

Tom Marshall

From: Evans, Jon [REDACTED]
To: 'Tom Marshall-Author' [REDACTED]
Sent: Monday, February 14, 2000 9:47 AM
Subject: FW: A-1s at Son Tay, A War Story

> -----

Tom, just got this and thought you might enjoy.

Thx so much for the visit. I don't know why, but it really was kind of fun and so much more than I expected. You make it very easy man, and for that I'm most greatful!! I never thought that level of recollection would be that enjoyable, but it sure was. My brain hasn't slowed down since. Your insights and intell are incredible. I can't believe I've remained blissfully ignorant all these years, maybe I just didn't want to admit how foolish and full of shit I was as a young warrior. In retrospect, I believe I really knew it at the time, but just couldn't accept it and keep doing the job.

Well man, I've got to dash. I look forward to seeing you again, and really appreciate the time, courtesy and generosity. Hopefully between the 2 of us we can help DIA get a handle on Barker and crew, and finally bring them home. That would propbably give John Madden a real sense of closure. Take real good care man. Night Stalkers and Black Widows don't quit (C-101 became a TF-160 unit), and I don't believe I ever heard a Phoenix do so either!!!

Bubba Jon-Widow 46

>

>

> A-1s at Son Tay

>

> I just got this from a friend of mine. I must warn you, once you

> start

> reading this, you won't stop... Its Good!

>

> The following is what I remember of the A-1 participation in the Son

> Tay

> prison camp raid. Wayne Mutza asked for some input to research he's doing
> on a book he's writing. This is what I came up with.

>

> A-1 participation in the Son Tay raid, 21 November 1970 On the

> Saturday

> night of 20 November 1970 a C-130 picked us up from Takhli where wehad
> been

> housed in the CIA compound since deploying from Eglin. The NKP flight
> line

> was blacked out, even the tower people had been relieved and was empty.

> The

2/17/00

> C-130 landed, without any lights on it or the runway and ramp, and taxied
> to
> the ramp. It had already lowered the rear ramp and when it came to almost
> a
> stop ten of us ran out, 2 pilots for each of the five Fat faces we were
> taking. It then continued on, pulling up the ramp, taxied out and took
> off.
> It had other people to deliver to other locations. The only people out
> and
> about were the crew chiefs and us. Of course the Wing Commander met us
> and
> followed me around like a puppy dog asking question after question.
>

> None of which I could answer. He got rather pissed as I recall.
> Picking up our flight gear we went straight to the birds, cranked up and
> taxied out. No taxi, runway or aircraft lights were used and no radio
> either, total silence. (The radio was not to be used till over the camp.)
> Taking off at the exact second we did a 360 over the base to join up. A
> C-130, Talon was to rendezvous with us there and lead us on. Timing was
> everything. It wasn't there. We did two more 360's and couldn't wait any
> longer. We were, by that time, about ten minutes behind schedule.
>

> The backup plan was to navigate ourselves to Son Tay, following the
> planned route and arriving at the appointed time, 0200 local Sunday, 21
> November. No way Jose. We had agreed among ourselves earlier that that
> was

> not a viable plan. We would fly the course until we got lost, which we
> knew

> we would, and then head straight for Hanoi. Hold just south of the IP,
> which was the Black River straight west of the camp, and do our thing at
> the

> TOT. (Time Over Target)
>

> The route was NKP, straight to Ventiane, straight north out of there
> and

> then drop to low level and weave through the karst and valleys all the
> rest

> of the way. Impossible at night for A-1's. A back up rendezvous with the
> Talon was over Ventiane at the appointed minute but because we had made an
> extra 360 over NKP waiting we were running late. We had been unable to
> make

> up all the lost time, some of it but not all. We hit Ventiane a few
> minutes

> late, maybe five, no Talon. We turned north and pressed on.
>

> After Ventiane passed behind there were no lights, anywhere, ink
> black.

