie points in early. It wasn't my potential rise to fame they were interested in, but rather, they wanted to borrow the '51 Ford. Reluctantly I let them buy me a dozen or so more VO's and water and gave them the keys.

They promised they would have it in front of the Bachelor's Quarters in time for me to make an early flight the next morning. They did and it was. Only now I had a completely camouflaged '51 Ford.

This was no greasy kid stuff job, this was the real $5,000 a copy, bonafide paint job. It had been run through the C-123 aircraft paint shop line and was perfect in every detail. Fantastic. The grey, brown, green and sand colored camouflage paint job gave the old Ford a real Air Commando look.

Down at the flight line, after my flight, I just pushed my way through the admiring throng looking over the Ford, climbed in the window and headed out for a shower and change of clothes.

I left through the main gate that afternoon on my way to my reserved barstool at a beachside ginmill. I watched the Security Policeman in my rear view mirror after I went through the base gate. He had given me a very funny look and I wasn't at all surprised to see him grab his telephone. I soaked up an extra quart of Seagram's VO that afternoon and into the evening debating what would happen to me when I tried to get back through the base gate.

Finally I just had to go back to the base. I drove right up to main gate gate rather gallantly I thought, but dreading the encounter with the Security Police who were very, very strict.

As I approached the gate an amazing thing happened. The Security Policeman who had watched me approach simply turned his back and gazed off into space as if he never saw me. The car was so well camouflaged that, for the next two months, not one Security Policeman ever acknowledged my entrance or departure from the base. They were beautiful guys!

I tried to quizz the Lieutenants about the paint job which must have been very difficult and risky to arrange, but they mumbled something about going through a funny car wash that night, but certainly not an aircraft paint line. I had a feeling there were some mighty resourceful Lieutenants in the Air Commandos.

The owner of my favorite gin mill offered me a staggering sum for the Ford, but it had become Commandoized like me and I felt it should stay with the Corps. The gin mill owner let me park the Ford on the grass in front of his place though, since he figured no one could see it anyway.

I thought that was great since parking places were hard to come by. He was an understanding gin mill owner.

The waitresses were sporty about it too. If a guy came in and asked for me the waitress would ask him if he saw my car out front. If he saw it they'd tell him I wasn't there and if he didn't see it I was there. This confused hell out of the rational folks who didn't play the game.

I gave the car to the Commando class in training behind me when I finished the course. I got a letter not too long after telling me that one of the guys got some bad ice in his drinks and made a wrong turn with the Ford while leaving a beach side gin mill. He wound up driving on the grass median strip in the center of the four lane highway leading to the base. He could have made it easily since no could see the camouflaged car, but unfortunately, he hit the "Welcome to Our City" sign and knocked the left front fender completely off. He continued on without retrieving the fender - probably the bad ice again.

The next morning, according to the letter writer, a bunch of the Commandos were having a get well beer breakfast when a State Highway patrolman drove up right next to the fenderless Ford, grabbed the missing fender from the trunk of the patrol car, dumped it next to the Ford and drove away! That's my kind of law enforcer.

Our next phase of training, at an Air Base in Virginia, was to take 30 days and supposedly closely simulate our combat mission. When we finished this phase we would be raal Air Commandos and combat ready! There was a ring to those words. Combat ready. We were ready all right, name a bar within twenty miles and we'd been there.

Our thirty day training course only took two weeks to complete. The weather was beautifully cooperative and we also suspected our instructors were most happy to send us on our way a bit early as well. The training, expected to be highly challenging, was not difficult at all. We flew over table top flat marshland. Our airplanes were lightly loaded and we were able to make high sweeping turns at the end of our simulated target runs. What a piece of cake.

We were later to be completely stunned in Vietnam to discover that in combat we would actually fly the 123 overloaded by 10,000 pounds more than the book allows. Those beautiful high sweeping turns were a dream too. They were a real no-no! If we pulled up at the end of the target pass we made an excellent target for the VC gunners.

