

COWBOY ZERO ONE

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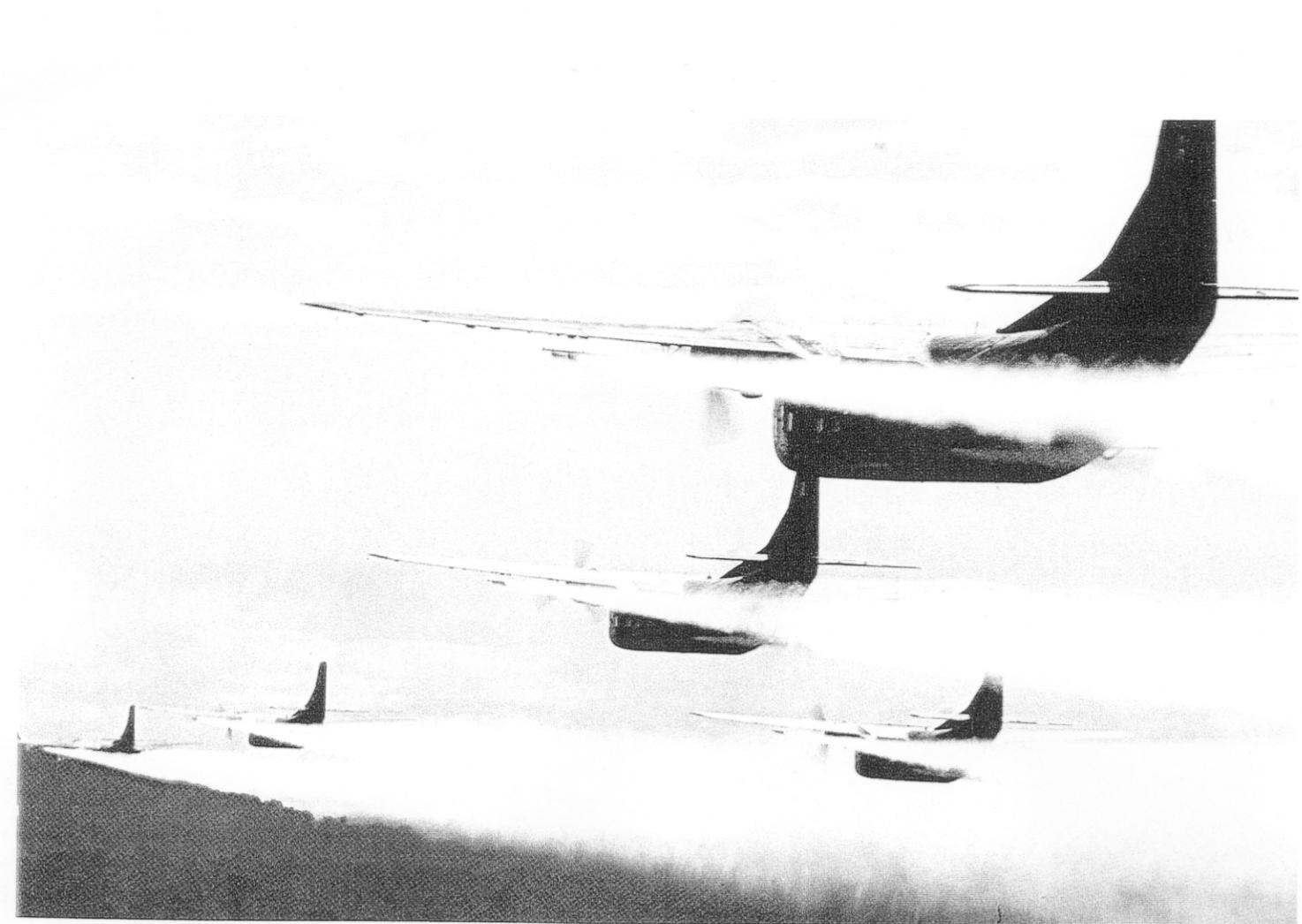
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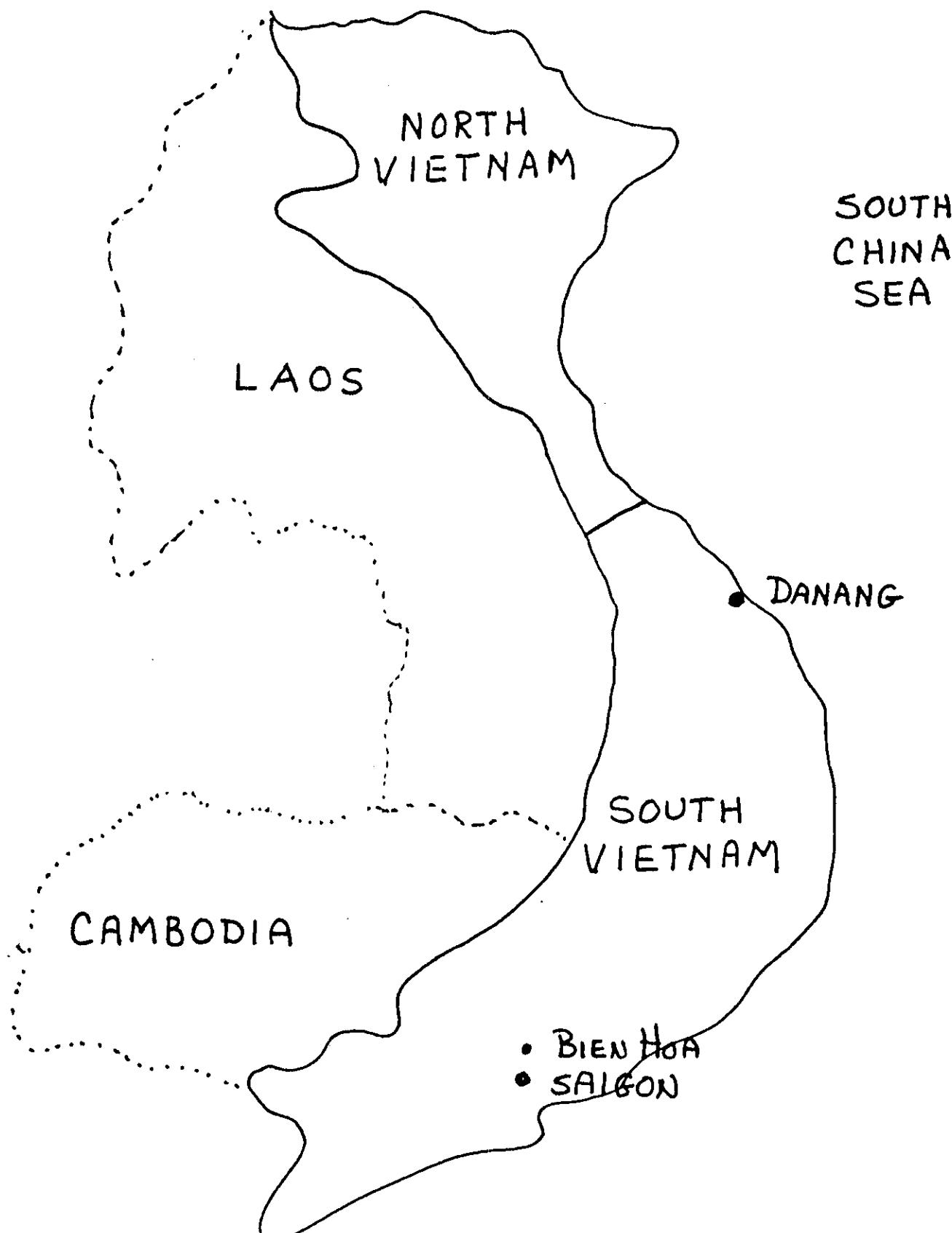


Camouflaged USAF/Fairchild Hiller C-123 flies
defoliation mission over Viet Cong territory



Written especially for
THE COWBOYS
THEIR TOP COVER
THE AIR COMMANDOS
&
THEM

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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 exaggerated 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 distinguish 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 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 after several other names had been used 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 had to be a volunteer for Vietnam combat, but also had to re-volunteer for duty as a Ranch Hand. Generally speaking you had to be a little squirrely to begin with to want in on this operation.

The Cowboys flew the UC-123, a twin engined transport that was originally designed as a glider. It was a versatile and sturdy beast, but the slowest dumpiest looking airplane 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 a perfect selection for the spray mission. The mating of this ugly elephant-like aircraft with its' Air Force crews, whose sanity was doubtful at best, gave birth to a combat saga which I will only touch on to set the record straight for 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 Ranch Hands. He admired small, elite, high esprit 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 of northern South Vietnam just below the Demilitarized Zone.

The planners set some rather unique prerequisites for the Ranch Hand flight crews. They actively sought former jet fighter pilots or multi engine pilots with extensive formation flying experience to fly these propellor driven behemoths.

The mission called for flying at the relatively slow combat speed of 150mph, straight and level at 100 feet above the ground while great numbers of extremely hostile Viet Cong gunners shot at will at the planes and crews. To add to the fun, the mission called for flying wingtip to wingtip formation with fighter type pylon turns at the end of each run and multiple passes over the same target. Just one good deal after another.

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

CHAPTER THREE
VOLUNTEERING

I was stationed at a posh Florida air base in late 1964 when the action in Vietnam changed from the small scale category to an acknowledged shooting war. I had been a jet pilot my entire career and cornering a flying job in Florida was a superb pleasure. My greatest quest in life was to fly the F-104 Starfighter, a needlenosed, Mach two aircraft with razor sharp 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, George "Bud" Day, would drop in every so often and save my sanity by taking me for a spin in a two seat F-100F Super Sabre jet fighter. I also wangled some back seat rides a the F-105 on a local project that had us dropping a dummy intercontinental missile nose cone on an empty twenty man life raft out in the ocean. Since you can't see anything from the back seat of an F-105 that was about as exciting as kissing your sister.

To insure my frustration level stayed at a high pitch the Air Force posted a detachment of F-104s to our air base. However, they belonged to another Air Force unit so flying them for me was out of the question. The F-104 detachment commander was an outstanding flyer and a great barstooler named Skip Kimmerly. I immediately bought him several hundred red label scotch and waters to get his attention. I continually pressed him with my admiration for the F-104. Skip thought Officer's clubs were built primarily for fighter pilots to have fun in at anyone's expense. Even on our relatively staid and prudish base, Skip kept the club jumping and we soon became close friends.

with our friendship firmly cemented in bar flying. Red Label Scotch, Seagram's VO and martinis.

Skip was itching to go to war and fly some fighter combat and he wanted 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 Skip knew the real way to my heart. Skip knew I wouldn't volunteer for Vietnam until I had flown the F-104.

I had told him dozens of times how Bud Day and I had flown to George air force base in California where there was an F-104 unit and tried to get an F-104 ride. Bud and I had many promises from friends at George air base and many hours in the air traveling to and from California, but we never got a ride in the F-104.

Skip finally got so desparate to fly combat that he made me the ultimate offer. If I would volunteer for a Vietnam fighter assignment with him, he would bend a lot of regulations and let me fly his F-104. I accepted right on the bar stool.

Except for having to make two passes to make a satisfactory landing, I had done it all. I had flown Mach two, looked down at the earth from higher than I had ever flown 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 jet jockeys like us were a shoo-in for instant combat orders. We figured we'd spend a couple weeks getting primed up on shooting guns and air

to air missiles and we would be shooting down Russian-made MIG jet fighters in a month or so.

We were wrong. My orders were obviously terribly wrong. My orders were for C-123 training, a multi-engine propellor driven cargo plane. Skip's orders were far worse. He was assigned to a desk job in Saigon. Skip submitted his resignation from the Air Force to be effective 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 and the Air Force one of the most outstanding fighter pilot I've ever known.

I considered resigning also, but a night on the town comparing the cost of Seagram's VO at civilian watering holes versus Officer clubs convinced me I would have to make a radical adjustment in my 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.

English

I conjured up visions of smudge faced 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 exercise 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 Vietnamese 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 takeoff 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 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 V.O. and telling one of Doc's combat buddies what I had done and ^{how} _A 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 had completed parachute jump training before I volunteered for Vietnam. Very few pilots were parachute jump qualified in those days. Some said it was because flight pay was higher than jump pay and you could only draw one not both. Others said pilots disliked jumping because it indicated you had lost your airplane sort of like the ship captain syndrome. This also may have inferred you had been shot down by a better enemy pilot. I personally felt most pilots abhorred jumping because they feared injuring themselves in a bad landing and perhaps mess up a good flying career.

Regardless, I was a jumper and we often took Army Rangers or Green Berets along on our training flights so they could practice jumping into the drop zone on our base. As previously noted, Doc had a bizarre sense of humor and concocted a neat scenario at the bar one night.

The next group of jumpers to request we drop them later in the week were Army green berets. The day before the mission I went to the parachute loft and checked out a main and reserve parachute which I stowd in the cockpit.

