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November 25, 1993

Fred Home

food distribution center

Bruce Lake

Dear Bruce,

I received your letter and book about 2 weeks ago, and really appreciate the thought. I've pretty much finished the book, and with today being Thanksgiving, it seemed like a good time to write (or at least start writing - I think this letter may end up taking a while). You've mentioned several times about being thankful for having simply survived Vietnam, to say nothing of having body and mind intact, and I couldn't agree more. We were definately among the lucky ones, I remember counting about 15 pilots dead of the 45 or so active pilots in the squadron, 33% !!

I guess I knew it at the time, but it surprises me how much you and I were alike as far as background, training experiences, attitudes, outlooks, same squadron, co-pilots, flight experiences, in fact I was surprised to read that we both left country on about the same day in February, except I'd finished up and was headed home. I'd gotten there in January 1968, in the middle of the big Tet offensive, and, as you mentioned, left in the middle of the smaller but still active Tet celebrations of 1969.

I was sent back to El Toro (actually the helicopter base was in Tustin, nearby) which was what I'd lobbied hard for while still in country. I'd completed a couple of years of college before enlisting, and a local college out here offered a program which would accept almost all my previous credits towards a degree. Also, my wife was still here from when I left for RVN, and she had a pretty good job in computer programing with a local defense contractor (she was making a lot more money than I was!). Anyway, I spent the next 1½ years here as a 46 instructor to RVN bound pilots, and got out of the service in August '70. I just couldn't see any reason to stay in. I'd already collected 40 air medals and a few purple hearts, and that 33% number kept running around in my head. I mean, being lucky for 13 months was one thing, but another tour? Forget it. Also, the peacetime service really drove me up the wall. One reason, I'm sure was that I was so far behind the power curve on rank. I was still a fairly junior 1st back in the states, I actually had some new students on the way to RVN who actually outranked me, and of course all the rest of the officers were Captains looking at Major. Talk about SLJO!! Of course it really wasn't any different in country, I was still a brown bar well into my tour, in fact I was section leader for about a month before I put on the silver bar. I had to chuckle at the memory of hanging our soft caps over the wet compass to announce our junior-ness. That brown bar caused all kinds of problems (and fun) because I was one of the last 3 Marcads to go thru, so everybody outranked me on the ground. I guess that's why I (we) used to hang around and fly so much. It was kind of a kick getting very senior in the air very quickly, while still wearing the brown bar. I've been trying to remember exactly what my collateral duty was in 265, I think I was assistant to the assistant something or other, some SLJ that left me lots of time to fly. By the way, around the

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time of the '68 Tet offensive (Lyndon Johnson - "We have turned the corner...", of course he was right about the turn, just wrong about which corner...) none of the other pilots minded anybody getting lots of hours. The more I flew, the more some of the oldtimers wanted me to fly. And like you, I couldn't get enough of it.

When I was getting ready to get out I was lucky enough to land a job flying for the local electric company. It was mostly helicopter, although I got a few hours co-pilot in their King-Air. I was hired because of my experience with the heavy helicopters. Edison was planning on buying a Huey for construction, and with all my external experience (plus just being in the right place at the right time) I went directly to work for them. Didn't even have to move our apartment, their base was right here in Orange County! Unfortunately (or, in hindsight, fortunately) they decided not to buy the Huey, and I wound up flying little piston-banger Hillers all around southern California. It really wasn't a bad job, the flying was a lot of fun, but there was nowhere to go in the company. Pilots were basically glorified truck drivers (of course I knew that but I hoped they didn't), and I couldn't see myself doing that for the rest of my life. While still with Edison I decided to get into a business where talent and hard work were recognized in the pay envelope, and not with medals to hang in the den. A commission arrangement sounded good, so I picked real estate and got my salesman license in my spare time. I quit Edison then, and started selling houses, still right here in Orange County. After about a year of that, I was offered the opportunity to get into commercial and industrial real estate. That was a hard choice, because I was doing real well in the house market. By that time though, we had two boys, and were planning on more, and I could see that house sales required lots of weekend and evening work, which would be a bad deal when the kids got into school and our paths would rarely cross. So I took the Coldwell Banker job and did real well at that thru the '70s. Well enough that by 1979 I left CB to run my own development and building business. I was pretty well burned out on brokerage by then anyway, and we now had 4 kids whom I really enjoyed spending lots of time with. I coached Little League, soccer and helped with the kid's swim team, also we did lots of camping and so on. Thru the '80s I really enjoyed myself. I was working out of an office in my home, spending lots of time with the family, and doing ok financially. I also got involved, in 1982, with starting up a charity foodbank for Orange County. I'd been helping out at our church with taking care of the needy in our area, and the foodbank was started to help small groups like ours obtain food donations, primarily to keep the costs of our programs down. Over the years I'd been on the foodbank's board of directors, and done lots of volunteer work there, then a little over two years ago I was offered the opportunity to take over as director of the whole foodbank operation. I wasn't real interested at first, mainly because I wasn't working too hard at real estate, having fun with the family, and wasn't looking for anything else. After a while though, I accepted, so for the last two years+ I've been a foodbank director, commuting to work every day, and generally acting like a real worker! Running the foodbank is sometimes lots of fun, and sometimes a real pain in the rear. We have 30 full time employees, about 50,000 square feet of warehouse, and last year put out 9.6 million pounds of food. I'll probably do this for another year or two, until I can train someone better than me to take over, then move on to something else. Just like RVN, I'm still not sure what I want to do when I grow up...