In the real world of combat we kept as close to the trees as possible. We made tight, level turns with our wings perpendicular to the ground. The tight, perpendicular turns were OK, but if you are only 100 feet off the ground to begin with and your wings are 70 feet long, it helps to pull up a bit - but not too much.

Another item they neglected in our Stateside training was cropdusting in mountainous terrain. We had trained over uninterrupted, smooth as glass Virginia countryside. In Vietnam, particularly around Danang, we flew in mountains that went straight up and out of sight. They were real heartgrabbers.

Meanwhile, before we could rush off to Saigon and display our newly acquired talents, THEY suddenly decided that all combat flyers would have to go through additional training at the Air Force Basic Survival School near Reno, Nevada then more training at the Jungle Survival School in the Phillipines.

Like many others, I had been stationed for the previous three years in a nice sunny part of Florida. Our four months of flying training was designed to indoctrinate us to a hot jungle environment. It was a chilling experience to report into Stead Air Force Base, deep in the Sierra Nevada Mountains on the second day of January. The temperature was fifteen degrees below zero! The snow was four feet deep and the wind cut right to your bone marrow.

It was a lovely school to prepare us for jungle warfare. None of us had the foresight to buy arctic underwear and other cold weather goodies since the world almanac clearly stated that Saigon was "hot, muggy and junglelike". Now I'm not saying the Air Force didn't issue us arctic gear for the training, but when you look down at your instructor's feet and see that he is wearing high quality civilian snow boots while you freeze your feet off in G.I. boots, you realize THEY did it again. A quick trip downtown and $40 or so later, you are wearing the same brand name boot your instructor waars. Although I never wore those boots since survival school, they were the most intelligent purchase I ever made.

They had some dandy instruction guaranteed to make you a self-reliant individual. You quickly became meaner than a rattlesnake and tougher than a mountain goat. We learned all the good Commando tricks like twenty ways to swiftly and silently do away with folks.

The primary emphasis was on learning how to defend yourself, keep your head in emergencies and specifically how to survive under any condition. We learned a lot about ourselves.

I consider myself a bit of a sophisticate when it comes to gourmet dining. You can't live or visit in 42 foreign countries without acquiring some measure of appreciation for interesting foods. However, nowhere in

world had I ever had the desire or courage to order a rattlesnake meat blue plate special. However, if I ever get as hungry as I did on the trek, look out rattlesnakes because I liked the small portion the instructor let us taste. In fact, I found a significant number of foods I previously distained suddenly weren't so bad after all. And that was only after no food for six days.

Other things we learned were how to escape and evade and how to make our way through hostile areas and situations. They had a dandy final exam. We were issued a half a nylon parachute and a pair of snowshoes, loaded on busses and taken to the end of the road in some remote spot in the mountains. We were told to snowshoe out to the finish line. I think we had six days to make it in. Someone told me later that it was about 20 miles in a straight line from start to finish. I slogged up and down vertical hills for 20 miles the first day only to discover I had actually traversed one mile on the map. At that rate it would be spring before I finished training.

Part of my problem was that I had never been on snowshoes before. I was a fast learner and on the sixth and final day I actually strode over fifteen feet before I tripped myself and fell down. I figure just another week or so and I would have really got the hang of snowshoeing.

To make this 6 day trek more realistic, we were to make it with only one other student for company, and that was in case one of you broke a leg, the other could go for help. Big deal, it took us six days to ever see another soul. Of course, no food was allowed. Actually food was allowed if you could catch it. Anyone who has the slightest knowledge of U.S. geography knows that even the hardiest grizzly bear won't expose himself to a week at the 9,000 foot level in the Sierra Nevadas with a January blizzard raging. Therefore, you can be sure that if the grizzly bears

wouldn't go out up there, then no other animals were out either - so much for the food we could catch. And, to really make our expedition more fun, we could not light a fire since THEY would be watching. If we lit a fire THEY would make us return to the starting point and begin again. By now you can see the problem. Snowshoes, no fires, no food and a raging blizzard.