On the morning of the jump, instead of Doc the real pilot in command briefing the flight crew and the Army 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 specifying that under no circumstances were they to jump 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 motorists 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 V.O. 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 V.O.'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} _A 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 real 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 wears. 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 excruciatingly 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.

CHAPTER FIVE
WELCOME TO VIETNAM

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 empty 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.

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 nonchalant 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 Vietnamese 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 personally 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 minimum 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 Vietnamese 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, "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 if I showed up at base operations at 8 o'clock. I decided I would check into the transient Officer's quarters, get cleaned up, have a dozen or so drinks at the O-club and go to war tomorrow all refreshed from the long trip across the Pacific.

What a devastating miscalculation that was. There were no transient officer quarters at Bien Hoa. Back in the States, a transient Officer would be sent to a building usually located next door to the Officer's club. He would be assigned his very own 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 soft towels provided, he could pop next door and climb up on a leather bar stool. Once established in the always air conditioned and elegant bar, tall, cool Seagram's VO and waters or crispy dry martinis would be instantly served on request. That was the way it was back home, but not here.

The transient quarters turned out to be World War II open bay tents packed wall to wall, three tiers high with World War I metal bunks. I know the bunks were of World War I 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 into it. After you stopped sinking which, if you were in a lower, 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 decisive and 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 Vietnamese mosquitos. Having vacationed in earlier years on the Jersey shore I can expertly describe mosquitos. The Vietnamese 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 world of combat. 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.

Normally new arrivals reporting to a combat unit get the first day off to catch up on sleep lost traveling half way around the world. They get the second day off to find a place to stay and administratively check into their new base. The next day is used for briefing. By my count that covers the first three days activities for new guys.

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 someone who is off someplace else.

By the third day, still wearing the clothes I had on when I arrived, and just when any normal organization would be getting around to expecting me to start flying missions, I already had seven combat missions and had been recommended for a Distinguishe Flying Cross and an Air Medal.

Ralph, the Major who was the Commander, took me under his wing to expedite my combat theater checkout. Ralph was the Gengis Khan of Saigon, a really fierce fellow and former college football player from Texas. He had all the credentials to be an Air Commando commander. He had

the rank, but he also had the size and attitude that caused one to hustle just a little harder. He truly led by example and had survived nearly a year in Vietnam combat even though he pressed himself, the crews and his aircraft to the maximum. The Cowboys respected him and trust me they only respected an outstanding commander. All you had to do was hang on to his shirt tail to see how a war was fought.

During the first hectic days after my arrival, I was in and out of airplanes and different seats so fast I wasn't catching the names of the enlisted crewmembers I was flying with, specifically the Flight Engineers. Those souls, God love 'em, rode in the cargo section 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 box made of some sort of composite materials that was "supposedly" bullet proof. When the ground fire began the Flight Engineers could duck into these waist high boxes.

I was flying on my second or third mission, as usual. Ralph the commander was my instructor. I was in the right hand or co-pilot's seat. I hadn't heard actual 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 I respected his experience in combat and if he felt it was prudent for me to get my head down I was all for it.

This immediately pose a critical problem. It is very difficult for the two Ranch Hand pilots flying the C-123 and working as a team to fly at 100 feet in close formation with the other aircraft. It requires both pilots to pay strict attention to all the details such as airspeed and proximity to the other aircraft. 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 soft spoken, 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, particularly in the middle of a hot combat mission.

This encounter resolved two problems. One, I woould not try to fly the airplane literally blindfolded because my head was under the instrument panel and two, my identity was established. I had no identity problem after that. It was simple. Junior was in his box and I was dumb-dumb, stupid or any other descriptive term except Junior.

We wore two flak vests for protection from ground fire while flying combat. Actually it would be more correct to say we wore one flak vest properly on our torsos and sat on the other one. The one we wore was for us. The one we sat on was for our favorite female back home. Most of our hits came through the bottom of the plane. Many of of our female friends were concerned about 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 Ralph.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As soon as a Cowboy got settled he would head straightforth to downtown Saigon's World Wide Tailor Shop who had a mysteriously inexhaustible supply of Army lightweight fatigues. After a swift, professional measuring session with the newly acquired fatigues on, the Cowboy would be asked to "Come by next morning, please." Overnight the Army fatigues would be converted into a short sleeved, form fitting snappy outfit. Of course they would have extra pockets on each sleeve for cigarettes, a couple of pencil inserts, a myriad of unit patches, an American flag, name tag and if room was left, "U.S. Air Force" over the left breast pocket. There was considerable latitude 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 harder 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 Vietnamese 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 Vietnamese in any vehicle smaller than an armored personnel carrier sights a cigar-chewing, large - 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 something "those damn Cowboys" had done. The Ranch Hand commander usually didn't have the complete story or explanation for a particular Cowboy exploit because the Cowboys were not eager to tell Saigon, the commander or THEM anything. The Cowboys never lied, but they were notorious for omitting details not favorable to their version of why this or that happened.

The Ranch Hand operation was being expanded. The Cowboys were getting more airplanes and crews. The outfit was now big enough to form three flight. 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 Hand, 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 assured a reasonably intelligent group of individuals. One might even expect them to be gentlemen, have high standards of conduct and abiding knowledge of military regulations. I had observed most of the Cowboy "selectees" in the classes training behind me and I had not noticed any abnormal or weird trait about them. I quite naturally assumed "C" Flight would be assigned five pilots and one navigator with all the aforementioned attributes. The reason only five

pilots were required was Roy was to be my assistant flight commander and he was already on board.

I couldn't have been more wrong in my expectations from the new arrivals. Somewhere the system failed. Somehow six, counting the navigator, highly questionable newly arrived officers could end up in the same unit, very improbable. The chance of all six being assigned to the same flight, impossible. Wrong.

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

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

No regulations applied to these tigers. They were Air Commandos. I think they had read too many comic books. They believed in John Wayne, themselves, top cover fighters and parties. Nothing else.

"C" Flight was led by myself and an outstanding young pilot named Roy who was on his second Ranch Hand combat tour. Roy knew every way not in the book to evade Saigon's suggestions and instructions. Flying with us was a large Texan nicknamed "Beak" who also had a previous tour over Vietnam as a KC-135 jet tanker pilot. Beak decided to

switch and fight and double volunteered. He later went on to fly a third tour in B-57s. Another of our pilots was "Cal" who could sweet talk a set of dice into providing an extra thousand a month. I never met anyone else who could track a dozen of his bets on each roll and never lose track of them. We also had "Ike" a straightforward young man I suspect of German heritage. None of us thought much about using checklists and other items recommended for safe flying and the way we flew depended on how we felt that day, except when you flew with Ike. Ike flew by the book and he made it seem right.

We had a taciturn Mormon, "Clyde", who rarely commented on anything, but when he did it was a jewel. Finally, THEY went to the well once to often to come up with our assigned navigator. He wore a real Hoss Cartwright ten gallon white cowboy hat, had a humungous drooping Panch Villa moustache and could find ant anthill in the jungle unerringly every time. His proclivity for throwing half gnawed steaks at people and occasionally diving headfirst into huge piles of stacked beer cans on other drinkers tables at the O-club earned him the name "Animal".

As an aside, Animal had been checked out on in-country navigating by Pete, an old hand in the Air Commando business. Animal spent his entire tour trying to one up on some of the stories that were legend about Pete's antics. Since Pete had already been in Vietnam about a year when I checked in, I just wrote him off as being combat kooky. Funny thing though, I was stationed with Pete a few years later Stateside and although he

was a crazy as ever, he was a heck of a good Boy Scout leader and worked wonders with the young folks.

Fortunately our four Flight Engineers were all stable, sane, serious and absolutely outstanding in their unenviable jobs of keeping the rest of us alive and their own heads screwed on straight while getting the daylights shot out of their supposedly bullet proof cubby holes in the back of the airplane.

An old grey haired Major that obviously outranked me reported in to the unit and following correct military protocol, he automatically took over as "C" Flight commander. This pushed me back to assistant flight commander, a job about as auspicious as being the fifth man on a four man bobsled team.

A few days later someone at the bar had the audacity and enough booze in him to intimate that Roy or one of the other young "C" Flight pilots had purposely scheduled some known hot groundfire targets for the day the new Major was to take over and lead "C" Flight on his first combat mission. That just isn't so. The fact that the old boy got the daylights shot out of his airplane on his first two missions is pure coincidence. The next day he asked THEM if he could go fly with another C-123 unit that had a less dangerous mission than ours. His idea was to go over and fly with them just on a "trial basis for a few days". He didn't even come back for his going away party which was a real blast.

I began to see how this rank thing went as more and more folks that outranked me began checking in. Everybody

it seemed wanted to be a flight commander so they could get a better efficiency report and increase their promotion chances. I didn't care about efficiency reports and as I was just a brand new major I wasn't worried about the next promotion. Besides, crazy as they were, the "C" Flight guys were interesting to be around. Every day was a happening with them. I think they even wanted me to be their boss since I had long ago given up on trying to have them conform to anything that smacked of Saigon's way of doing things.

One night we had an important meeting at the bar. Just before "C" Flight passed out I convinced them that if we hung around Saigon much longer we were going to get a regulation-reading flight commander. Since I had bought the drinks all night they each grunted something that sounded like an agreement to my plan to get "C" Flight sent up to Danang for longer than the normal deployment.

Even THEY thought this was a good idea. Mountain flying around Danang versus the relatively easy flying over the flat delta down south around Saigon was not one of our most pleasant duties. Up till this time we had kept three airplanes and crews at Danang and rotated them every ten days or so since combat crop dusting in the mountains would soon give you a case of the perpetual shakes.

Come to think of it, I don't know of any flying types, military or civilian, who do low flying mountain work. I am also dead certain that THEY had no one in the Saigon targetting office with an map reading ability. The mountain targets they usually selected were one way in, no way out beauties!

CHAPTER EIGHT

DANANG

Whoever was in charge up at Danang carried the title of Detachment Commander. In itself that meant very little, but the big blessing was that as detachment commander you had a big chunk of the unit working for you and wonder of wonders, you were many miles away from Saigon and THEM. The detachment commander had about as much leeway in running his war as he had guts enough to take and that fit my idea of how wars should be fought.

It was an odd situation because many of the pilots in Saigon outranked me and could have taken my job based on their rank. I couldn't believe they would rather fly as the number ~~ten~~ copilot on the delta flatlands when they could be the detachment commander at Danang, but I never was challenged for the job.

Pragmatically, THEY may have bought off on the "C" flight move to Danang believing that "out of sight, out of mind" would make Saigon's days a bit easier. It wasn't to work that way.

The normal Ranch Hand schedule was to fly two early morning missions a day. The characteristics of our spray materials dictated that we avoid spraying in extremely high temperatures. Because of this restriction we briefed each morning at 0430, took off in the cool pre-dawn hours, hit our target as soon as there was enough light to see it, made a 15 minute turn around for the second mission and there we were, 8 AM in the morning and done for the day.

The early morning schedule is probably what prompted a great number of the inflated stories about the Cowboys. You see, we would always wind up in the O-Club about 0830 in the morning and start a little party. If it was a good mission and we had been shot up or one or more guys had been wounded, we'd have a "shot up" or "purple heart" party; if our fighter top cover did a superior job of suppressing ground fire, we'd have a "top cover" party and invite our fighter escort pilots to join us. If it was a rare hum-drum mission, we'd have a "hum-drum" party. If you think we had a party every day, you've got it right.

At the Danang Officer's Club the dining hall and the bar adjoined. Most of the normal people assigned to Danang would just be having their breakfast when the Cowboys began their not-so-graceful thing at the bar. I met one young supply Officer who thought we partied all night and were still there each morning. He still thought that when he rotated back to the States.

The Officer's Club at Danang had an ominous sign out front. The sign read DOOM Club. It took me a minute to realize this was not a macabre joke, but the regulation Air Force identification of the Club. The sign stood for Danang Officer's Open Mess.

And open it was, for the entire building had louvred walls. This allowed the balmy South China Sea breezes to waft through. It also allowed the monsoon gales to blow the rain straight through unmolested (and into your food on your metal tray). If you start with your standard issue dehydrated foods like eggs, milk, potatoes and others and add some water they may be partially palatable to some people. But, if you add another quart of unwanted rain water to the same meal it all runs together on your tray into an unappetizing and unidentifiable mush.

Another fascinating feature of Danang were our living quarters. Sure enough those World War II vintage tents was the best the base could offer. Probably the second dumbest thing I ever did in Vietnam occurred in our tent late one night.

There was a rat colony surrounding the base and our tent was their primary target. These rats were not run-of-the-mill rats, they were big, voracious and fearless. Once our tent full of Cowboys had settled down for the night, out came the rats. I was deathly afraid of rats.

On this particular night, I was fitfully sleeping on my stomach when a bolder than average rat hopped up on my butt for a look around. This raised the hairs on the back of my neck to a new high as I vividly imagined the (probably) rabid rat planning his leap for my jugular.