> And then our worst nightmare loomed up. A cloud bank. Being lead I
> wasn't

> worried about being hit but the rest of the flight exploded like a covey

> of
> quail, everyone in God only knows what direction. Pushing it up I climbed
> straight ahead and soon popped out on top. Not an A-1 in sight and no
> hope
> of joining up again without lights or radio. We were all on our own.
> After
> a short time we noticed a speck of light far ahead. A star? After
> watching
> it a while we were sure it was below the horizon and no Lao in his right
> mind would have a light on. Had to be something else. Heading straight
> for
> it, it took some time to catch. A fully loaded A-1 is no speed demon.
> Sure
> enough, there was our Talon with a teeny-weeny white light on the top of
> the
> fuselage and a dim bluish glow coming from the open ramp in the rear.
> Couldn't see the bluish glow until you were only few meters from it. There
> were already two A-1's there, one on each wing. We moved up and the left
> one moved out and we took our place on the left wing tip. A few minutes
> later the other two A-1's slowly pulled up and once we were all in place
> the
> little white light went out, the bluish glow went out and the Talon
> descended into the black. From there on it was hold on tight as it bobbed
> and weaved through the hills and valleys.
>
> The Talon driver was top notch. His power applications during climbs
> and descents and gentle banking allowed our heavy A-1 to hang right in
> there. The three day "moon window" we had for this operation provided good
> night vis. With one exception. Several valleys we drove through were so
> deep that mountains, karst, trees or whatever eclipsed the moon. When
> that
> happened it was like diving into an inkwell. You could make out only a
> few
> feet of wing tip and that was only because of our own exhaust flame. When
> turns or ups and downs occurred at those times it was tough.
>
> As we emerged from the back country out over the Red River Valley it
> was almost like being over Iowa farm country with Omaha/Council Bluffs up
> ahead. (Hanoi) Lights everywhere. Soon there after the Talon started
> climbing and we knew the IP was coming up. We had a controlled altitude
> over the IP. The choppers, with their Talon, were going to be under us
> coming in from a
> different direction.
>
> They should have been slightly ahead of us but one couldn't be sure
> everyone was on time. The control time was over the camp so IP times were
> adjusted for the different speeds.
>
> Then the Talon transmitted the code word. First of anything we heard
> on

> the radio all night. I can't remember the word but it was to be picked up
> by a high orbiting EC-135 over northern Laos and relayed back to wherever.
> It meant we had crossed the IP. (We were two seconds off. The best
> anyone
> had done during practice was ten minutes. Of course we didn't have Talons
> for the practice.) The Talon then accelerated out and up like a shot and
> disappeared in the night. The heading to the camp was 091 and trying to
> reset our DG by a giggly whiskey compass was an effort in futility. You
> remember the high tech, latest hardware we had on board. Good thing all
> the
> towns, cities and roads were lit up. With the target study we had done it
> was like being in your own back yard.
>
> Next number 5 peeled off to the right. He was backup in case anyone
> was
> shot down and was to orbit a large hill just south of course until called
> in. As it turned out the hill was an Army artillery practice range and it
> wasn't long before they started taking a few rounds. They moved off to
> somewhere else, probably closer to the camp, don't know where. Just
> another
> example of the brilliant Intel we had.
>
> Then 3 & 4 peeled off to the left to hold just short of the camp till
> called in. The plan was to call them in when we had expended 50% of our
> ordnance. Then they would do the same with us, each time expending 50% of
> what you had left. That way, if someone went down, there would always be
> aircraft in the air that had some ordnance left for support. Then 2
> dropped
> back so we could set up a two aircraft Daisy Chain around the camp.
>
> It was like a precision ballet, a computer simulation would not have
> been better timed. Just as I rolled into a bank along side the camp two
> flares popped right over it, having been released from one of the Talons.
> At the same time Banana (HH-3 with Blue Boy assault team aboard.) crashed
> landed inside the camp compound and the first Apple (CH-53) opened up with
> mini-guns on the watch towers and the guard quarters. The towers either
> blew apart or caught fire as did the guard quarters. We didn't want the
> big
> fire consuming the two story quarters, attracts attention, but it was too
> late.
>
> At that time we had nothing to do except to make sure no one
> approached
> the camp. No one did. We could see the sparkles from a Fire Fight
> Simulator dropped by one of the Talons on the other side of town as a
> distraction and soon a large explosion and fire where another Talon dumped
> napalm on an infantry base armory a few klicks to the South. Then the
> shit
> hit the fan. Gear Box (The Command and Control team.) started yelling
> about