This confidence building program offered us an exceptional opportunity to get not only uncommonly cold and miserable but also excrutiatingly hungry. I managed to do all of the above. I singlehandedly came to the conclusion that when you are mentally and physically prepared for jungle operations you really should stick to the plan. THEY had done it to me again. I was certain there was a war plan somewhere in the bowels of the Pentagon to invade the North Pole and THEY had managed to get the plan mixed up with mine - which was simply to go to hot,muggy Vietnam and win the war.

With the memory of the Survival School cold soaked into my head, feet, hands and body, I arrived at Clark AFB in the Phillipines to undergo five days of jungle training. Clark AFB is only one hour's flying time away from Saigon and the war and no one could really expect an Air Commando to pass up five days of real war for five days of simulated war and thus delay his destiny to become the world's greatest combat flyer.

I had been a reasonable, obliging career Officer prior to the Stead Air Base Survival School experience, but that training which stressed the individual's ability to cope with nonstandard situations had me convinced that I was a superslick military weapon and keeping me out of Vietnam would only prolong the war. Some of the regulations I once regarded as sacrosanct suddenly seemed less important as I neared"the front" so to speak.

My first combat decision was to invest a dime in the pay phone at the Clark Air Base passenger terminal and call the Administrative section of the Jungle School. I asked the sign in clerk when he expected me and if I had arrived yet - of course I didn't tell him I was me. I thought a little test of the system might be a good move before I went over and signed in. The clerk managed to give me all of 15 seconds of his time telling me, he"didn't have the slightest clue as to who the hell was there, and besides, there wasn't a record on the whole damn island to tell who had been there".

I thanked the emply line he left me on and booked myself on a flight leaving for Saigon forty five minutes later. After all, if you are going to win a war you should have the full 365 days to do it in. There was no real sense in taking a five day delay to mess around with snakes and alligators or whatever. At a jungle school where even the clerks were pushy, can you imagine what the instructors would be like? It was in the best interest of the service I told myself as the Air Force transport lifted off. I had made a good decision by avoiding a hostile confrontation between myself and those overworked instructors. On to Saigon.

CHAPTER FIVE

WELCOME TO VIETNAM

Most adventurers nearing the front for the first time probably reflect on home and family but I was completely engrossed in studying my traveling companions. No one spoke to each other, but it wasn't difficult to tell the new guys from the old timers in the war. The new guys had on unscuffed, shiny dress shoes and very new looking uniforms that were badly wrinkled from the long trip over the Pacific. They were trying very hard to look nonchalent but it wasn't working.

The old timers had scuffed combat boots and well worn combat fatigues. They also had all the symptoms of suffering from classic hangovers after visiting some of the seedier "boys town" gin mills near Manila. I was really glad an old Air Commando had advised me to have my favorite female wash and bleach my new fatigues about a dozen times before I ever put them on. This gave my fatigues a faded look and kept me from looking like a new guy. I was later to learn that the Vietnemese women who did our fatigues and other laundry usually used four times the amount of soap and bleach required and after beating hell out your clothes on a rock with another rock, they could reduce shiny new fatigues to old timers in just two washings.

I concentrated my study of the travelers on the old timers. I wanted to acquire their mannerisms as quickly as possible. There was one Green Beret who had little "v" devices pinned all around the hatband of his beret. I just knew each little metal "v" represented a Viet Cong he had personnally done in. Another Green Beret had on a necklace of hand grenade pins. I really liked that. I made a mental note to make one of those as a great conversation necklace for my favorite female to wear. Somehow I never followed through on that idea though.

The strangest guy on board was the civilian. He was relaxed to the point of appearing bored, but he was very keen of eye. It took me bit to realize he was wearing $100 shoes, a real silk shirt and an obviously expensive watch. The watch was the kind that tells you the time, latitude, altitude and probably had chimes in it. On his other wrist he had a gold bracelet that must have weighed five pounds. For all his effort to look like your standard, regular issue American civilian he sure wasn't.