Unhesitatingly my right hand snaked out, grabbed my .38 and pointing the gun over my shoulder and behind my head, I fired blindly in the direction of a spot about an inch over my butt.

I discovered several ^{things} happen when you hose off a .38 over your shoulder, in the dark, in a tent filled with armed, nervous Air Commandos.

Obviously I was lucky I didn't shoot myself in the butt which would have been very inglorious. Second, facing a tent full of hostile, scared comrades who have bolted upright and are now pointing loaded weapons at you is no way to promote a friendly atmosphere. Finally, it was only pure luck I didn't hit someone in my tent, naturally the bullet whistled through four more tents, hitting no one, however, it did stir up a bunch of epithets about my ancestry. I wrote a quick note home for a six pack of rat poison.

The above fiasco and a few other minor incidents during the first days helped us establish our presence at Danang to the base brass. We had no identity problem with the fighter wing commander, the director of operations or the base commander, but we did have a credibility problem.

To remedy this, Roy felt we should try to improve our image by appearing as fun-filled, loveable combat types during our daily stints in the Officer's club.

Roy, being young, still remembered how to stomp your heel onto a beer can so it would attach itself firmly to your shoe. His masterfully choreographed rousing dance routines were unveiled shortly thereafter by the "Original Ranch Hand Tap Dance and Dirty Ditty Singers". Their motto was "anybody who can't tap dance is queer". Whenever they yelled their motto out every flyer in the club would leap to their feet and do a fast tap or two and return to their drinking.

One evening while the "Tap Dance and Dirty Ditty Singers" were entertaining our fighter pilot friends, Ike turned up the juke box so the infamous dancers could better hear the music over the clatter of their beer can-studded feet. I vaguely remember a sign posted on the juke box that warned there were flight crews sleeping nearby and to please not turn the juke up late in the evening. Ike was not being nasty, he was just carried away by the latest dance routine Roy had come up with.

Within minutes after the juke box went to maximum loud, three bird colonels came storming into the club. It was obvious someone had rousted them from bed because they were so ridiculously dressed. Each had on only (hopefully) under clothes, shower clogs, a hat and a raincoat. Their bare legs protruding from their raincoats made it difficult to generate the respect I'm sure they expected.

I was behind the bar re-soling my boots with a new supply of beer cans when they came in. The colonels headed straight for the dance floor and after a couple of not too successful attempts they finally got the dancing Cowboys to quit dancing and try to stand at attention. I noticed right off the Cowboys were having a little difficulty standing at attention with the beer cans on their boots.

Being a good leader but more likely because I was more than half smashed, I wrenched off my beer cans and strode onto the dance floor placing myself between the irate colonels and the now giggling Cowboys.

It seemed like the proper leadership role to assume. After all how could I not admit to being a party to this since I was the only other person in the bar with a purple scarf on?

I made a blustery suggestion that the Colonels should discuss this problem with me since I was the leader and that I would then take the matter up with my flight - all in the military manner of course. Wow! Did those Colonels take me up on that offer. They were taking turns chewing on me. When they began to repeat themselves and their estimation of our behavior, I just couldn't resist making a wisecrack about how ridiculous they looked.

Fortunately at that time the fighter guys took up for us and began singing a few cheerful "hims" (not to be confused with hymns) to the Colonels. A "him" is a short song sung to a person you don't particularly like and it goes "Him, Him, F ___ Him". This seemed to irritate the Colonels even more.

After some more ridiculous threats to my career, they departed to call Saigon and tell THEM another inflated war story about "those damn Cowboys" at Danang.

Saigon's call to the Danang Club arrived about 10 minutes later and I foolishly answered it. Except for a couple of embellishments on what THEY had in mind for my future career THEY really didn't add much to the chewing out I had already received from the Colonels. It was an unimaginative rehash and I hung up on THEM with a clear conscience when THEY started to get redundant. It was not uncommon for the telephone line to go dead in the middle of a sentence in Vietnam.

When I got up the next morning I vowed to stay low profile for a few days and then everything would get back to normal. Unfortunately, "C" flight felt that I had been unjustly put on by both the Danang Colonels and THEM so they retaliated in a most blatant way.

Very early in the morning they went to the flight line and found a Saigon bound C-123. With malice toward all they painted JUKE BOX in four foot high letters on the side. Then they conned the crew into taxiing the damn airplane up and down the ramp a half a dozen times. You can imagine the reaction from Saigon when the sympathetic crew did the same thing at Saigon when they reached there several hours later. It is great to be supported by your flight but I seriously doubt if support like that really helps a flight commanders career.

I can't overlook a few retaliations that the fighter pilots made on my behalf. That evening, an enterprising group of them spent two hours tying ropes to every G.I. garbage can along the road in the Colonel's quarters. They then connected the whole thing to the guys car that did

most chewing on me. One of them faked a call to him telling him to rush to the flight line. Everyone at the Club was outside and waiting when he raced off in his staff car with 20 G.I. trash cans clanking along behind.

This inspired another group of young fighter pilots to remove the steps from one of the other Colonel's trailer and make the same "hurry to the flight line" call to him. Once again the entire Club complement swarmed outside in time to see the Colonel take a four foot pratfall out the front door of his trailer. Some of these devious fighter pilots would have made great Air Commandos.

Occasionally we got a movie that wasn't made before 1950. One night we got two quite new ones but the movie scheduler really blew it when he put them on the same night. The first show was Julie Andrews in "Mary Poppins." The arrival of two new movies had attracted a large audience of five or six hundred G.I.'s to the open air theatre. Mary Poppins wasn't the greatest fare for an all male audience and the usual comments about looking up a flying females dress were abundant. All in all it was favorably received.

Without even a split second break the eager projectionist went from the fade out of Mary Poppins to the opening scene of the next feature, "The Americanization of Emily" which shows Julie Andrews wrassling around naked in bed with James Garner. With one great roar every G.I. in that outdoor theatre leaped up and yelled, "Mary Poppins screws!". Poor Julie went from Sweet Mary to swinger in just seconds, but it made our evening. So much for a fleeting public image.

Another confrontation I had with the brass at Danang came about over our purple scarves. Every Cowboy wore a purple scarf. They had been presented to us personnally by General Ky himself. He considered us his personal friends and our operations building was next to his personal quarters. He had many of us over quite frequently to his house. He was a very powerful friend to have in those days. Down at Saigon THEY had recently decreed a purge of all the "go-to-hell" hats, the gaudy pistol and ammo belts and the wild patches - everything that high-spirited troops love to wear in combat.

The Cowboys refused to take off their scarves, though they did abandon the other tabu items. I got my first and last invitation to the Danang Commander's meeting he frequently had with the unit commanders about a week after our arrival. The commander's first order of business was to

order me to "take off that goddamn purple scarf". Politely refusing only seemed to upset him, but I knew I had right on my side. After all, I was a Ranch Hand and all Ranch Hands wore purple scarves. Hell, it was the best barroom protection in the world - nobody hit a purple scarved Ranch Hand in a gin mill because everybody knew he was shot at and hit enough when he was flying. Anything a Cowboy did in a bar was forgiven.

When the commander realized I was adamant in keeping the scarf on, he got very red in the face, sputtered some obscenities and suggested I would be happier back at our Operations shack. In fact he actually asked me to leave right then and there. He was busily putting a priority call through to THEM when I left. We later heard that the commander tried his best to get THEM to make us take off the scarves. Somehow, most mysteriously, General Ky got wind of the flap and told THEM that HE would close all the gates to Tan Son Nhut Air Base if HIS Cowboys were forced to give up the scarves HE had given them. We were never bothered about our scarves again during my tour.

As I've written earlier, Danang was not a tropical paradise in the early days of the war. We were billeted in tents, there was mud up to our armpits and the rats and our chow was cussed in the same terms. The C-ration had been highly improved since Korea and we had over a hundred cases stashed in the half a quonset hut we called operations. We ate a lot of C-rations.

Before Vietnam, while I was stationed in Florida with Skip, the F-104 pilot, he had presented me with a C-ration can opener. It is the most simple, effective can opener ever devised by man. I hung that beauty right on my dog tag chain so I could look like an old time Air Commando. I later learned that old time Air Commandos do not wear C-ration can openers on their dog tag chains because there is a can opener in each pack of C-rations.

In spite of this revelation, I used the can opener on my dog tag chain exclusively the year I spent in Vietnam. A quick estimate would show that I probably opened more than a hundred cases of rations with that can opener. I got so enamoured with the thing that I wrote home at least 20 times extolling its virtues and telling how indispensable it was. I even wrote a request that for my first birthday present back home I wanted it gold-plated. When I finally got back to the States, not one soul would even bring up C-ration can openers in the conversation. Well, I still think it's a good idea, so I had it gold plated myself.

At Danang it never rained for just one day, when it rained it rained relentlessly for a week or more. Tents, bedding, clothes and everything else got clammy damp the first day it rained and stayed that way until the sun came out days later.

The law of the land was that you never raised your arm high enough to expose your armpit in the company of others. This was an acquired etiquette learned quickly by new arrivals. There was a saying in Vietnam that you could always spot a guy from Danang by his green, moldy armpits.

As I mentioned earlier, this excess rain problem also contributed to our dehydrated meals becoming soggy mounds. During one particularly heavy rain seige that had grounded our flights for several days everyone's morale was pretty low as soggy meal after soggy meal was served.

Undaunted, my younger "C" Flight folks devised a radical plan. Tired of mush and C-rations they suggested the Cowboys set an example for the rest of Danang and have a "Dining-In".

A Dining-In is normally a very formal military dining ceremony. You wear your formal dress uniform or a tuxedo with black tie and the table settings are ultra fancy. There is a head table for the distinquished guests and the chairman. The Chaplain is always invited because a benediction is a must.

A military Dining-In is so regimented and truly formal and boring that many folks don't enjoy attending them. Smoking is not allowed! However, they do have one redeeming factor. Once the hour or so of formal dining and speeches get over with, there is one heck of a party. No one I knew had ever heard of a Dining-In being attempted in a combat zone before and for sure not in muddy Danang.

It sure sounded good over a dozen or so VO's and water, but with the mud up to our knees, the rain blowing horizontally through the club and not once piece of dry clothing to our names, I could only wish them well. All they wanted from me was one of our planes to go off somewhere, no need to tell me where, nor how long they would be gone and the location of some unspecified items of "surplus" equipment we might have around.

I never asked where they went in the South Pacific or who they bribed, but sure enough on a Friday night they were ready to hold the first "Ranch Hand Combat Dining-In".

They were only gone two days and when they returned they were the proverbial cheshire cats, smug and secretive, and not giving out any clues to their flight commander about what they had been up to or where they had been.

The ebullient conspiratorial Cowboys had roped off a section of the O-Club dining room with a red velvet rope draped through chromed stanchions. Behind the head table was a resplendent silk Ranch Hand flag complete with gold plated staff and spear point-like ornament on top. There were a half dozen cases of Portuguese Mateus Rosé wine and each place setting had a beautiful dinner wine glass of the highest quality (the kind that when you ran a wet finger around the rim would make a pretty sound). On all the roped off tables were pure white silk tablecloths and 3 foot high solid brass candelabras with huge candles burning brightly. Would you believe the candles were scented? That dingy old gin mill never smelled better.

A fifty gallon metal barrel had been cut in half and was filled with white hot barbeque coals. Neatly stacked next to the barbeque were two dozen of the best looking New York Cut steaks I've ever longed for. They weighed at least two pounds apiece.

Except for Ike who was cooking the steaks, the rest of the Cowboys and the Base Chaplain, who had temerariously accepted our invitation, marshalled at the bar to await the order to march into the dining room and take our places. The smell of prime steaks cooking on a real barbeque fire tantalized and infused us with a nearly uncontrollable anticipation. One of the Cowboys referred to his condition as, "almost as good as his fantasies about reestablishing romantic encounters with his favorite Stateside female when he rotated home". I almost agreed with him.

The Ranch Hand flag had been brought into the bar during the pre-dinner cocktail hour so when Ike rang a pure brass bell (which had also mysteriously appeared), the Cowboys were ready.

That rag-tag bunch of go-to-hellers marched smartly into the dining hall with thier Ranch Hand flag held high and literally stopped the world. I have seen some things that have turned an organization around but this was undoubtedly the shining hour of these rinky-dinks. It completely awed some pretty tough combat types who frequented the Club.

The Cowboys remained dignified through a truly formal opening and the benediction and even managed to act in a gentlemanly fashion for another five minutes. Then it went to hell and they were good old "C" flight, RanchHand once more. Animal had gnawed up most of his 2 pound steak in

world record time and with a characteristic grunt he threw the remainder across the table hitting Clyde in the forehead. This encouraged the others to clean their area of leftovers in a similar manner and soon everyone was wearing some portion or another of some else's meal.