> losing Axe. Axe was Col. (Bull) Simons personal call sign. "We've lost
> Axe" he kept yelling. "God damn, Simons has been killed, we're all in
> deep
> shit." At this point I'd like to say that I think the Universe will
> collapse
> in upon itself in the Big Crunch before the Army and Air Force will ever
> be
> able to talk to each other on a radio and have each other understand
> what's
> going on. He wasn't lost like being dead in AF jargon, they just didn't
> know where he was, couldn't find him.
>
> Then the radio erupted with chatter from everywhere. The second Apple
> carrying half the assault force and Bull Simons, had landed the troops in
> the wrong place. There heading had been one degree off coming in from the
> IP. (Whether pilot or equipment error I don't know.) Placing them several
> hundred meters south of the camp. When the time ran out they saw a
> building
> that didn't quite look like the guard quarters but it was the only
> building
> around, so landed. That's where the infamous "Fire Fight at The School"
> took place. We called it a school because it looked like a school,
> regardless of what it really was. You couldn't just keep referring to it
> as
> the white building south of the camp. There were lots of buildings south
> of
> the camp. Everything had to have a name. That way everyone knows what
> you're talking about. The liberal media, though, had a small Field Day
> with
> that name. I remember some time later a female TV reporter asking Col.
> Simons if he had killed anyone at The School. He said something to the
> effect "I was approached by a big fella, I had a tracer as every third
> round
> in my M-16 and saw three go through his middle." The reporter didn't have
> a
> follow up question.
>
> The troops in the wrong place were screaming, Gear Box was screaming
> and
> all the Apples were screaming. The FM and VHF radios were almost
> impossible
> to read let alone get anything in of your own. (The UHF was kept for AF
> use
> to call the MIG Cap or Weasels if needed or to talk among ourselves.) The
> Apple that had dumped the guys in the wrong place was the closest so did a
> 180 and went in to pick them up. All the others took off and headed for
> the
> School as well just in case. No one has figured out yet why there wasn't
> a
> mid-air. The troops at the school were in a fierce fire-fight the whole

> time they were on the ground. Right after they landed people came pouring
> out of the building. Most were too large in stature for Vietnamese. The
> guess was Chinese or Russian but no one had time to check. The estimated
> kill was between one and two hundred and again, no one had time to count.
> Bull Simons and the rest of the assault force made it back to the camp
> without a casualty. The whole incident only lasted a few minutes but it
> put
> the entire ground operation off schedule. The two parameter teams, Red
> Wine
> and Green Leaf, headed out to do their thing but Blue Boy, the assault
> team
> inside the prison compound, had already searched most of the prison.
>
> As soon as Simons got on the radio he asked Blue Boy for a status
> report. The answer was "No Packages so far, still searching." (A Package
> was the code word for a prisoner.) Simons then told us to take out the
> foot
> bridge to the Citadel.
>
> We called a group of building surrounded by a small moat the Citadel.
> It
> was a few hundred meters southeast of the Camp and had a small foot bridge
> over the moat on the camp side. Intel told us it was a military cadet
> training facility and probably had a small armory for small arms. We
> didn't
> want anyone coming across that bridge armed and get within rifle range of
> the camp. Jerry and I put two WP bombs on it and when 2 came in saw the
> bridge was wiped out and dropped short to get anyone that might have
> already
> come across. In the process taking out a few blocks of a housing area
> between the camp and the citadel. WP does a real number on wooden
> structures, the fire storm was not small.
>
> About this time the sequence of events gets all jumbled up. I have no
> idea what happened first, second and so forth. About the time Simons and
> the troops got back to the camp the first SAM took off. You cannot miss a
> SAM launch at night. It's like a mini Shuttle launch, lights up an area
> for
> miles in all directions. The first few were called "SAM, SAM, DIVE, DIVE"
> but that soon became silly. There were so many launches that you couldn't
> call them. There seemed to be about four launch sites within a few miles
> off the camp on the West side of Hanoi. The rest were further east and we
> didn't think they were a threat to us. Most of the SAM's went high, after
> The MIG cap, Weasels and the Navy's two hundred plane faint coming in from
> the East. The idea was to make them think there was a major raid on Hanoi
> and not bother with a few planes on the West side. It worked, NSA told us
> later that the Air Defense Commander screamed "Fire at Will," shut down
> the
> net and went off the air.
>