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Your book had me real confused for a while because I couldn't place some of the names. Then later I realized you had changed some of the names, I'm guessing the ones who were W or KIA. I'd be curious to know why you did that... It didn't take me too long to recognize Jim Rains as Jeff Rainaud (spelling ?). As you probably remember, Jeff and I were very good friends over there; I remember he and I talking incessantly about many things, including our upcoming R&Rs to Hawaii. I can't remember if he had just come back or was just getting ready to go, when he bought it. I know it was just before I went, and his death really affected me during what should have been a joyous 5 or 6 days with my wife. Did you know that I watched Jeff go down? I was leading the section with Jeff on the wing when we went into some crappy little zone near a river a little ways up Happy Vally (at least I think it was Happy Valley, my memory for all those names after 25 years isn't so hot...). We had taken some fire on the way in, so came out with a pretty tight spiral, me first. I was at about 2,000 feet (I remember that real well, because I figure Jeff was at about 1,500') when the Huey gun came over the air with "Injure lead, a 34 just ran into your wingman..." I looked out & down, and it took me several moments to understand what the hell was going on. The 34 was already on fire, with that magnesium burning like a sparkler on the 4th of July. I remember staring at Jeff's bird for some time, bewildered, because I was looking down and was looking at the belly. The bird was inverted, slightly nose down, and my recollection is that all the blades had been thrown. I was surprised by your book, that they landed upright in the river bed, it must have been a coincidence because I know they rolled at least once on the way down. That incident upset me more than anything else in the war. Even set aside the fact that he was probably my best friend in the squadron, just the fact that he had done absolutely nothing wrong, and yet had to pay for some 34 driver's incompetance with his life and all his crew's lives, affected me profoundly. I mean, what the hell, there must have been a million ways we could legitimately get killed over there without have one of our own do it for us! I later heard that the 34 was on some kind of sightseeing tour with a couple of heavies. He was straight & level at 1,500' driving up the valley with his head up his ass. How he couldn't have seen us coming up out of that zone is incredible, especially since I had just flown thru his altitude. Like Jeff, we never saw the 34 either, until it was a torch. But that's not too surprising, having been bent up in a spiral and taking ground fire... Shit.

Since I've been reading your book, my wife's been wondering if I going to start waking up again in the middle of the night in pretty bad shape. I did that for a while after getting back, I don't remember much about it, but it scared her pretty good a few times. I did wake up last night thinking about shoulder mounted heat seekers. They had been reported around the DMZ about the time I was leaving. There was also a reported truck mounted 37mm AA gun up there that was taking bites out of helicopters on GCAs -- just a few more reasons I never considered re-up.

radar controlled

I enjoyed the memory of the orphanage trips. I'm not sure if you were there yet, but we also used to go into the village at the base of Marble Mountain with our flight surgeon, Lt. Wiley as I remember. He had set up a small informal health clinic there, and some of us used to go help out. It was also fun to wander around the little village & tour the marble factories. I still have a marble tea set I bought on one of those trips. One day when I wasn't there, someone dropped a grenade in the gas tank of Whiley's jeep, with electrical tape around the spoon. That was so the grenade would wait until the gas acted on the tape enough to loosen the bond, release the spoon and blow up the jeep, hopefully with some people on board, or with the jeep parked near a bunch of people back on base. Fortunately the tape let go pretty quickly and the jeep blew while Whiley was still in the clinic. That was the end of those trips...