When all the food had been disposed of one way or another, a custom of the real Dining-ins as they were practiced in the States almost got started. In the States, after the meal a toast was made, the smoking lamp was lit and the guest speaker was introduced. It was a the Danang first-ever Ranch Hand combat Dining-in that a small modification to custom was initiated.

Our speaker was to be the Chaplain and as he rose to speak, he was instantly pelted with anything handy to the diners. He ducked under the table, rapidly departing without having uttered a word, and to the best of my knowledge, he vowed never to be an after dinner speaker anywhere, anytime. For many years after this custom prevailed and I would caution anyone who is invited to participate as a speaker at a Ranch Hand function seriously consider declining the offer.

Our Dining-ins were such a success that we had them for any occasion, even inviting our Saigon counterparts up to Danang for them. Unfortunately, we were piquing hell out of the less fortunate souls at Danang with our lavish spreads. One night, we discovered just before T-time, the time to troop into the mess hall, that a newly assigned Lieutenant had taken over as O-club manager. This joker was in his words, "Not going to put up with the chilling wine and setting fancy tables for some rinky-dinky unit".

It was Ike or Clyde who suggested we have a "reverse" Dining-in. Instead of a lavish meal, we would give the appearance that the O-club couldn't feed us in a satisfactory manner. Ike jumped in the jeep and went to our quonset hut and picked up three cases of C-rations. Clyde got three cases of beer and Pete, our instructor navigator who was visiting, with Ranch Hand flag held high led us into the dining room. Pete got things off to a flying start, and everybody's attention, when he hurled the Ranch Hand flag at the far wall where it impaled gold point first. We all sat down and proceeded to sing songs which quite frankly questioned the ancestry and parentage of the new club officer, and in general cast more than a few nasty remarks about everyone in the chain of command.

I could list the things we had available equipmentwise in those early days at Danang in one paragraph. On second thought, I could probably sum up our available assets in one sentence. Oh hell, would you believe in two words? Very little.

We were getting the message loud and clear that support of our little unit ranked very low on the list of the Danang commander's list of things required to win the war. We had one half of a quonset hut, used the base command post to brief in when they would let us and base supplied transportation was our of the question.

We had one old French Army truck that some early days Air Commandos had liberated. The truck ran on airplane starting unit gas and used airplane sparkplugs that had been ingeniously attached to the engine by an

inventive flight engineer. What a Rube Goldberg that was!
It ran and it was our only transport, so we made do.

As the leader in name only it was apparent to me that we needed some form of personnel transport at Danang. We were aware that there were thousands of shiny new Honda motorcycle in Tokyo near Tachikawa air base. Why not run up a get a couple of them for starters and go from there? A good idea but Cowboys had a bad thing on timing.

CHAPTER NINE
THE HONDA CAPER

As the leader, I felt obligated to send myself on this important mission to Tachikawa Air Base (called "Tachi" by us). Coincidentally Tachi was just outside Tokyo where you could buy Hondos and the base also had a well known O-Club. It also had a large hospital staffed with wonderfully tall, clean, round eyed American nurses all of whom were as beautiful as Miss America to us from white-womanless Danang.

To catch an airplane hop in Vietnam THEY required that you have an official set of orders stating specifically when you were authorized to GO where and for how long. This involved a lot of paperwork.

Cowboys never bothered to have official travel orders cut for each trip since we didn't have any administrative personnel with us at Danang. Every Cowboy up there was a front line combat flyer and we all hated anything that smacked of regulations or paperwork. Besides if we had cut orders then Saigon would have wanted a copy. We felt the less THEY knew about the whereabouts of various "C" flight folks the better.

Normally without the official orders the transport crews wouldn't let you on their planes. However, the transport folks all recognized our purple scarves and got us on board without the paperwork hassel. If a transport was already filled with passengers and a Cowboy showed up looking for a hop, the transport crew would claim he was part of their crew and have the Cowboy ride up front with them. Although they were bending the regs they were great folks and it was a neat arrangement.

I spent the first four days and nights at Tachi re-acquainting myself with several hot showers a day, dry clothes, birds singing (and one hell of a lot of bird and nurse watching) and, of course, huge amounts of VO and water in the air conditioned O-Club.

To luxuriate in this pleasant atmosphere though, I had to put up with one unpleasant facet associated with being a Cowboy. I was forced to listen to all the vacationing top cover pilots tell me over and over again what an extreme pleasure it was for them to have an organization such as the Ranch Hands fly around as bait. They felt it was "extremely sporty" that we would troll around hostile countrysides attracting ground fire sources for them. After the Cowboys had "found" the enemy, the fighter pilots instead of dropping bombs on "potential" targets which usually only killed monkeys and made toothpicks of trees, would have a bonafide target full of bad guys.

A great number of frustrated fighter and bomber pilots spent their entire year in Vietnam dumping thousands of pounds of bombs on 300' high, triple canopied forests, based on a suspicion there may be VC there, never seeing the target, and worse, never knowing if they had ever damaged the VC war effort. Not so with the top cover guys who covered Ranch Hand missions. They always knew they were hitting the bad guys hard and that produced a lot of personal satisfaction for them, but better yet, one hell of a lot of protection for the Cowboys.

On the fifth day, I spent less than ten minutes buying two shiny new Honda 90 motorcycles. I conned an old Air Force friend into lugging the Hondas to the flight line in his Volkswagen. You'll just have to picture that. When I arrived at the passenger terminal was when I discovered my timing problem. While I had been spending the last five days getting my head straight and inflating the Japanese treasury, one of THEM in Saigon had decided Americans could no longer bring Hondas into Vietnam.

I tried desperately to convince the passenger booking Sergeant that my two Hondas were hand baggage or carry on baggage or anything he wanted me to call them except Honda motorcycles. He was unrelenting and refused all my entreatments (including a near-bribe). I thought non-combatants would do anything to get their hands on a captured communist AK-47 tommy gun. The Sergeant was so regulation abiding that I'll bet he even had creases ironed in his underwear.

Fortunately, there are certain Sergeants who understand combat persons dilemmas. I finally located the right crew chief, the right loadmaster and the right airplane all going to Saigon that night. This C-130 left every night for Saigon with the latest copies of the Armed Forces newspaper the Stars and Stripes. You can totally bury two Honda 90's on a C-130 if you don't mind restacking about 3 tons of newspapers.

Off we went, my unlisted Hondas totally camouflaged under mountains of Stars and Stripes papers. This was a no-sweat milk-run direct to Saigon. It would be dark when we arrived and I couldn't miss - almost.

I must have antagonized one of the patron saints of combat folks since one of the engines suddenly went amiss. In fact it quit and we were too far out to return to Tokyo. Worse luck, we were close enough to Kadena Air Base on Okinawa to go there rather than to press on to Saigon.

Despite this setback I was still in relatively good shape. All they had to do was fix the engine and we would hop off to Saigon with no one the wiser. No such luck. THEY decided the original flight crew would be out of duty time before the mission would be completed. A new flight crew was assigned. There went my understanding crew chief and flight engineer.

I might still have made it, but the new crew felt the world would end if the Stars and Stripes newspapers did not get through. They actually asked for another airplane! Where were these guys when we desparately needed combat supplies and equipment that always arrived late, if at all? No one ever heard of a battle won or lost because of a load of newspapers. Why couldn't these guys just wait till this perfectly loaded airplane was fixed and then fly on to Saigon?

Under the watchful eye of the new aircraft commander, the ground crew began transferring the newspapers a bale at a time from the cargo compartment. Soon the Hondas began to materialize before the aircraft commander's astonished eyes. The aircraft commander was a Lt. Colonel and he must have spent his entire career in anticipation of his big chance to do something to please THEM. I had hoped for a little compassion on has part. I even peeked over to see if his name tag read "Mr. Nice Guy" but I was wrong again.

Guess who this new aircraft commander was. Yes sir, it was Dick Tracy, Jack Armstrong, George Washington and Benedict Arnold all wrapped up in an Air Force uniform. This guy did not swerve from his duty. He had the OSI, the

Air Force's Office of Special Investigations, people surrounding the plane in the blink of an eye.

He was a real blabbermouth and had already told at least nine-tenths of the free world that he had personally caught the first offender of the NO HONDA rule. He really worked at passing the word to every command post in the world on the caper. In less than an hour there was no doubt in anyone's mind at Kadena air base that I was about to made the example of the week, month and year.

Meanwhile the contrabrand Hondas had been wheeled over to the base operations building. The OSI goons were all over me like a blanket and I was beginning to believe they were very serious that I was facing at least seven court martial charges. I finally convinced the OSI top cop that I had to use the men's room. On that run, I pushed one of the Hondas over to a hangar and hid it behind some outbound freight. It took me another hour to convince the inquisition team that I had to use the men's room again and the second Honda took a walk.

It was now 2:30am so things quieted down and OSI group figured they could go home and resume the grilling in the morning. They went out the front door of base operations and I went out the back.

Here's where I got my first break. A \$50.00 friendly Okinawan civilian employee helped me pack both Hondas in a G.I. packing crate. A \$20.00 friendly night transportation sergeant gave me a speed course on how to type up a cargo manifest and what symbols are used to get what cargo where. Then he added the forklift to place it on the right shipping pallet. Of course it was just a

coincidence that the pallet he selected was destined for a C-130 aircraft leaving in one hour for Saigon.

Feeling quite smug about the whole thing and knowing the evidence was no longer available to the OSI thugs, I simply booked myself to Saigon on the same plane my Hondas were scheduled to leave on. While the OSI war stallers were dreaming sadistic dreams about making my day even more miserable tomorrow, my flight was lifting off into the dawning light for Saigon.

During the flight I searched all over that C-130 for my pallet of Hondas, but I had no luck finding it. I spent the next two days meeting every C-130 that landed in Saigon but no pallet with my Hondas turned up.

I had to get back to Danang but before I left Saigon I worked a deal with a Ranch Hand sergeant who would continue the vigil for the Hondas. I only had to offer him, at no charge to him, one of the two Hondas for this favor. Would you believe that about ten days later I got a phone call from the sergeant. I had a Honda, it was officially registered and had legal title and license plates all dated thirty days before the no Honda rule went into effect. Very efficient these sergeants. I did not ask any questions, simply flew to Saigon and picked up my Honda.

I was willing to forgive and forget the whole Honda incident but some senior war staller must have been piqued and insisted on continuing the senseless harrassment of a lowly combat flight commander who was only trying to get some badly needed transportation for his crews.

The Lt. Colonel who flew down from 315th headquarters in Taiwan with the seven court martial charges against me looked a little harried when he finally found me. "C" Flight had had this guy chasing his tail all over the base for two days of wild goose chases. He finally cornered me at a preflight mission briefing he knew I would be at.

By this time every fighter pilot guard house lawyer had given me tons of advice on how to beat the rap. Great guys and I even think some of them could have become lawyers but that would be a heck of a waste of outstanding top cover jocks.

There we stood, Mr. Righteous with his pen at the ready, telling me I have to sign the court martial charge sheet and I am asking him, now get this, "Where are the alleged Hondas?". He kinds of wilts and I turn the key, kick the starter and ride off on the alleged you know what.

CHAPTER TEN

TOP COVER

What most of the jet top cover folks don't hear is the nerve rattling sound of ground fire. I heard the gun fire every bullet that hit my aircraft. It got to where we could even identify the weapon as a Russian AK-47, a U.S. made M-16 or even .38 pistols. We flew at 100 feet with our windows open to reduce the glass fragments which really splattered around the cockpit when a window was hit.

Our fighter cover usually came in for their protective firing passes from dead behind us and they were flying at a speed of at least 450mph. We never knew when they would come past us at about the same altitude we were flying at and usually started pumping out 20 mm cannon fire just as they reached us.

You talk about a heart stopper! Imagine being a bit tense to begin with and knowing full well there is probably a passle of VC troops below that have shooting you full of holes as their whole days effort. Without warning, picture four 20 mm cannons firing off less than 100 feet from your ear as the fighter goes by. Now you understand a heart stopper!

On one mission we had an over eager fighter type who began dropping his CBU goodies too soon and managed to effectively bomb the daylights out of our three ship formation. I was too young for WW II and the Polesti oil field raids, but the stories saying you could walk on the anti aircraft flak are legend. If you don't believe an F-100 dumping his entire load of CBU anti personnel bomblets onto your flight isn't frightening, then I recommend Polesti.

Out of "C" Flights three ship formation number two

lost a windscreen and one engine. Number three also lost his windscreen and one engine and the lead aircraft was riddled by shrapnel. I was the lead pilot and when the explosions ceased and the shrapnel quit rattling around inside the plane, I lost all interest in continuing that mission. Unbelievably no crewmember was wounded and we limped back to base with over 100 holes in our planes.