> We were at our briefed 3 thousand feet until the SAM's started coming
> our way. Intel told us we wouldn't have any trouble with SAM's at that
> altitude. A lot some pencil pushing puke knows. We all hit the deck and
> kept an eye on the launch sites close to us and sure enough, someone
> decided
> to try for the guys to the West, us. The site closest to us, just a few
> miles to the Northeast launched one that never got to the horizon. I
> watched it rise and almost immediately it leveled off. Then the thing
> stopped moving on the windscreen. You know what that means, collision
> course. We dove into the Red River and turned west. Jerry was flying and
> I
> was turned around keeping an eye on the damn thing as it charged at us
> over
> my right shoulder. I kept bumping the stick forward saying "Lower, Lower."
> Jerry kept bumping the stick back saying "We're going to hit the water."
> When the rocket plume on the thing seemed as big as the A-1 I yelled break
> left. We went up and over the river bank, about fifty feet, and leveled
> off
> at phone poll height going straight south.
>
> We never saw the thing again. It either hadn't had time to arm or
> buried itself in the water/mud so deep that the flash of detonation was
> masked. That's another thing you can't miss at night. The detonation of a
> SAM. It's a lightening bright flash, quite large. They were going off
> over
> us constantly and when you got used to them you didn't even bother to look
> up. For about a thirty minute period there were no less then three SAM's
> airborne at any one time and other times so many you couldn't count them.
> I've never heard an estimate of the number fired that night but it has to
> be
> in the hundreds. All the SAM misses would self detonate, either at a pre
> set altitude or motor burn out, don't know which.
>
> Like I said, you wouldn't look up at a SAM detonation because they
> were
> so numerous unless something was different. Then there was something
> different. The flash was yellowish instead of bright white. Looking up
> there was a large fire ball with flaming debris falling from it. "Damn,
> someone got nailed." Then suddenly there was a flaming dash across the
> sky
> heading southwest, then another and another. Three dashes were all I saw,
> couldn't spend any more time looking up.
>
> Later we learned that a SAM had detonated close to a Weasel and filled
> his bird with holes. Fuel was streaming out and his AB was igniting it in
> dashes across the sky. Since he was losing all his fuel anyway he left it
> in AB till he ran out. He got to the southern PDJ before bailing out.
> About
> this time Blue Boy calls Axe and says "Search complete, negative
> packages."

> Silence, then Simons asks for a repeat. "Search complete, negative
> packages, repeat negative packages." More silence.
>
> I don't know what anyone else was thinking then but for me it was
> setup,
> ambush. But hell, we'd already been there twenty minutes and they'd have
> sprung it by then. So then it turned to "What the hell are we doing
> here?"
> And "How the hell are we going to get our asses out of here intact."
> Simons
> must have been thinking the same thing. He called for the parameter teams
> to pull back and the Apples to come in for pickup. Then he told us to
> take
> out the Big Bridge.
>
> All sounds very simple but it sure wasn't. First of all we had no
> hard
> ordnance and couldn't take out the Big Bridge. We had no more WP bombs
> and
> that was the only thing that would have damaged a wooden bridge. The
> bridge
> was Red Wines objective and were supposed to blow it but because of their
> late start hadn't reached it before the pull back order.
>
> A little poop about the Big Bridge. The bridge was a few hundred
> meters
> northeast of the camp on the road that ran in front of it. It was about a
> hundred feet long, heavily constructed and could carry any vehicle up to a
> tank, we were told. Red Wine was supposed to blow it and hold the road
> while Green Leaf went southeast and held the road there.
> During training the engineers said twelve pounds of C-4 would take out
> the bridge. However, to be sure they were going to double it and use
> twenty-four pounds.
>
> Col. Simons said that he wanted to be doubly sure and doubled that to
> forty-eight pounds then added that two people would carry forty-eight
> pounds
> each making it ninety-six pounds of C-4. I would have liked to see what
> ninety-six pounds of C-4 did to that bridge but it wasn't to be.
>
> What made things worse was that the out bound and pull back routes
> for
> the parameter teams were different. Since each team out bound had to take
> out any possible threats they didn't want to retrace their steps and
> possibly run into someone they missed. He would have been one pissed off
> Gomer. There was a lot of housing just outside the camp. Intel said it
> was
> for the camp commander, married officers and maybe some camp workers. The
> teams outbound went house to house making sure no one was going to be a
> threat. It was a slow process so between starting out late and an early