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I don't remember quite as much second guessing of the overall war as you relate. Maybe we had gotten most of that out of our systems during the Tet offensive - we knew then that the war was all f---ed up, and that any military meaning was out of the question. I'd honestly joined for two reasons, about equally weighed. First, I felt a strong duty as a citizen, to support the government that provided us the best place in the world to live. I couldn't understand all the young folks who would take advantage of all our blessings, then refuse to give anything to support the system. They seemed to think the system had to be perfect before they would condescend to lend any support. If the government didn't act exactly as they wished, they'd protest & run away to Canada. I suspect a lot of them were scared for their skins, who wasn't? Anyway, I figured I owed Uncle, and that, together with the fact that he would teach me to fly for free, pay me in fact, was why I joined up. After I realized the military futility of the Vietnam exercise, I could be content to be the best pilot possible, and look forward to going home. It certainly didn't take any positive feelings about the war to motivate about going into a hot zone to pull out medevacs; saving lives and generally doing the best job possible was plenty enough motivation for me, and I figured the negative talk was a waste of time and a distraction to performance - so I usually avoided it as much as possible.

Wasn't Bill Poe a piece of work? He and I bunked next to each other for quite a while, and I know I'm a much better person for it. To say nothing of the piloting parts, which you so accurately related. The only bad thing about flying with Bill, other than the fact they always gave him the worst maintenance nightmares, was that they also gave him the worst shit-sandwiches of missions. I think Bill was on a first name basis with most all the recon grunts. I'm surprised they didn't give Bill a going away party... I think Bill's living up in the northwest somewhere. One of my sons is going to the University of Washington in Seattle, maybe when I'm up that way sometime I'll try to look him up. There aren't too many other pilots I'd say that about...

I also got a kick out of your comments about the medals we didn't get. I was co-pilot one day with Bear Bryant when we got shot up pretty good in the cockpit, we both drew purple hearts for that one. Later on, our wingman mentioned something to the awards officer (who may have been Higgenbottom at the time) about the mission. The comment that came back was something to the effect that a couple of brown & silver bar Marcads weren't worth the time to write up the awards. It didn't bother me too much at the time because I'd already figured that the USMC was not going to be my career, and I wasn't concerned about my personel file. It bothered me much more later when I'd see someone bragging about (or being praised about) some awards. Then I'd read the citation and say to myself, what the hell, we pulled that crap once a week! Once in a great while my kids show some interest in the war, I suppose it might be nice to have some fancy medals to show off a little for them. I did get one medal without ever taking one round. And I'm actually more proud of that obscure medal than almost anything else in the war. I'd transferred up to 161 in that big pilot shuffle around December '68. That made me real senior with in-country flight time since that squadron had come over intact sometime the previous summer. Anyway, in January I volunteered for a real interesting mission that nobody else wanted. It was to be all IFR, flying up a valley somewhere south of KheSahn, dropping resupplies by parachute to several hundred stranded ARVN grunts. I'd always been fascinated with instrument