That kind of damage would cause Saigon to ask a bunch of dumb questions and possibly do some career harm to the pilot who dropped his ordnance on us. We wrote off the windscreens and the two engines to enemy ground fire. The fighter wing came up with every sheet metal mechanic in Vietnam it seemed like and by 0500am the next morning it was business as usual for the Cowboys and THEY were none the wiser.

Except for the minor incident just noted, our top cover fighters were our salvation. I actually had one F-100 fly UNDER MY WING on a strafing pass and I was at tree top level. Unfortunately, Saigon decided we could get along without fighter escorts.

One of our squadron bosses made an emotional appeal to THEM about this problem and THEY reluctantly decided that a couple of full colonels from 7th Air Force would go along on a Ranch Hand mission to determine if top cover was necessary.

At the time we had a couple of target areas where we could fly and without exception attract more ground fire in one 30 second pass that a lot of combat flyers saw during their entire one year tour.

Naturally, Ralph chose the hottest target to insure our "evaluator" colonels would fully understand our problem. I was the pilot of the number three ship that day and would carry one of the colonels so he could get a good look at the operation from the rear. He was a nice fellow, wrinkled face, grey haired, etc.

Just before we started our engines, Ralph stuck his head in my cockpit and whispered in my ear, "Be very gentle on that colonel you are carrying, he has a heart condition". Great Scott! Just what I needed. Why tell me to take it easy on the old man? It is the VC Ralph should tell. After all they are the ones shooting at us.

We took off and flew to the target area and sure enough just was we start our run all hell breaks loose! Because we have no top cover fighters for ground fire suppression the VC are using tracers to increase their accuracy in hitting our planes. We all know that between each tracer you can see there are five other non-tracer bullets. All of the tracers seemed to going right through Ralph's lead airplane.

All I am trying to do is keep my heart pumping and wondering how do I explain a headquarters colonel having a coronary in my cockpit.

Those VC gunners were good. Admittedly being able to use tracers helped them immensely. They seldom used tracers when we had top cover escort as it gave their gun positions away, the FAC would mark the positions and massive airpower would be unleashed upon them.

The gunners severely shot up Ralph's airplane, but they did not concentrate on or hit the number two or three

aircraft. My grey haired colonel was actually doing better than me aorta-wise and needless to say our top cover fighters were restored to us immediately. No one ever questioned our need for fighter support again during my tour.

CHAPTER ELEVEN
THE TRADERS

I met a special forces lieutenant in a Saigon bar one night. He had just liberated an air conditioner from a South Vietnamese black marketeer. The black marketeer had accepted \$300 in U.S. dollars from the lieutenant for the air conditioner, this in spite of the fact that the air conditioner had "Property of US Gov't" stencilled all over it. I commented he should have shot the black marketeer and taken the air conditioner thus saving \$300.

The lieutenant told me how he was assigned to a forward camp far out in the boondocks. He said he had plenty of electric power, but he was living in a tent and he really wanted to air condition his tent very badly. He felt that as commander of the parcel of the jungle he was overseeing that he should set an example for the souls he was protecting.

He convinced me that I should drop him and his air conditioner off at his mini-palace in the jungle. Since I would be flying right over his base on the way back to Danang it wasn't a big deal. Besides I figured in the condition we both were in when we parted that night I had seen the last of him. He must have been made of sturdy stuff, because next morning as I felt my way into the cockpit I had to step around the air conditioner and the sleeping lieutenant in the cargo compartment.

We dropped him off at his camp and pressed on with winning the war. About three weeks later we had to make an unscheduled emergency stop at his little landing strip. We landed so our resourceful flight engineer could try and plug up some unrequested bullet holes which were allowing our engine oil to flow back over the wing instead of lubing

the engine as suggested in the owners manual.

While our sly and cunning flight engineer devised a new way to patch bullet holes in engines, the rest of the crew went over to the lieutenant's tent to partake of a couple of Budweiser 7-ups. Pilots never drink when they are on duty or flying - particularly in combat.

What greeted us when we entered the tent was the lieutenant's prized air conditioner running like a dream. It was mounted on a table dead center in the tightly closed tent pumping cold air out the front and hot air out the back effectively keeping the temperature in the tent about 110 degrees or about 10 degrees warmer than the air outside of the tent. I don't remember any of us advising him that it would be a nifty idea to vent the hot air out of the tent and I believe he spent his entire tour in Vietnam with that air conditioner running full blast right in the middle of the tent

Through necessity we became great traders up at Danang. I had discarded the idea of acquiring any more Hondas. The last series of phone calls from THEM down in Saigon convinced me it was time to convert to other modes of "operation transportation".

One of my less righteous pilots told me he knew a guy who could provide us with a brand new (expendable) special forces jeep if we could come up with a ten ton jack and a C-123 full of plywood. Now there is something we could do and no one could fault us for it. We'd be helping the war effort. Those poor special forces guys out there

in the boondocks probably couldn't get airlift support from the regular airlift folks. Well, it would only take a couple of hours to convert one of our aircraft into an airlift aircraft. All we had to do was remove a 10,000 gallon tank from the cargo bay etc, etc.

That afternoon we backed (yes the C-123 could back up) our hastily converted plane up to the loading dock in Saigon. We took on a load of plywood and a ten ton jack. An hour later we delivered the booty but they told us our jeep was out on a run and could we pick it up the next day? Sure, we would come back the next day. That night we reinstalled the 10,000 gallon tank etc,etc back in our plane and flew our normal two missions. As soon as we landed we converted our plane to an airlift plane by taking out the 10,000 gallon tank and the pump etc, etc. And away we went to pick up our jeep.

There were no control towers as such out in the boondock airstrips so we simply flew in and landed. We noticed there was a great deal of activity going on about the camp and there seemed to be a great number of ranking army officers in clean uniforms poking about. A young special forces type nearly took his head off on one of our propellers trying to get to the plane before any of the army brass came over. He scrambled up into the cockpit and handed me a very cryptic note. All it said was "There is an Army Inspector General Team Investigating us, get the hell out of here, we buried your jeep two hours ago".

All of our trades weren't losers. We did not carry

parachutes since a successful bailout at 100 feet isn't even a remote possibility. We did carry more personal guns, ammunition, bayonettes, knives etc, than any Air Force organization in the history of aviation.

When I first arrived at Saigon the Cowboys had a CONEX container (a huge metal, watertight container the size of a small home). Our CONEX container was stuffed with over 300 weapons for the 12 of us. I personally carried an M-16 automatic rifle with 300 rounds of ammo. I also carried a standard issue .38 caliber pistol with 150 rounds of ammo, a .38 civilian snub nose with 150 rounds of ammo and a .25 hide out civilian automatic with 300 rounds of ammo.

In our CONEX we had our choice of .45 automatics, Thompson sub machine guns, 12 gauge shotguns, carbines, Swedish K sub machine guns, M-1 rifles, 9mm automatics, magnums and others I can't remember. One of our flight engineers had a 40mm grenade launcher in his supposedly bullet proof box in the back of the aircraft. Only one of our downed crews had to fight it out with the VC while waiting to be rescued. That is Junior's story and quite a story it is. I may touch on it a little later.

As if we weren't already carrying enough ammunition some ingenious Cowboy figured that if you taped an inverted M-16 clip to the one you had in the weapon then all you had to do was eject the empty clip, turn it around and reinsert the full end into your gun. It came to pass that we now needed 100 more M-16 ammunition clips. The supply form I filled out for the 100 clips was the only supply form I

ever signed in Vietnam.

You guessed it. A few days later a flatbed Air Force trailer as long as a quonset hut pulled up. There was a CONEX container and a forklift on the flatbed. We watched in stunned silence as we became the owners of a shiny new CONEX container and 10,000 M-16 ammunition clips.

A CONEX was a highly prized item so we obviously kept that for secure storage for occasional goodies that providently fell into our hands. We traded 9,900 extra M-16 clips to the 3rd Marines for an inexhaustible supply of beer.

Another good deal we fell into was the steel helmet swap. Now in all the recruiting posters you have ever seen of Air Force pilots, did you ever see one with a steel helmet on? We had them. They were the good kind that really covered up your head and neck. You couldn't fly with one on, but they were good helmets.

There was this group of fearless Navy folks who operated PBRs (Patrol Boat, River in Navy lingo). These brave souls ran around in unarmored teeny-weeny boats getting the daylights shot out of themselves and they sure needed help. They didn't have the nifty helmets we had, but they did have the world's largest frozen food locker. It was an entire ship that the Navy just ran up on the beach at Danang. There were goodies inside the hummer that would make you salivate for a week. Wearing warm clothes, a stroll by a gourmet such as I down what seemed endless rows of frozen food bins was dizzying.

After all the dehydrated, rain soaked mush and C-Rations we had eaten we felt it was definitely our duty and a pleasure to help the war effort by providing our helmets to those poor Navy fellows. When they gave us unrestricted access and shopping privileges on that freezer ship it gave us a "gut feeling" of comraderie.

CHAPTER TWELVE
OPERATIONS OFFICERS

It was policy that while at Danang we had to call THEM every day at 4:00pm. I would explain what the Cowboys did that day and THEY would tell me what we were to do the next day. I learned my lesson early on in regard to making the phone call myself. THEY had a way with words and were most explicit in expressing their feelings to me on the Cowboys conduct of the war. In fact, THEY got downright personal. That All-American butt chewer on the other end of the phone was a real pro.

In order to keep up the high spirit required by me to run "C" Flight and to keep me from having a daily morale decline about 4:00pm, I appointed our most junior ranking Officer to leave the bar and call Saigon at the appointed time. This worked out beautifully. The All-American butt chewer in Saigon knew whatever had gone wrong that day was not kids' fault and that he was chewing on an innocent man. This somewhat tempered the badmouth from THEM.

Next, the young Officer taking the call at the Danang end, because I was writing his efficiency report, would leave out large numbers of the cuss words and references to my origin, etc. that THEY had included in the conversation. This double buffer, so to speak, resulted in my getting the general gist of what Saigon wanted but without the uncomplimentary remarks. Naturally, being in the bar and fortified with several Seagram's and waters when the young man returned, much of the sting of the daily bad news included in all daily calls was reduced.

One day I told the young Officer to be sure THEY knew we had gotten two of our three aircraft badly shot up and would not be able to fly our missions the next day.

I was stunned when the young man returned from making the call and told me THEY had laid on double missions for us the next morning. That really got me mad. I grabbed a phone and called THEM myself. That was one big "GOTCHA" for THEM.

THEY didn't want us to fly double missions the next day. Those crafty devils threw that red herring at me so that I would get all excited and call them personally. THEY made up for all the times they couldn't get me personally on the phone. THEY even went back to comment on some silly things that had happened weeks before. Once I saw through this shabby trick I used the slickest thing that came out of the war. I hung up the phone. The phone service was so bad the party on the other end could never be sure how, why, who or what had cut off the connection.

THEY tried just once to take "C" Flight from me by ordering me to Saigon to become an Operations Officer. The ops officer is the number two man in the unit. I could suppose it was either a compliment to be considered for the job or it may have been a diabolical plot to separate me from "C" Flight. I was well aware that ops officers did not fly very often and spent their nights dreaming up absurd ops plans for aircrews to follow.

I evaded the offer for a while, but THEY were adamant and I went down to Saigon to learn the ops officer trade. Like Skip, the F-104 pilot, I was a swift learner. I quickly learned that ops officers put in 13 to 14 hours a day at a desk, flew very little and got all wrapped around a thousand silly details not at all associated with winning the war.

One of the most overrated things ops officers do is formally brief THEM every day. Ops officers also spend a great deal of time answering questions throughout the day that THEY forgot to ask at the briefing. After one week I could see a Lieutenant could handle this chore, yet I was very surprised to find that all the other briefers were Lt Colonels. I finally realized that there is a whole passle of middle-aged middle managers, mostly Lt. Colonels, who don't fly that emerge during wars. This is a group I recommend with entirely, particularly in war time.

This group is aptly referred to by combat flyers as "seagulls". They just sit around, eat a lot, put out lots of crap, make unnecessary noise and will not fly unless you throw rocks at them. If they do fly it is usually not very well.

I could tell after one week in Saigon that fighting the war from a desk in Saigon was neither glamorous nor adventurous. One positive thing though was that I had gotten a feel for how THEY viewed the manner in which "C" Flight was winning the war. "C" Flight to Saigon was another bunch of statistics on a board on a wall. The name of the game was to win statistically using hundreds of charts. Woe to the chartkeeper whose chart fell below the desired goals.

I personally knew that "C" Flight was made up of some very patriotic souls who laid their lives on the line every day. They were flying their butts off and off fighting magnificently in spite of all the "poor" advice, both target-wise and tactically passed on to us by Saigon. By mutual agreement I was on my way back to Danang and "C"

Flight seven days after leaving.

The ops officer experience did have one benefit. I now had some limited knowledge of how the chart game was played. We now flew our missions the same as ever and more importantly we partied as hard as ever, the real change was in how we described our routine business of winning the war but with new terminology. This almost got us in the good graces of Saigon.