> pull
> back they had no chance of reaching their goal.
>
> Since they hadn't got to the end of the outbound route there was no
> way
> they could follow the pull back route. The radios went bananas again.
> "There's part of Red Wine's team in Green Leaf's area of responsibility
> and
> part of Green Leaf's team in Red Wines area. Do not fire without
> identification." This was repeated over and over again. So much so that
> the teams couldn't get in to acknowledge. They were so out of breath that
> they couldn't say but one word between two or three panting breaths. It
> wasn't fun to listen to.
>
> Some time during all this we had expended 50% of our ordnance and
> called
> in 3 and 4. They had done the same and called us back. We dumped the
> Rockeyes on the bridge. The Rockeye is a Navy fast mover ordnance we had
> to
> certify the A-1 to carry while in training at Eglin. It's a
> multi-munitions thing with gobs of little shaped charges to take out
> vehicles, even tanks I guess. Not very good for bridges. We put a lot of
> holes in it though. After that we laid down continuos strafe till everyone
> was in the Apples and on their way.
>
> I might add we never saw any vehicles or people moving anywhere near
> the
> camp. There was a lot of traffic on the East west road along the Red
> River,
> about a klick north, going in and out of Hanoi but no one turned toward
> the
> camp. Also about this time, the SAM launches were slowing down but the
> MIG
> calls were increasing. Roughly twenty minutes into the forty minutes this
> took we started picking up MIG calls. Intel told us they had no night
> qualified pilots so we would have no trouble with MIG's. Right. There was
> one call of an air to air missile firing. Said it zoomed right past his
> plane. I don't know who it was and never saw any myself. That was the
> only
> call of a firing I remember hearing. But the MIG warning calls from
> Collage
> Eye or whoever makes those things were coming regularly.
>
> Once the Jollies were off and running we putted along above and behind
> them, guessing where they were since it was dark and no one could see each
> other. Everyone was to call the IP outbound. One by one we heard the
> calls, thank God. Then we hear this voice "Is everybody out?" "Who are
> you?" "This is Apple something or other." "Where are you?" "I'm back at
> the holding point waiting to be sure everyone got out okay." "God damn
> jerk." We told him to get his ass airborne and head for the IP as fast as

> his funny machine would take him. He acknowledged. By this time we had
> nearly reached the IP ourselves. Jerry and I looked at each other and
> said
> "We don't have a choice." With possible MIG's around a lonely Jolly all
> by
> himself makes for a pretty good target. We turned around, climbed to a
> nice
> MIG target altitude, three or four thousand, and went Christmas tree.
> Every
> light we had was turned on and we slowly drove back to Hanoi. With MIG
> calls coming every few minutes I was sweating profusely. Don't know if it
> was hot, I was scared or just pooped out but I was soaked. It seemed an
> eternity but as the camp and the West side of Hanoi was slipping under the
> nose we heard the IP call. Lights out and Split-S. We beat feet west for
> the IP on the deck. Getting away from the river valley and into the dark
> country side we climbed to a safe altitude to clear the mountains en-route
> to Udorn. Then started to take care of some pilot stuff. We had used up
> the left stub tank getting there and most of the right. We were on
> internal
> over the target and used the centerline while holding. Time to clean up
> the
> fuel mess. The right stub ran out almost right away, just a couple
> minutes
> were left in it. Time to jettison. That's when the longest two seconds
> of
> my life occurred.
>
> I hit the button but instead of falling away it pitched up, slammed
> back
> against the leading edge making it into a vee shape and came bouncing
> along
> the leading edge of the wing toward the fuselage. I can see it to this
> day,
> making four bounces and then falling away under the wing. It all happened
> in one or two seconds, didn't even have time to say "Oh shit." I
> sometimes
> wonder what would have happened to the right horizontal stabilizer if it
> had
> decided to pass up and over the wing instead of under. I don't dwell on
> it
> though, too scary.
>
> The five Jollies, three carrying the assault force and two empty
> because
> of no prisoners, were all together having had to hit a tanker in order to
> make it back. The A-1's were spread out who knew where but still in radio
> contact. As we crossed the PDJ we picked up the beeper of the downed
> Weasels and soon made voice contact. They were both all right. #1 was
> cool
> but #2 was a little panicky. Not because he was being threatened but