Somehow I couldn't picture him looking down a transit as a civil engineer. Down a silenced gun barrel - yes. Nor could I picture him pouring over governmental procurement contracts. Hit contracts - yes. Whatever or whoever he was, I was glad he was on our side.

The C-130 Hercules Transport plane took a little over an hour to reach Vietnam. The approach to the airfield was steep and fast followed by a short field landing and rapid taxi to the unloading area. We were exhorted by the crew to get our bodies and baggage off the airplane as soon as possible which, THEN made an incredibly swift departure for the friendlier climes of the Phillipines. That particular airlift flight crew really believed in minumum exposure to possible mortar attacks. After retrieving our personal gear that had been blown all over the ramp by the prop wash from the plane's record setting departure, we got our first lesson in combat geography. We had landed not at the promised Tan Son Nhut Air Base on the edge of the city of Saigon, but at Bien Hoa Air Base some twenty miles outside the city.

Being a pilot myself, I always made it a point to land where I was supposed to. Twenty miles from the right airfield is ridiculous. I guess for some transport pilots twenty miles away is close enough for combat work, after all it's only a couple of minutes by air. But, trying to travel twenty miles on the ground in Vietnam could be a major undertaking. I never found out why we didn't land at Tan Son Nhut as advertised.

The passenger terminal was barely more than an open-sided lean-to on the side of the ramp, but it had a telephone. I got a real combat tingle when I saw my first sand bag bunkers for use in case of a mortar attack. However, I was a little disappointed that they hadn't advanced the state of the art very much since these looked just like the ones I saw in the movie "All Quiet on the Western Front".

I decided some quick action on my part was required to rectify the geographical error the transport pilot had made. How could I possibly start winning the war when my unit was twenty miles away and they didn't even know I was in Vietnam?

Most Officers are a little spoiled by the rank system and I was no different. Because I was an Air Commando and an Officer all I would have to do is pick up the telephone and call for a staff car to drive me to Saigon. What transpired was a two-fold education for me.

First, and mark this well, you just didn't pick up a telephone in Vietnam and call a motor pool only twenty miles away. I've placed overseas phone calls from God-awful places to God-awful places half-way around the world easier than the twenty miles to Saigon.

It was first necessary to establish contact with the female Vietnemese operators. That was the easiest part since it only entailed an infinite amount of patience. You had to be wary of the old trick of the operator opening the line, you could hear her breathing, you knew she was there, but not a word came from her. What she was doing was tying up the line while taking a breather, nothing more.

Sooner or later, though, you were able to make contact and from there on it was a race against time. It was necessary to immediately establish the fact that your call was of the highest priority. You did this by injecting a note of urgency in your voice that would have won you an Oscar nomination stateside. You also had to keep up a rapid fire conversation even if you had nothing to say.

A second or two of silence on either end of the phone and your line would be instantly taken by another operator who had been convinced by another actor that his call was so vitally urgent the war might be lost if it didn't go through. I learned all of the foregoing in a series of attempts to get that call through. Being an Air Commando, I learned fast and after only twenty or thirty failures I finally reached the Saigon motor pool office.

My second highly educational experience was my first and last phone call to the Saigon motor pool. My request for a staff car and driver to bring me from Bien Hoa to Saigon gave the motor pool dispatch Sergeant his first good belly laugh of the week.

Between guffaws he informed me, "Nobody drives a staff car between Bien Hoa and Saigon unless they are escorted by an armored convoy". If that wasn't enough, he had to get in one more zinger like, "Didn't I know there weren't enough staff cars for THEM, let alone filling silly requests for combat folks to ask for a ride in a hostile countryside"?

I was holding an empty phone line again.

It must have been the phone service over there, I decided. It seemed every time a Sergeant was given a dumb request, he would explain only once why it couldn't be done and the phone would go dead. It definitely had to be the phone system since everyone knows Sergeants are polite and patient and never slam down telephones on Officers.