Our dazzling reports of successes or even failures couched in Saigonese terminology brought great serenity to our chartkeeper. Even the phone calls began to decrease. I had suspected we had a problem communicating with THEM, I just didn't realize you could tell them you screwed up and make it sound reasonable.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BIEN HOA

Our Saigon operations were ordered to move from Tan Son Nhut Air Base to Bien Hoa a nearby air base and "C" Flight went down to help. Any normal military flying unit would have martialed its forces and with little fanfare made an orderly exit from one base to the other base only twenty miles away. Not "C" Flight.

Roy had scrounged up about twenty cases of colored smoke grenades. Through an ingenious wiring program he installed great numbers of them on the three 123's tail booms that "C" Flight would be flying over to Bien Hoa. Next, he ran a trip wire back into the aircraft from each of the smoke grenades.

How he ever talked me into flying with him in the lead aircraft, I'll never know. When it was time for our takeoff, I found he had worked a deal with the control tower to make a low level pass right down the main street of the base.

He took a flight of C-123's in a perfect "V" formation down the center of Tan Son Nhut air base cutting the grass with his props and the number two and three aircraft in the formation having to stack up high on his wings to avoid the cars parked on the side of the road. He called "smoke on" and we became a rainbow of colored smoke roaring in a zero altitude, 180kts, with propellers howling in full pitch. I have never seen a more colorful, well executed or lower pass ever made by a flight of fighters let alone lumbering behemoths like the C-123s down Tan Son Nhut's main street.

Wheeling up, up and away he headed the flight

toward Bien Hoa. Bien Hoa was a fighter base and I'm sure news of a rinky-dink multi-engine flying unit arriving at their base was the least thrilling news they had that week.

As we pulled up out of the grass to a reasonable altitude of 150 feet or so, I noticed my knuckles were pure white. I just knew there was going to be hell to pay for that low level pass over Tan Son Nhut, but at least we were back in the air and how much trouble could get into landing at our new base?

That was my first underestimation of what a little twenty mile transfer could really develop into. Roy made all the proper radio calls to Bien Hoa tower and I was just breathing normally again when he told the tower that "Plan B" was ready. I asked him what the devil that was. "Oh," he said, "I have a little something I worked out with the Bien Hoa tower guys this morning".

Now leaving the base in a colorful splash is one thing, but checking into a new on in other than the proper military manner is another and can set you back a bunch. Roy had his already tightly tucked in formation tuck it in even closer and here we go again. Three C-123s, wings overlapping wings and down in the grass we go. He was lined up with the base main street which was bordered by the Officers Club and Wing Headquarters. "Smoke on Cowboys" he yells like a kid on Christmas morning and down the main street we go. He has outdone himself on colors on this pass. So many smoke grenades were going off on the tail booms that the street behind us just disappeared in a kaleidoscope of color.

He pulled up in a smooth chandelle climbing turn and put the wingmen in echelon on his right wing. Then he poured on max power and led the three elephant-like C123s down the initial approach to the runway. He made a fighter plane 360 degree overhead pitch out and again, with his seemingly endless supply of smoke grenades he demonstrated quite vividly that the Cowboys flew fighter patterns when they landed.

To my utter amazement not one senior Officer criticized this unorthodox operation. I believe they were in shock. The fighter folks, on the other hand, gave us a real warm welcome right after they found out the Cowboys were sharing all the champagne in the club for our "Welcome to Bien Hoa" party.

Bien Hoa was a fun place. The fighter folks played all kinds of games in the Officer's club that put more folks temporarily out of the war than combat did. They had one trick where you put a chair under one of the big revolving ceiling fans, then you climbed on the chair and stuck your head in the fan.

This trick didn't bother the fighter jocks too much, but our Flight Surgeon, God bless him, tried it one night and got belted about twenty feet across the room with a very nasty cut on his forehead. The fighter guys forgot to tell him you caught the fan blade with your finger. The badly bleeding Doc leaped up off the floor and having consumed just enough scotch to think he could do it, he headed for the dispensary and using a mirror, sewed his own head up! Sure enough, in about a half hour he was back in

the club sporting the world's worst self-stitching job ever performed by a flight surgeon.

Our flight surgeons were pretty special guys. They flew hairy missions with us, partyed with us, stitched us up when we got shot up and let us fly when any sane doctor would have grounded us or put us in the hospital. One or two of them were even allowed to practice on women and children after only a year to two of rehabilitation after they returned to the States.

One time I discovered a strange fungus growing on my right shoulder. It didn't bother me physically, but it kept spreading. The more it spread the more I worried, the more I worried the more it spread. A real vicious circle. I remember my Grandmother telling me that if a poison ivy rash ever completed a full circle around your body you would die!

At this point I was totally rattled over a rash that wasn't giving me any trouble at all physically but I was scared half to death. It had almost completed the fatal full circle.

The flight surgeon who was used to working on really important stuff on Cowboys like Honda rashes and bullets finally got interested in my dumb rash. He gave me some superb medical advice. He told me to change the soap my laundress was doing my clothes in. Two days later it was goodby rash. It was a shame it was such an easy cure. I was looking forward to being airlifted back to the States, perhaps to the Mayo clinic. I had visions of all the top Docs in the world working madly to cure'

this new unexplained disease. I wish I could remember the name of the soap that gave me the rash so I could have Ralph Nader get after the manufacturer for scaring the daylights out of combat consumers.

On the 4th of July we took the afternoon off and went over to Vung Tau, a beautiful resort beach on the China sea. It was a warm sun, cool beer party, but it lost its glamor since we all wore pistols and our M-16 rifles were nearby. Our neighbors on the other end of the beach sunning themselves were Vietcong troops on R & R. They stayed at their end of the beach, we stayed at ours. Very interesting.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
THE GREAT SHOOTUP

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER FIFTEEN
THE SECRET MISSION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"C" Flight was selected to make the first run over the DMZ and the national news reporter from CBS would be John Hart. I assume John drew the short straw or whatever reporters do to get a red hot story. He was as please as a puppy with a big bone that he was going on the mission. I figured the relentless monsoon rains had addled his brain.

We were pleasantly surprised to find that John Hart really knew his business and it was a pleasure working with a professional like him. We could get very little done during the monsoon which in one day poured eleven inches of rain upon us. When I lived in Albuquerque the entire ration of rain was only nine inches.

John Hart set out to get his back up film and commentary completed early. With his back up film in the can so to speak all he needed was the actual combat mission footage and he could press on to report the rest of the war. Although the weather was too unfavorable to actually fly our combat mission, there were short periods during which we could taxi, takeoff and land if we stayed close to the field.

For five days John Hart had us go through the simulated mission including wake up, breakfast, mission briefing, aircraft preflight, start, taxi, takeoff and landing. All of this was superbly performed by "C" Flight since it was boring as hell otherwise to sit around and watch it rain.

There were two serious drawbacks to all this uninvited international publicity. First and paramount to the Cowboys, the VC would not only know we were coming

but also where and when. The Air Force and Navy had about twenty five fighters dedicated to this mission, the Navy had a battleship off the coast and there were at least four rescue helicopters plus three FACs assigned to cover us. We still wanted all the surprise we could get, but that was slipping away from us.

Once, earlier in the war, THEY had directed that a psychological warfare aircraft fly over the target just ahead of us and tell the VC through the aircraft's loud speakers not to shoot at us. THEY thought it was a keen plan. All it accomplished was to provide the now wide awake VC gunners plenty of time to stack up additional ammunition clips for their guns. We scrubbed that idea in short order since the VC shot us up quite severely and even shot up the psychological warfare aircraft.

The other drawback to the publicity was that I quickly noticed I no longer had control of "C" Flight. I was now leading John Wayne, Sidney Portier, Kirk Douglas and Burt Lancaster. With a microphone and a camera on them for eleven days my "C" Flight had gone Hollywood. They wore their go-to-hell commando hats at rakish angles, swaggers replaced normal walking and speech patterns mimiced all of the above named movie stars. They were actually telling the cameramen how to film them at the bar.

The film crews filmed a Cowboy Dining-in, but that portion of the film was providently left on the cutting room floor. That party was so full of zany hollywood wannabees that had Saigon seen the film all of "C" Flight would have been sent back Stateside in straight jackets.

The monsoon finally went somewhere else to rain on other people and the skies cleared up beautifully. We got our three ship formation off the ground with John Hart with me in the lead aircraft. His cameraman was in the last or number three aircraft. Sort of like having the President and Vice President fly in different aircraft so that if one plane crashes and the other makes it they still have something left.

We strongly anticipated that with all the world fanfare of the previous eleven days that the VC would have a massive number of anti-aircraft guns concentrated in the DMZ. I was stunned to find the DMZ absolutely barren. There was no place to hide. B-52's and artillery had leveled everything. Only bomb and shell holes remained. There was not one stick of brush or tree that our mission would do anything to.

I was, however, pleasantly surprised twice on the target run. We had gotten about three minutes into our four minute run before we encountered any ground fire. I must admit it was actually a relief for once to hear ground fire. I just knew with the whole world watching our "super shot and hit" image would be completely destroyed if we had a "no hit" mission. With all the suppression forces above us I knew they were salivating at a chance to find some VC out the open of the barren, treeless DMZ.

Meanwhile, John Hart was doing his commentary into his tape recorder standing up in the flight engineers box as we flew over the target. The box only came up to your waist if you were standing up. When the ground fire started I heard two quick hits somewhere behind me in the

cargo section of the plane. I could tell they were near the center of the cargo compartment where John was doing his on-scene combat mission report.

I was concerned for John's well being for two reasons. One, I liked him and didn't want him hurt or killed. Two, if John got hurt you can bet Saigon would see that I got hurt as well. I called to the flight engineer on the intercom to how they were faring with the bullets coming through the plane. My always unflappable flight engineer had an admiring tone to his voice when he told me we had taken two .30 caliber slugs through the fuselage both of which hit just two inches from John Hart's head and then ricocheted off to wherever ricochets go. He said John kept right on talking into his microphone and slowly lowered himself down into the box without batting an eye.

Several months after I had rotated to the States John had CBS graciously provide me with a copy of the six minute Walter Cronkite news segment that John did on the Cowboys. I can vouch that John's voice never waivered when those bullets nearly took his head off. I could hear them hit the plane on the tape. John was beautiful! That was our kind of combat reporter! Most reporters we met didn't want to leave Saigon and get out in the boonies with the troops where the action was.

One thing though, John did overdo the buildup he gave me on camera particularly making it sound like I was the commander of the whole cotton-picking war. I guess that explains the chilly atmosphere in the Saigon phone calls from THEM for the rest of my tour. Thanks John.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HONG KONG

There was a Rest and Recreation (R & R) program for the military personnel serving in Southeast Asia. This program authorized servicemen to take up to a five day leave from the war zone, and with free air provided, they could elect to go to Bangkok, Australia, Hawaii, Hong Kong or other destinations. I chose Hong Kong.

The R & R was designed to be a morale builder and to help you get your head straight about half way through the one year combat tour. A serviceman could spend a month or two looking forward to his R & R, enjoy the time spent on leave, and have pleasant memories of it for several months after. It sounded awfully good to me.

Most combat personnel were in pretty bad mental and physical shape when their turn for R & R came up. We were only authorized one of these leaves during our tour in Southeast Asia.

I arrived at the R & R center on schedule physically drained, mentally exhausted and a prime candidate for the advertised relaxation program. It was 10am when I checked in. The orders were very specific about when you had to be there. There were about one hundred of us and promptly as 10am we were lined up to wait for over an hour in the 100 degree sunshine. No shade was authorized at the R & R center.

After filling out a veritable mountain of paperwork, we were subjected to enough briefings to qualify us for associate professorships in Eastern culture. We were intensely briefed on what we couldn't do. It would have been easier and quicker to brief us on what we could do. That certainly would have been the shorter of the two

lists. The R & R center was called "Camp Alpha". It was so bad they never built a "Camp Bravo".

By mid-afternoon my interest in going on R & R was waning rapidly. Fortunately they finally loaded us on a chartered civilian jetliner and the most beautiful American round eyed flight attendant handed me the first glass of cold, real milk I'd had in six months. I felt there just might be a chance this was going to be a worthwhile trip. Again, I had underestimated THEM and the R & R planners.

It was quite evident that not one of the Saigon planners, organizers or administrators had ever gone through the programmed R & R procedures themselves. As we deplaned in Hong Kong there was a raging thunderstorm in progress. It was a long soaking run to cover where they packed us into a cramped briefing room. Soaked to our skin they made us listen to the same damn briefings we had listened to in Saigon.

We were wet, tired, hungry and bored. My patience level was way below zero and my physical state was nearing complete paralysis. I was mentally composing some fancy forms of assassination for every noncombatant briefer I had had to listen to that day and night. It was now after 8pm in the evening when THEY finally turned us loose. We were so fatigued and hungry by then that any thought of a night out on the town was out of the question. I believe that first day had been deliberately and diabolically planned to ruin our first night out of the combat zone.