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flying, and was pretty good at it, even being student of the month for the instrument training portion at Whiting in the T-28s. And I'd gone out of my way to stay proficient while in country. The weather was absolute crap, and had been for over a week. Which of course was why the Arvn were in such bad trouble. They had been unable to get either resupplied or get any close air/ground support from our fixed wing, because they were 0/0 for the whole time up that lousey valley. They were completely surrounded and virtually out of everything. What we figured out, was that I could fly up the valley on ASRAT, then kick the pallets of supplies out the back, precisely over their base. ASRAT was used extensively with the jet bombers to drop ordnance, but I think mine was the only time it was rigged up in this fashion. It was a lot of fun for a while. We'd set the transponder, then somebody in a truck somewhere would vector us around in the soup until we were headed up the valley. They could tell exactly where we were, and our altitude within a few feet. "Uh, Cattlecall 1-0, up 50' please..." . Up 50 feet?? Holy cow, we were going to drop this stuff right on their plates! The tricky part was approaching the drop point because we had to level the ramp to get ready to push the pallet out. Which of course altered the dynamics and usually the altitude. "Uh, Cattlecall 1-0, down 100' please...". We also had to drop the airspeed way down, to about 50 kts as I recall, which wasn't too much fun in the soup, "Uh, Cattlecall 1-0, come right 3° and down 75' please..." Then, "1,000 meters, come right 2°... 500 meters, down 100'... 200 meters steady... DROP!" At that point I found I had to kick the nose up even higher to get the pallet down the ramp, and was real relieved when it was clear and we could resume normal (?) flight, still in the soup & on ASRAT, because there were usually two pallets on board, and we had to drive around for a while before dropping the #2. The delay was so the grunts could let us (ASRAT) know where the 1st pallet landed, and make adjustments. About this time I got to wondering what would happen if the pallet got hung up and the chute popped. It didn't take much imagination to see

little pieces of Fred and 46 scattered all over the Arvn base. No wonder nobody else would do this... After flying this mission all day, I think we reloaded twice & went back for a total of 6 drops, the radios starting crapping out on us. After the last drop they went out completely, which was really spooky because we were still pretty much between those mountains, low, and in the soup up that valley. Fortunately, I'd asked the co-pilot to follow along on a map as best he could, as to where we actually were. It wasn't that I didn't trust ASRAT, but we were well below the mountains on either side of us in order to make the drops as accurate as possible, and a little DR in the cockpit seemed like a good idea. Plus the sun (wherever it was) was going down so being in the soup, at dusk with no radios, was a real bummer. Since the tops were nowhere to be known, and we didn't have much fuel, I decided to fly east for a while, until clear of the mountains and bad guys, then just let down. I put it into a 500'/min descent with a moderate spiral (with the co-pilot looking down, since I was on the instruments) and waited till we saw something. I had also slowed down to 50 kts (again) figuring that, if nothing else, we would be in a landing configuration when we ran out of altitude. I told the whole crew to call out the clock location of the first thing they saw, and to add "shit!" if we were about to crash into something. We broke out at 150' directly over highway 1, just as I had planned (ha, ha). It had taken a while to get down and was pretty dark under the crap, plus we were now real low on fuel, so I headed south along the road to an Army base I knew was around somewhere. The Army pilots all loved the story, I don't think any of them even know what instrument flying is. Between all the drinks they bought us, and being absolutely wiped out from all day in the soup, I was a goner by 9pm... When we re-fueled the next day, we took more than the tanks were supposed to hold...

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We heard the next day that the Arvn actually recovered most of what we dropped. Sometime later, a little ARVN General came to Quang Tri to explain that those supplies most certainly saved hundreds of his troops lives, and gave me Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Silver Star for our efforts. From a purely piloting viewpoint, I'm as proud of that day as I am of any of the shoot-em-up, blood & guts days. There was some talk of a DFC, but I was real short by then, and wasn't really part of that squadron's inner circle, so they never did anything about it. Like you though, the DFC would have been the one I'd liked to have had.

I had my own 'stateside reality check' when after about 2 months in-country I was notified that my Dad had died of an unexpected and sudden heart attack. You talk about mixed emotions... I was stunned by my Dad's death, he was only 58, and with all the death we were witnessing in RVN my Dad's death was totally out of place - inconceivable. At the same time I was delighted to be out of country and going HOME to see my wife and family. I had 30 days leave as I remember, and between going & coming, then getting re-checked in-country, I lost about 6 weeks of flying. I also was lucky enough to lose a bunch more in-country time because I was in the half of the squadron that went to Subic Bay. I also remember getting sick after transferring up to Quang Tri, and skating for about 3 weeks then. As it was I ended up with about 750 hours in-country and 800+ mission credits. Between the emergency leave, the boat trip, and being SIQ, I probably lost 3 months flying there, and still ended up with more hours than most. With those extra 3 months I could have ended up with a thousand hours & mission credits. I also could have ended up in a body bag...