I resolved to catch a flight to Saigon. There were at least 40 ways to catch a plane hop in Vietnam, but on that first day I didn't know any of them.

I found out there was a scheduled helicopter flight each morning and I could get to Saigon by being at base operations at 8 o'clock the next morning. That seemed OK. I decided I would check into the transient officers quarters, get cleaned up, have a dozen or so drinks at the Officers Club and go to war tomorrow all refreshed from the trip.

What a devastating miscalculation that was. There were no transient officers quarters there. Back in the States, a transient officer would be sent to a building that was usually right next door to the Officers Club. He would be given his very own private room with bathroom adjoining and, of course, a better than average bed. After luxuriating in a hot shower and drying off with several of the four towels provided, he could pop next door and climb up on a leather bar stool. Once established in the always-air conditioned and elegant club, tall cool Seagram's VO and waters or crispy-dry martinis would be served instantly upon request. That was the way it was back home, but not here.

The transient quarters turned out to be World War Two open tentspacked wall to wall, three tiers high with World War One metal bunks. I know the bunks were World War One vintage because I saw my father's initials scratched on one just beneath the 1916 manufacturer's date.

Rank meant absolutely nothing in that tent. You found a bunk and climbed in. After you stopped sinking, (if you were in a lower, this was when your butt hit the floor) you stayed there. If you left, you more than likely would lose your bunk to a newly arrived transient. Since rank meant nothing, brute strength and size became the determining factors. I was not ready to

test my newly acquired Commando skills by jousting with any of the gorillas in the tent. It was painfully obvious that all personnel selected for Vietnam early in the war were direct descendants of King Kong. Being no relation to the gorilla, I was at a distinct disadvantage.

The G.I. tent would have delighted a commercial mold grower. It consistently maintained an environment of 100° temperature and 100% humidity. This discomfort was minor since the end of the world was to come with my introduction to Vietnemese mosquitos. Having vacationed in earlier years on the Jersey shore I can expertly describe mosquitos. The Vietnemese variety were slightly smaller than a fighter plane, had the bite of a medium sized alligator and drained blood faster than a maximum sized vampire. I estimated that just over 500 mosquitos were vying to gnaw on each square inch of my skin inside the tent, the count jumped inestimably when I walked outside.

With sleep out of the question, I headed for the john. It was about two blocks away and right out of the French Foreign Legion. Actually it had really been built by Legionnaires about the same time the bunks in the tent were manufactured.

I spent the rest of the night in the john. It had the only lighted bulb for miles around since everything else was blacked out. I suspect it was lighted to offer the VC a convenient target. Hell, if they hit it it would have been an insignificant loss to our side and what self respecting gunner would lay claim to the destruction of a latrine?

I wrote a rambling doleful letter about all the experiences I have previously mentioned since arriving in combat. If my eyes hadn't swollen shut from the mosquito bites I probably would have completed the world's most enlightening article on what to expect when arriving in a war zone too early in the war.

If I go to war again, I'm waiting until the engineers finish building air conditioned Officer's Clubs and swimming pools. That old Air Commando axiom "First in, First to Fight" is OK - just once, but it doesn't turn me on like it used to. I think "Late in, lavish facilities and let's discuss this fighting business" would make a swell motto.

CHAPTER SIX

WELCOME TO THE RANCH

That morning, looking like a walking wounded case, I finally made my way to Saigon. Hello War!

When I checked in, the unit was woefully short of pilots. The Ranch Hands had been pushing themselves to the limit and they wasted no time in introducing me to their combat world. They had each been flying at least two or more missions every day without a break for three weeks at a clip and then hopefully getting a couple of days off.

New arrivals reporting into a combat unit normally get the first day off to sleep off the time change of traveling half way around the world. They get the next day off to find a place to stay and administratively check into their new base. The next day is used for briefings. By my count that covers the first three days activities for new guys in normal organizations.