I decided to have supper at the hotel, sack out early and get a fresh jump on the shopping and sightseeing in the morning. The dining room Maitre'd coldly informed

me that I could not be served unless I wore a coat. I had several nice civilian coats back in the States, but I had not found them required for combat so I hadn't brought any to Vietnam. He offered to rent me a jacket. I rented the jacket. I also ordered Lobster Newburg for supper. When I paid for my supper and the rented jacket I found I could have eaten at New York's Club 21 for a lot less and I would have gotten Lobster Newburg. I hadn't recognized what it was they served me but it sure as heck wasn't Lobster Newburg.

I collapsed into bed with one day and one night gone on my five day R & R. So far I hadn't left the hotel had had a lousy meal and was in worse shape than I had been back in the combat zone.

The next morning I took stock of my situation. I had exactly three days and two nights left on my R & R. It is very clever the way THEY counted a five day R & R. The day of travel to and the day of travel from your R & R come out of your five days. By my count it comes out to a three day R & R.

Fortified with a breakfast of six or seven bloody marys I strode forth for the short trip to "the place" to buy my goodies. Everyone in Vietnam knew someone who had been to Hong Kong and could tell you where the fantastic bargains were. My budget had been planned by experts who had made the Hong Kong trip previously. I went to "the place", mentioned my expert planners names and within 45 minutes of entering "the place" I had been measured and handed a bill for #385 U.S. money.

The major flaw with my planners estimates was that

their budget was off just a tad. Where they said I would get three tailored suits, I got two. Instead of four pairs of hand made shoes I had three. They had not factored in the astronomical inflation rate the G.I.s were fueling by visiting Hong Kong. Cowboys always were bad on their timing.

My next disappointment was learning I could only send home \$50 worth of presents a day. That meant only \$200 during my R & R and that at only \$50 a day. With the combat tour a year long and only four days to shop in the \$200 limit was ridiculous. The first beaded blouse I looked at cost more than \$200. That would have shot my entire legal shopping limit and I would have to cut it up into four pieces to send it home legally.

Another bothersome detail I discovered long after I had left Hong Kong was the problem of female sizes. I found this out in exactly the amount of time it takes to send a package from Hong Kong to get to the States, have my favorite female try it on and her highly ticked off letter get back to me in Vietnam asking me, "Who in the devil were you buying those miniature clothes for?". If your favorite females size is 32 and you send her an oriental size 32 you had best hope she has a very tiny little sister she can give your gift to.

That R & R was just one good deal after another. It was about this time that the questionable Lobster Newburg from the night before hit me. I contracted the most terrible case of food poisoning ever. I had diarrhea, fever, chills and cramps.

Many pilots have hemorrhoids and I am no exception.

On top of everything else the diarrhea had my hemorrhoids hanging out about a yard. Leaving the hotel room was out of the question. That was the worst case of the miserables I ever had. On the fifth and final day of my R & R I was barely able to crawl from my bed and board the aircraft to fly us back to Saigon. I was literally dying to get back to the war where I would remain relatively healthy, much wealthier and definitely safer from food poisoning. No one ever got food poisoning from C-rations. This had been a very forgettable first and last R & R.

One of the first things I did when I got well was to write back to Hong Kong Chamber of Commerce requesting some of their tourist brochures. I wanted to see what I had missed.

Later, just before Christmas, I took my second short break in three months and caught a flight to Tachikawa. It was on my second day of my crusade to totally deplete the Tachi O-club of Seagram's VO that I walked into the wrong room while heading for the men's room. I had walked into the photographer's tiny shop. This was a small concession operated by a local Japanese photographer. He did a thriving business taking pictures of transient combat vacationers who wanted to send home handsome color portraits of themselves.

I must have been on my sixth or seventh Seagram's that night because if there is one thing I do well it is finding the men's room. What the heck, I was already in the photographer's shop so I figured I would have some snazzy portraits made for the Stateside folks. Being three quarters smashed, I was certain it was a great time

to send portraits of a seasoned combat Air Commando home for Christmas instead of money or presents.

I had become very sly, cunning and wily when dealing with local tradesmen by this time. I first pinned down the price and then extracted from the photographer the absolute specific date I could expect the portraits. He swore on Buddha's belly that I would have them in six days so I could send them off for Christmas. He was so convincing that I ordered a half dozen more copies just in case other Stateside folks saw this splendid Air Commando's portrait and I would be inundated with requests for more copies. Nobody wrote.

I finally received the portraits on the 31st of March. Cowboys had a bad thing with timing.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MORTAR ATTACK

We had a real zinger of a mortar attack one night. I had never been under fire while on the ground before. The Florida natives had been very friendly and never fired mortars at our Stateside air base, so I was understandably concerned when we heard there had been mortar attacks on bases near ours.

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

When the first VC 122mm mortar round hit, we were all sound asleep and even though our own artillery was booming away, I knew what that inbound round was. I hit face down in the dirt of the sandbagged mortar bunker before the debris thrown up by the VC's first round came down on the shelter roof.

What amazed me considering I was never trained in ground war tactics, was that I had leaped out of bed from a sound sleep, in a pitch black room and had an M-16 rifle, a pair of boots and a flashlight in my hands when I hit facedown in the bunker. On a normal morning I would have trouble finding the alarm clock. I consider my grabbing up of the bare essentials as I did while moving at about Mach one in my race to the bunker to be one of the most significant feats of my adult life.

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

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

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

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

I'm not real sure a snake can do you a lot of harm, but I am positive a 122mm rocket can. Yet here we were.

Twenty or so guys who had just vacated a perfectly good bunker designed to withstand 122mm rockets now standing out in the open. Cooler heads prevailed and a young Officer who I felt should have been recommended for the Silver Star went back into the bunker to make a snake search. About that time a mortar round hit near us and we scramble back into the bunker. I did notice that although our newly designated snake control officer assured us the bunker was free of snakes and creepy crawly things, there was a great deal of fierce swatting at imagined things crawling on our near naked bodies.

The mortar attack was over in about fifteen minutes. It became eerily quiet outside and everyone wanted to get out of the bunker. We could see some fierce fires burning on the base so we all climbed on top of the bunker for a better view.

Some small arms fire began at the other end of the base and suddenly one of the base security sergeants raced up to the bunker. He was probably a very nice person in the real world, he may even have had a mother, and he probably had never before really cursed an officer in his entire military career. I suppose he just got all caught up in this war thing since he cussed and threatened the daylights out of the twenty or so of us on top of the bunker. He did it in a superlative manner I might add.

He left no question in our minds that he absolutely, positively and definitely meant for us to "Get off that Goddam bunker roof, get inside that Goddam bunker.

shut up and sit down and don't come out till I say so!". He also made some unflattering comments about our mental processes, specifically, "What kind of dumb bastards would get up on a bunker roof, in the open, when the VC were overrunning the place?".

We held a conference inside the bunker and decided that just as soon as the all clear sounded we would just walk right out of that bunker in spite of that sergeant.

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

There was still a hazard involved in Tet despite the cease fire. It seems the friendly South Vietnamese had huge quantities of ammunition. They also had this great compulsion to shoot their guns into the air in huge volleys to celebrate the Tet new year. The only bad part about this seemingly harmless fun is old Newton's law. You can figure on a good night, the Vietnamese shoot about 200,000 bullets into the air. You can get even odds that 200,000 also come down out of the air. The score at our base alone was one American wounded, four American planes with bullet holes. The only time we ever wore steel helmets and flak vests on the base was during Tet to protect us from falling friendly bullets.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

GROUND FIRE

Our flight engineers really had a rough job. They stayed hunkered down in a supposedly bullet resistant box in the cargo bay until the ground fire began. Then their job was to stand up and throw smoke grenades out the open doors to mark where the VC gunners were shooting from. It does seem ridiculous to put them in the boxes to protect them, and then have them leap up and throw smoke grenades when the bullets start flying into the aircraft.

We took a lot of hits and we certainly got our share of Purple Hearts. Clyde had an experience that ended up sending him home from the war because he had gotten one too many Purple Hearts. He and another Cowboy were climbing out after making a pass over a relatively quiet target when an armor piercing .50 caliber came up through the cockpit floor. That armor piercing hummer did its job and went through the floor armor like it was cheese.

The bullet did two things. It hurled a piece of boiler plate the size of a silver dollar right into the co-pilots flak vest directly over his heart. The core of the bullet continued on into Clyde's ankle and followed his leg bone right up to his knee. The first indication I had of trouble was Clyde calling over the radio that he was hit and both he and the co-pilot were wounded. I asked for their condition and Clyde said he was hurting pretty bad and the co-pilot was slumped forward with a piece of shrapnel sticking out of his chest.

Pretty soon Clyde's voice started getting weak and that meant we might soon have two unconscious pilots and only the flight engineer to fly the aircraft to an emergency landing. The next voice we heard was the co-pilot. He said he was flying the plane and that Clyde was unconscious. By this time we were near Danang and I had every piece of emergency support equipment in northern half of South Vietnam standing by.

The plane with its' wounded crew made a reasonably normal approach to the runway and the last voice we heard calling was Clyde's. I landed right behind Clyde's plane and there were enough emergency vehicles surrounding Clyde's plane to outfit a medium sized nation. The medics seemed to be more concerned with the co-pilot because Clyde was just standing around while they had the co-pilot lying down on a stretcher. I told a flight surgeon Clyde had been hit also. The Doc says, "Clyde's hit too? I've been working on the wrong guy. The co-pilot only has a piece of shrapnel stuck in his flak vest, it never even broke skin". Tough Clyde walked to the ambulance, but that was the last walk he took for many weeks. When he got well enough to get around on crutches he was sent home.

Clyde didn't want to be rotated back to the States. We finally convinced him to go by telling him if he stayed he would only be allowed to fly on very quiet targets or maybe assigned full time to target evaluation. That is the worst thing you can do to a Cowboy so Clyde went back to the States as ordered by the flight surgeon. When he starts telling his war stories to his kids years from now they will think he is as full of crap as a Christmas

they will think he is as full of crap as a Christmas turkey. Maybe this recounting will give him some credibility.

The "trash haulers" as we fondly called them were the C-123 crews that hauled anything and everything around Vietnam. They were strictly cargo haulers but they sure did get some strange cargos. Often they were called upon to transport South Vietnamese civilians to various places. The cargo haulers told us that when they were going to be flown somewhere the civilians would run what they called "Buddha Juice" all over themselves which they claimed protected them from ground fire, crashing and other serious calamities while flying.

The Ranch Hands were taking so many hits at this time that we seriously considered rubbing Buddha Juice all over ourselves. We actually got some, but it was so vile smelling we quickly dropped that idea. If we rubbed that stuff on us we would have been banned in every bar in Southeast Asia. Erase that thought. We had an image to maintain.

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

You guessed it. We must have received twenty cans of Aerowax from concerned friends in the States. We tried it on our windscreens, all over the airplane, on our helmets. I didn't see anyone drinking it but I'm not sure someone didn't try that also. No luck, we kept getting hit hard so we decided we should write the Better Business Bureau and file a complaint about false advertising.

Our first enlisted hero was "Junior" a good old boy. He was a sergeant flight engineer, very quiet and flew a lot of missions. He particularly attracted bullets. Junior was on our first airplane that was shot down. With typical Cowboy bad timing and bad luck the aircraft crashed right in the middle of the VC gunners who shot it down.

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

Just as Junior began beating back the flames from the burning engine, the VC gunners opened up on the downed plane and crew. Junior picked up his M-16 and played ground soldier for a spell by shooting back at the VC. Then he picked up the fire extinguisher and played fireman. The VC started shooting again so Junior picked up the co-pilot's M-16 and traded some more bullets with the VC.

He then went back to fighting the fire and pulling on the co-pilot to free him from the wreckage. When the VC once more began blazing away Junior grabbed the pilot's M-16 and went back to the ground soldier mode.

Junior's three role playing episode could have gone on for a long time since the VC wouldn't give up and Junior was really getting the hang of this ground combat thing.

Fortunately for the VC a long range reconnaissance team of Marines in a flock of helicopters saw this weird one man war below them. If you know Marines you know they love a good skirmish. They simply set their choppers down all around the crashed plane sort of like the covered wagons circling up. Before the chopper skids hit the ground Marines poured out of the choppers and simply crunched the VC in about the time it takes to say 20,000 rounds.

The Marines handled that incident as if they did those things every day. Maybe they did. Junior got the Silver Star, volunteered for a second tour and promptly got shot down again. He decided he would go back to the States for a breather and everyone gave a sigh of relief. We were all scared to death he would ship over again and we'd get another plane shot down.