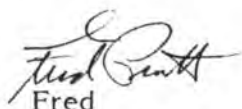
I've been telling my wife a little about your book, and she just asked me if I wanted to read thru all the letters I'd sent her from RVN... I DON'T THINK SO! Although it doesn't surprise me, I don't think I ever thought she would have saved all that stuff. I never saved any of her letters... I know I've got old logbooks and military stuff around somewhere. I've also got a bunch of photos around here in a box. About 5 years ago I came across my sword and some medals, and large wood carvings of the Navy wings and MC globe, so I arranged it all into a wall display for my home office. Aside from that, I really have not paid any attention to Vietnam in 25 years. Maybe some rainy weekend I'll dig all that stuff out & make some sense of it. I'm wondering what that will be like. I know just since starting your book I've dredged up memories long since forgotten, and I'm not real sure about re-opening that whole can of worms. How was it for you with all the obvious effort in putting the book together?

I'm now on my third day of writing this letter, and realize that you probably couldn't care less about most of this stuff, but for some reason it's felt good getting it off my chest. To answer your question, I really haven't kept up with any of the old 265 crowd at all. I had stayed in the reserves until about 1974, flying 34s then 46s here locally, so kept up with some of the guys then, but not in many years since then. I know Steve Sunderman was in the area for a while, and Dave Ariss is doing real estate deals about 75 miles east of here. (You may not have known Dave, he was the one who got shot up real bad while hoisting some medevacs & was lucky to live thru it, and all the subsequent operations). I do keep up with George Lee, he also ended up in industrial real estate with Coldwell Banker, doing extremely well down in the Phoenix area.

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Interestingly enough, I ran into Joe Genova last year at the foodbank. He has something to do with agriculture out here, and is involved in a group that donates to the foodbank. Here's a couple of other (non-265) names you may recognize: Bill Ring lives a few miles from me, and works locally in the securities business. Bill also started up the Vietnam Combat Pilot's Assn. We all get together 3 or 4 times a year to drink beer and tell lies. Bill always gets us front row seats for the El Toro Blue Angels air show, which is a lot of fun but always makes me feel very old, watching my kids climb around on the static displays. My oldest sons are now older than I was when I went to Pensacola! I bump into Charlie Crookall every once in a while, and I know Vern Sharpless is a cop in the Santa Ana PD, or at least was the last time I saw him 10 years ago. I had a call 6 months ago from Fred Penning, who is now down in San Diego working a white collar job with Waste Management. Fred had flown civilian 46s for quite a while with a logging company up north somewhere, and had some great stories to tell about that! I saw Scotty (can't think of his last name) at last year's air show. He had restored a T-28 and had it on display for the weekend. Roberts

I guess that's about it. I'm thinking that if I checked back thru my old squadron records I'd come up with some other (forgotten) names... maybe later. I had heard about the big reunions around the country, but haven't been too interested. I would, though, be real interested in a 265 get together - I think that would be a lot more meaningful than a big group of guys I probably never knew. Best wishes to Kay & your family - assuming you're still married & have a family!


Fred

Two last thoughts: Your comments about learning patience while being forced to sit in a hot zone were right on the mark. I also look back on those situations as a sort of stress relieving technique. When I occasionally find myself getting stressed out, I think back to the anxiety of spiraling down into known gunfire, sitting there watching muzzle-flashes, etc. etc., then I have to laugh at whatever rinky-dink situation is causing my current feelings. Occasionally at work when one of my employees really screws up, and is feeling bad about it, I ask them how many people died because of it. That usually gets me a blank stare, and I'll reply, well, what the hell, nobody died, how serious could it have really been?

Your motorcycle stories also struck a chord. Maybe it was our early Bell training with the twist-grip throttle? A friend of mine was an avid bike racer, off-road, in the desert. One day, about a year after getting back, I went out with him and a few of his racing friends "just for fun" in the sand dunes near Palm Springs. I had done some road riding, but was a total novice off-road, so stayed back in line as we did follow-the-leader up & over the dunes. Somehow, at one point, I ended up in the lead & went roaring up a dune to discover THAT dune was actually there because of a 5' high retaining wall on the other side. Making the mistake of trying to stop at the last second, I did a neat 180° forward roll, followed by a perfect 3 point inverted landed - my head & both shoulders. The surgery wasn't any fun at all & 6 months later when they took the pin out of my shoulder, I decided to lay off the bikes and stick with something safe, like 46s.