> because he was all alone, in the dark, in the woods, in Laos. I didn't
> blame him one bit.
>
> Then we made contact with four Sandy's launched out of NKP in answer
> to
> the Weasels May Day. They didn't know who we were because of the call
> signs. Took a hell of a while to convince them that Peach and Apple
> really
> meant Sandy and Jolly.
>
> The call sign battle had been long and arduous but in the end we lost.
> I'll never forgive the Air Force for either picking them or allowing them
> to
> be forced on us. At least the Army had call signs that if not macho were
> at
> least neutral. Blue Boy, Red Wine, Green leaf, Gear Box and Axle. What
> did
> the whimpy Air Force come up with? A-1's Peach, Jollies Apple, the HH-3
> that crash landed in the compound Banana, Talons Cherry and the C-130
> tanker
> Lime. A damn fruit salad. It was embarrassing, down right humiliating.
> I'll
> never forgive those pencil pushing Air Force pukes for that.
>
> Anyway, it was decided that the two empty Jollies would hang around
> with
> the four Sandy's and make a first light pick up. From what I understand
> it
> was uncontested and pretty much a piece of cake. Landing at Udorn we were
> all rushed to debriefing, a building right on the flight line. As I
> walked
> in I was met by a group of Intel people with wide grins across their faces
> and seemed higher then kites. I thought they were lunatics. They asked
> "How many prisoners?" I said "None, the camp was empty." The grins
> disappeared and their faces turned pale. "What?" I repeated it and
> thought
> they were going to pass out.
>
> What had happened was after leaving the target area the Army did a
> head
> count and got it all screwed up? For a while they thought someone might
> have been left behind. For several minutes over the radio we could hear
> the
> chatter between the Jollies. "I've got thirty-three, I've got
> thirty-five,
> I've got thirty-two, I've got thirty-one." Seemed to go on forever.
> Finally
> they got it right and no one was left behind. The high orbiting EC-135
> must
> have been relaying all that back to Udorn and it was interpreted by the

> Intelpeople as a prisoner count. They all thought we had rescued thirty
> some
> prisoners.
>
> Once that got squared away debriefing fell apart. People running
> every
> which way. I don't remember ever being debriefed and don't think anyone
> ever was. What preparations had been made to receive prisoners I
> don't know
> but they had to be considerable and now were all down the tubes. It was
> almost a state of panic. Col. Simons, Jerry Rhine, Dick Meadows and maybe
> others were whisked off to meet with Gen. Leroy Manor at Monkey Mountain,
> Da
> Nang. The rest of us were left in the lurch and forgotten about. The sun
> was coming up by then and we all wandered out onto the ramp. Sat down on
> the cement cross legged, Indian style, in circles of about ten. Us in our
> reeking sweat soaked flight suits and the grunts with their blackened
> faces,
> guns, grenades and what-have-you hanging off them. They were bleeding
> from
> every square inch of exposed skin from dozens of cuts, scrapes and
> bruises.
> We were all just sat mumbling to each other. No stories were being told.
> We had all just done it, seen it or heard it and knew what had happened.
>
> Then someone came out and handed a bottle to each of the circles.
> Everyone took a sip and passed it around and around and around, till it
> was
> empty. All of us still just mumbling to ourselves and each other. I can't
> attest to what was going on at the other circles but there wasn't a dry
> eye
> at ours. A tear running down every cheek. A gallant effort with nothing
> to
> show. To hell and back for naught.
>
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>
>
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