

Da Nang

A Forward Air Controller's Year
of Combat over Vietnam

DIARY

COL. TOM YARBOROUGH

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This book is dedicated to the memory and fighting spirit of the 338 U. S. Air Force forward air controllers who were lost in battle in the skies over Southeast Asia.

***"Give honour to our heroes fall'n, how ill
soe'er the cause that bade them forth to die"***

William Watson
"The English Dead"

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smoke, the Cobras worked the areas over while the CH-54 made his run onto the mountaintop. For all we knew, the sounds at which we fired could have been some animal rooting around in the tangle of vegetation, but this was no time to be cautious—anybody moving up the side of the mountain was considered the enemy. Besides, the relay site could hear the bad guys shooting at us on every resupply sortie, so we knew the threat and the danger were real.

These missions seemed easy compared to inserting a team on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Since there was never any doubt about where the friendlies were, controlling air strikes was a snap. Most of us began to regard the daily resupply missions as milk runs. We knew the NVA fired at us, but we tended to dismiss the danger as minimal. Of course, it was always possible to get hit when the bad guys emptied clip after clip in our direction, but fortunately, the sky is a big place, and most of us felt that if we were to get blasted, it would be the result of a lucky shot, what pilots called the "golden BB."

On August 22 I had a welcome break from the routine resupply missions. South Vietnam was a veritable crossroads for Air Force flyers, and I should not have been surprised to run across yet another buddy from the world, but I was happily surprised to see my roommate from pilot training, Captain Norm Komich, show up at Da Nang. The best part was that Norm had been assigned as a Jolly Green helicopter pilot living on the ground floor of the Covey hooch. Norm was the kind of tonic we all needed. He had a great sense of humor and was one of the most naturally upbeat people any of us would ever meet. Norm took a lot of good-natured kidding over his very meticulous eating habits, stemming primarily from an unquenchable desire for "greens and grams of protein." Norm took the teasing graciously because none of it was vicious—nobody dared to be nasty because he was a world-class body builder and former Mr. Massachusetts. His biceps were about the size of an average man's leg. Throughout the tour, Norm tried, in his heavy Boston accent, to convert us to better health through proper diet, rest, and no

booze. He never succeeded, but it was always fun letting him try.

Fortunately for me, I had friends to fall back on when the action heated up, such guys as Evan Quiros, Carl D'Beneditto, and Norm Komich. On the morning of August 31, I slept in since I was on the afternoon resupply run to the radio relay site. At about 10:30 that morning, Evan walked into our room, acting sort of stiff and tentative. I figured that something was bothering him, that he would get around to telling me in his own time. Finally, Evan took a deep breath and said, "I guess you didn't hear about Mike McGerty. The word just came in a little while ago. He got shot down out around that mountain you guys are always flying to."

I felt myself recoil from Evan's news. At first I was angry with him. I'd been in the room all morning. How could I know about McGerty? What a goddamn dumb thing to say. Then I took a close look at Evan's face. It was drawn tight with tension. He probably felt as awkward about telling me as I felt about hearing it. None of us knew how to handle circumstances like that, much less express them. My reaction had been classic—shoot the messenger.

When I finally trusted my voice enough to speak, it sounded hollow to me, as it had when I'd heard that Rick Meacham had been shot down. "Did he eject?" I asked.

Evan simply shook his head no, then added softly, "The back-seater didn't get out either."

We flew the afternoon resupply run as scheduled. After the last chopper dumped his load on the LZ, I circled down the northeast face of the mountain to the crash site. Through the heavy foliage, we could just make out the disintegrated mess that had once been an OV-10. The Bright Light team had already recovered the bodies of Captain Mike McGerty and Sergeant First Class Charlie Gray. Nobody could shed much light on what had happened. The relay site said Mike and Charlie were checking out some movement in a small ravine. The troops on the mountaintop heard a long burst of

automatic-weapons fire, followed by a sputtering engine and a loud crash.

Flying back to Da Nang, I remembered that Mike had been in the Prairie Fire program for only three weeks. He'd just been fully checked out a couple of days before. And Charlie Gray, veteran of God only knew how many scary missions on the ground, hated to fly with us. So we teamed the two of them up and sent them out to cut their teeth on resupply missions to the radio relay site—a regular milk run, laced with golden BBs.

SEPTEMBER

Combat Instructor

I assumed we'd have a hard time recruiting new pilots into Prairie Fire after the word got around about Mike McGerty's death. I couldn't have been more wrong. Mike's death uncorked a river of sentiment as well as volunteers, all wanting a chance to fly for Prairie Fire. Each had his own reasons—adventure, curiosity, revenge, even a desire to win a few medals. Whatever the reasons, the head Covey, Ed Cullivan, had the unenviable job of picking a new Prairie Fire boss. While he sorted through the applicants, we kept flying missions.

I had the early morning go on the fifth of September. At Covey Ops, the briefer brought me up to speed on the current and forecast weather. In what amounted to a preview of the coming monsoon season, the coast from Da Nang north was socked in with low scud and drizzle. The weather man expected a gradual burnoff by late morning, but until then, everything along the coast was instrument flight rules (IFR).

Just before dawn, I finished preflighting and completed loading several crates of fresh vegetables and a bag of mail, referred to as "Pony Express," into the cargo bay of aircraft 661. Whenever possible, we tried to help out the MLTs by hauling a few goodies to them. When they had to rely on the normal supply system, the wait tended to stretch out.

Right after lift off, the horizon disappeared into a swirling gray mass of clouds. Totally engulfed in the thick soup, I had no choice but to concentrate on flying precise instruments. While the departure controller vectored me via radar to various altitudes and headings, I stayed glued on my instruments,