In my case, none of the above was true. I flew two missions the morning I arrived, can't remember clearing into the base and "hot bunked" for the first ten days. "Hot bunking" is when you sleep in a bed belonging to a guy who is off someplace else.

By the third day, still wearing the same clothes as when I arrived, and just when any normal organization would just be getting around to expecting me to go to work, I already had seven combat missions and earned a Distinguished Flying Cross.

Ralph, the Major who was running the outfit, took me under his wing to expedite my combat theater checkout. Ralph was the Gengis Khan of Saigon, a really fierce former All-American football player from Texas and he certainly typified all the elements of an Air Commando commander. He had the rank, but he also had the size and attitude that prompted one to hustle just a bit more than average. You always had that feeling he was waiting for you to slack off a bit so he would have a reason to wrench your head off.

Ralph was the world's meanest looking gorilla ever sent to Vietnam. The encouraging part was he had survived nearly a year even though he pressed himself, the crews and the planes to the maximum. The Ranch Hands respected him and they only respected an outstanding commander. All you had to do was hang on to his shirt tail and see how a war was fought.

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 propellors 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 propellors. 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^{o} 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.

Ralph was known to tipple on occasion, like sipping two or three bottles of Beefeaters dry before venturing forth on his Honda 750. When he roared into Saigon, cigar firmly clenched, throttle wide open with a ground speed of 70-80 mph, he struck paralyzing fear in the hearts and minds of the few Vietnemese that ever dared joust with him for the right of way.

It was rumored the Saigon traffic safety folks had a bulletin out stating, "If a Vietnemese in any vehicle smaller than an armored personnel carrier sights a cigar-chewing, gorilla-sized American on an over-sized Honda, immediately deposit humble body and vehicle in nearest ditch to prevent premature meeting of honorable ancestors."

Naturally I felt obliged to buy a motorcycle just like everyone else. Well, not quite like everyone else. Everybody else had a Honda. I bought the only U.S. manufactured motorcycle that ever found its way to Vietnam.

I have no idea how the motorcycle got to Vietnam, but it was a 125cc Harley Davidson, vintage long forgotten. It had huge crash bars on the sides and one outstanding advantage over all the other motorcycles in Vietnam. Stealing motorcycles and stripping major parts was a big operation in Vietnam. The folks that owned the Hondas would spend up to $20 a night in downtown Saigon just hiring guys to guard their Hondas while they slipped into a gin mill for a toddy. The more places they stopped at, the more guards they hired and it soon mounted up as a major expense.

My Harley, being the only one of its kind, escaped this problem. Not one part on the Harley would fit the Japanese made cycles. Stealing the whole motorcycle was out of the question. There was no way the thief could camouflage the Harley to look like anything but an old Harley and he would have been caught immediately.

The Harley was a good old machine, plenty of pep and if you got in real trouble, you could lay the old beast down at 30 or 40mph on its huge crash bars, climb up on top of the gas tank and ride it while it slid down the street, hopefully to an easy stop.

That particular maneuver was especially spectacular at night with a great shower of sparks flying behind the machine sliding down the street.

Although not recommended for a steady pastime, I did have to do just that several times and it saved my body from some severe hurt and pain on more than one occasion.

Don't get me wrong. I took a couple of grand slam headers off the Harley. You may have already figured I'm a firm believer in the old fighter pilot axiom that you have to smoke and drink to have a good time. Another axiom I discovered was that smoking, drinking and riding a Harley simultaneously could be very harmful to your health.

Every American who rode motorcycles in Vietnam suffered from a common injury at one time or another. Because of the high temperatures, we all wore short sleeve shirts, including times when we were riding our cycles. Thus, whenever you fell off your bike or took a spill, you usually skinned yourself up pretty badly which left some ugly rashes to heal up. Because of the predominance of Hondas in Vietnam, these rashes became known as Honda Rash. The first time I fell down, skinning myself quite suitably on many parts of my body, the Cowboys immediately dubbed my injuries a Harley Heart. This was a crude reference to the Purple Heart given for combat wounds. The term stuck, and while the rest of the G.I. motorcycle riders in Vietnam got Honda Rashes from their crashes, I got Harley Hearts.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"C" FLIGHT

With Ralph's inspiring, but most imposing guidance, my ascension up the ladder of the chain of command took one week. In seven days I was a fully qualified lead aircraft commander - because Ralph said I was. Ralph's pronouncements were usually followed by a clap of thunder so no one ever argued with him.

When Ralph said I was fully qualified, the fact that I couldn't find my way home from the target was immaterial, I was qualified. Hell, I had just begun to decipher the taxiway diagram of the air base and was overjoyed on any occasion that I could successfully get the airplane to the correct runway for takeoff. Flying around the country side was another matter. The more experienced pilots recognized the winding rivers at once but they were a hopeless maze for me. The Navigators continued to point out "prominent" land marks but I never saw a thing except monotonously unchanging green delta countryside.

As the newly checked out lead pilot, I continued to lead the other aircraft to the targets. The Navigators with infinite patience kept pointing me toward the target and then pointing me back to the home base after the mission.

On the plus side, I had it figured that if it only took seven days to become the lead aircraft commander, the next step to flight commander should be completed by my tenth day in Vietnam. Extending this lightening climb in my version of unit command philosophy, I deduced I would be the commander of the entire unit by my 20th day in combat.

Unknown to me, the jokers in Personnel back in the States were using the "you are going to be the commander" line on every flying jock they could find. It seems the more folks that found out how much the Ranch Hands were shot at and hit, the more severe the problem of recruiting double volunteers for the Ranch was becoming. Thus, the bait of becoming a combat commander was used on everybody.

I had arrived as the second ranking Officer. I departed as the 19th ranking Officer. Oh well, 18 other guys suffered the same aspiring "commander" deflations that I suffered.

In reflecting on the escapades and personal traits of the Cowboys who eventually flew for me in the Ranch, I'm sort of glad I never became the commander. That motley group of characters managed one way or another to ruin the commander's day - every day. Commanders don't have fun.

Commanders stationed in Saigon had to be fast on their feet. Commanders had to meet THEM on a face-to-face basis every day. Ranch Hand commanders particularly spent a lot of their time trying to explain off something "those damn Cowboys had done." The commander usually didn't have the full story or explanation for a particular exploit because Cowboys were reluctant to tell Saigon, the commander or THEM anything. The Cowboys never lied, but they were notorious for omitting details unfavorable to their version of why this or that happened that day.

The Ranch operation was being expanded. The Cowboys were getting more airplanes and crews. The outfit was now big enough to form three flights. Each flight would have three airplanes, seven pilots, a navigator and four flight engineers. I was to be "C" flight commander.

With very few exceptions the pilots and navigators in the Air Force, and thus in the Ranch Hands, were college graduates. They had been screened by several Officer selection boards for things like insanity and had to be relatively well coordinated to become flyers.

One would immediately assume that this would assure a reasonably intelligent group of individuals. One might even expect them to be gentlemen, have high standards of conduct and an abiding knowledge of military regulations. I had observed some of the Cowboy "selectees" in the classes training behind me and I have not noticed any abnormal or wierd traits about them. I quite naturally assumed that "C" flight would be assigned five pilots and one navigator with all the aforementioned attributes.

I couldn't have been more wrong. Somewhere the system failed. Somehow six highly questionable Air Force Officers slipped through the screening process. The chance that all six could end up in one unit - improbable. The chance of all six being assigned to the same flight - impossible. Wrong.

What I got was six absolutely crazy bastards who never heard of protocol, regulations, checklists or any other standard military procedures.

Their only redeeming qualities were they loved to fly combat, thought getting shot at and hit was a swinging way of life and they loved to party, party, party. From there on it was all downhill. Flight commanders were people they pretended to listen to at the daily mission briefings, unit commanders didn't count and anyone higher than that was THEM and referred to in dregatory terms only.

No regulations applied to the six. They were the last of the Air