When Junior, now known as "magnet-ass" for his ability to draw ground fire, got shot down the second time, his aircraft went right into the jungle and totally disappeared. No fire, no smoke, not even a hole in the thick jungle. It was if they were swallowed up without a

trace. Very spooky. We figured they were goners. Not so, for in just a minute or two the crew came up loud and clear on the survival radio, said no one was hurt, but could we please send a rescue chopper as soon as possible. I asked them if they were concerned about VC nearby and they said no, but we are very concerned about snakes!

The way the rest of us circling around above them felt was that if you can crash into a nearly impenetrable jungle and come up with only scratches you are so lucky that snakes would seem to be a non-problem.

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

I was riding my sturdy old Harley motorcycle behind the truck with the jubilant Cowboys. The weather was clear, the road was bone dry, it was only 0930am and I was cold sober. I'll never know how I managed it, but when I popped the clutch to whizz away from the stoplight at the main intersection of the air base, the front end of the cycle went straight up in the air. I fell on my butt and the motorcycle came crashing down on top of me doing great harm to my ribs and my pride. The most embarrassing part was when I got the stars out of my eyes while lying on my back, I was looking up at a staff car that had been right behind me at the light and sure enough it had four stars on the license plate and snappy little flag on the fender with

four stars.

I am convinced the broad daylight pratt fall off my motorcycle in front of the Commanding General of 7th Air Force triggered the program to get all servicemen in Vietnam off of motorcycles. The General had a pretty good indications from the daily safety and accident briefings his safety officer gave him that the military had more casualties from motorcycle accidents than the war. My fantastic acrobatic trick in full view of the world with the General watching was more than likely all the convincing he needed to determine that motorcycles could be harmful to your health. It is ironic that I probably was the cause of the ban on importing Hondas that got me in so much trouble later on.

There was another Cowboy pilot who also had a magnet ass, remember Junior?, He wasn't in my flight, but when I was first checking out we flew in the same formation for three days straight and three days in a row his plane was riddled by groundfire. I wasn't ten feet from him yet my plane never took a hit. For the next three days, after we had our mission briefing, and as we were walking to the planes, he asked me to change planes and flight positions with him. If the briefing called for him to fly as number two aircraft and I was to fly as number three, he would fly as number three and I would fly as number two.

For the next three days I escorted his shot up plane to some mini-airstrip so he could make an emergency landing and get his battle damaged C-123 repaired. I would fly him and his crew back to our main base in my unmarked.

unhit airplane. He got an early rotation to the States after collecting a couple or three Purple Hearts, the last one for a piece of glass from a shot out windscreen the base docs weren't capable of removing.

When we first flew our three ship formation on passes over a new target the VC would shoot at the lead but by not leading the target as you would when shooting ducks, the bullets usually hit the number three plane in the tail section. Since we went back on each target every 90 days, the VC got to practice by the calendar and the more times we went back the better they got

Initially, if you hadn't had your share of groundfire hits for the week, and the Cowboys were really wierd about that, you could fly as number three in the formation, the last ship, and you could up your hit count in a hurry. However, as we continued to return to the same targets those previously inexperienced VC gunners soon became real 9-level pros. They not only could soon learn to lead well enough to not only hit the lead aircraft, but to shoot up the engines and the cockpit. That got our attention.

In the early days at Danang we were the bastard outfit and had no permanent bunks of our own. We were billeted with some really hairy chested heros, the Jolly Green Giant rescue crews. These guys put thier butts on the line constantly day or night to go into enemy territory and pull shot down aircrews out of the jungle while under intense groundfire. Fantastic people.

One night the Jollys all came in laughing and

giggling. Not much of their work was funny we asked what had them all chuckling. They told us they had come to a hover over a downed fighter pilot and had just put their rescuer down in the jungle on their hoist. This was their most vulnerable time in the rescue. With their man on the ground and their hoist cable far down into the jungle, they had to hover till they recovered their rescuer and the hoist cable.

It was at this time that a black pajamaed VC raced out of the woods with his AK-47 machine gun. He pointed the automatic weapon at the chopper, then moved the muzzle about 30 yards in front of the hovering chopper. He fired off his entire 30 round clip just ahead of the dead still chopper's cockpit. The door gunner neatly chopped the VC down with a fast burst from his mini-gun. The pararescuer on the ground made a fast search of the VC's body, scarfed up the VC's AK-47 and leaped on the hoist for a quick getaway.

When they were clear of groundfire they read the rice paper drawing the former VC gunner had been carrying. It showed a jolly green helicopter and in clear North Vietnamese it said, "To shoot down this helicopter, aim your weapon 3 planes lengths ahead of it". Somebody in Hanoi forgot to add that the helicopter must be moving for this strategy to work.

The jolly greens were planning to have 10,000 copies made for air drop all over North and South Vietnam. It might just make a few more VCs miss a hovering chopper.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

OTHER GUYS

Sometimes we would fly on missions with guys from other types of flying units. This was purely goofing off on our part. It wasn't particularly bright either since all the ways to get seriously hurt or killed were available to us on any Ranch Hand combat mission.

I was down at Bien Hoa once for a briefing or some other nonessential thing when I met this absolutely crazy Forward Air Controller (FAC) in the O-club bar. Those strange fellows made their war by flying around in teeny weeny airplanes that had zero bullet protection. At least we had some armor plate around the cockpit area. The FACs' mission was to putt putt around a tree top level looking for VC activity. When they found something they then hung around and directed air strikes on the area.

This FAC must have known my weakness because he managed to inveigle me into drinking about three quarts of Seagrams VO while he told me heroic stories about FAC flying. Before I realized it I had volunteered to fly with him the next morning and look for VC and trouble.

As usual, my timing was bad. I was already pretty shaky from night before and his teeny bopper aircraft did not install much confidence in me at all. Sure enough he found seven pajama clad VC out in the open and began his one man war. He was flying an unarmed O-1 spotter plane which is nothing more than a Piper Cub aircraft you see at civilian airports. It is fabric covered and even if you rubbed aerowax on it it would not slow down a bullet.

My fearless FAC chased the seven VC into a bunch of

trees sort of like he was herding cattle. Then he called for all the world to hear that he had seven VC surrounded and who would like to come and exterminate them.

I kept hoping some fighter jocks with wall to wall ordinance would show up to take on the attack role in this scene. No such luck. It seemed everyone was busy making toothpicks or killing monkeys on much more important targets. The FAC continued to circle the VC while we were literally looking into their eyes and down the wrong end of their AK-47 machine guns. This FAC guy was moving his little airplane all over the sky so the VC couldn't get a clean shot at us. I had always believed airplanes were meant to be flown smoothly coordinated and that passenger comfort should be uppermost in the mind of the pilot particularly when I am the hung over passenger.

No fighters showed up but some bored artillery guys said they wanted some of the action and they started dropping some really heavy stuff right underneath of us. In the meantime I was ready to lose my breakfast from erratic, crazy and violent flying manuevers we were going through, the VC shooting at us, and now the damn artillery rounds going off under us.

I mentioned to the FAC that there is a law of gravity thing that says them artillery shells are falling from the sky. I also mention that the sky they are falling through is the one and same sky we are presently occupying and I prudently suggest we get the hell out of there. He quoted some vague odds about him, me, the airplane and an artillery shell all being in the same place at the same

time. This does not console me in the slightest since the last statistics course I took prominently mentioned something about the random possibility theory.

The FAC wasn't satisfied that the VC's position was being shelled, he had to make several low passes over them firing his M-16 out the window at them. When he ran out of ammunition he continued to make low passes firing his white smoke marker rockets at them.

After an hour of this ridiculous circus act the FAC headed for home. All he had in mind was to get some gas and more white smoke markers and go back to his war.

He actually expected me to go back with him. I allowed myself one millisecond to consider his offer and made straight for a three quart afternoon at the O-club.

Another day, I flew in a two seat F-100F jet fighter with a six foot five inch pilot named Gene who I am certain had to coil up like a snake to fit into the jet's cockpit. Gene was a good sort, kind of hard to talk to at the bar since you always wound up with a stiff neck from looking up at him. Gene knew I had been strictly a single engine jet pilot until I went to Vietnam so he offered to let me fly on a combat mission with him in his F-100.

Things were going pretty well on the mission. Gene had taxied out with three other F-100s and made the takeoff and climb out. When we leveled at 20,000 feet Gene let me take the control while we were in close formation. Our flight of four fighters were loaded from

wingtip to wingtip with bombs and things. I missed a hand signal from the leader and managed to get four F-100s going absolutely ape to keep from running into each other. Gene noticed right off that I was causing some concern to the other members of the flight who were now scattered to the four winds in self protection.

The leader regathered his flock and we pressed on to the target. Gene did not make an offer to let me fly his plane anymore that day. I convinced myself that flying the C-123 for eight months and the different kind of formation we flew had made me a little rusty and I really hadn't lost the tender touch of a superb formantion flyer.

When we had dropped all but our last two bombs, we climbed up to 20,000 feet where we were to drop our last bombs by skyspot (a ground radar station told us when to drop the bombs) on suspected VC positions. From 20,000 feet straight and level flight, we recieived the radio tone that told us to drop our bombs which Gene did. The F-100 lurched slightly as the two 750 pound iron bombs fell away toward the ground. Gene rolled the F-100 over on its back and flew up alongside the falling bombs. We were now two bombs and an F-100 in perfect formation heading for the ground at whatever speed and angle bombs fall at. A quick calculation by my trigger like mind told me we were in a few feet away from 1500 pounds of high explosives and the bombs were wobbling all over the place. I think when my high pitched plea to get the hell away from them Goddam armed bombs became incoherent babbling was when Gene pulled up and away. He sure had a way of getting my attention.

Another time when I was down at Bien Hoa, Gene,

who had flown some super top cover for the Cowboys, drank about two gallons of Seagram's VO with me and somewhere in our highly intelligent analysis of THEIR war tactics he asked me why we had camouflaged our C-123s. It seemed kind of dumb to him since there was no record of North Vietnamese MIGs attacking Ranch Hand aircraft from 12 o'clock high. Also, he pointed out as he grabbed me by both lapels and getting my attention as fighter jocks are wont to do, "How in the hell was our top cover supposed to find us in the jungle tree tops all camouflaged?". In fact, he went on to say, shaking me a couple of times to be sure I got his point, "How would you like to fly with me on a Ranch Hand top cover mission so he could prove his point?" as I mentioned, he stood about six foot five and he now had a hammer lock on me, I couldn't dispute his point.

The next day he had me riding in the backseat of his F-100F two seat fighter. I had briefed the mission face to face with the F-100 top cover pilots and my own "C" Flight pilots but instead of leading the flight in my C-123 I flew with Gene on his top cover mission over my flight.

Here we were, I am in the backseat of the F-100F, we are circling at 4500 feet, our FAC is somewhere in Southeast Asia, but at least in radio contact with us, the Cowboys are circling at 3500 feet and nobody has seen anybody yet. We milled around for about twenty minutes and finally we are all gathered in the same general area. The old Cowboy radio call of, "Take 'em down Cowboys" was beautiful except the flight of camouflaged C-123s flat

disappeared when they let down on top of the jungle at 150 feet above the trees. Now I could see, or really couldn't see, what the problem was for our top cover fighters. Whoever decided to camouflage the Ranch Hand aircraft in essence effectively hid us from the very folks we wanted to see us.

That night I had a nice wide white stripe painted from wing tip to wing tip across the top of our three planes. We, the fighters and the FACs all thought that was the greatest tactical improvement in warfare to date. The FAC's could see us, the fighters could see us and the VC couldn't see the stripe on the top of the wing. We got superior top cover support that day. It was a really great idea.

It was another one sided conversation with THEM that went something like this, "Dammit, you can't paint a white stripe over that \$5,000 camouflage paint job! Now you paint over that stripe right now!". I am a reasonable person and I believe in carrying out orders when they are as direct as that one was. I had the white stripe painted over with bright day glow orange paint and the war went on.

Skip, my ex-F-104 friend, really was unhappy in his ground job and once in a while we would meet at the club in Saigon and have quart or two to review the war. One night Skip was feeling so low I asked if he would like to fly some combat missions with my outfit? Normally, if you asked someone if they would like to fly on a Ranch Hand combat mission you were suddenly talking to an empty bar stool. All Skip asked was where to be at what time.

Skip flew his first Ranch Hand mission sitting on the radio console between myself and the co-pilot. He was a born combatant and a swift learner. He didn't have four months of C-123 checkout, nor 30 days of stateside advanced mission training, nor 10 days of in-country orientation missions. In fact Skip had never been in a C-123 before.

As I said, Skip was a fast learner, his second mission I put him in the pilot's seat as we came up on the target and he flew it like the professional he was. I hope I made up to him in some small way what to me was a very big deal (flying the F-104) and hopefully lessened some of the sting of a desk job in Saigon.

I received a letter from George "Bud" Day, my closest personal friend and the greatest fighter pilot I have ever flown with. Bud and I had at least 2,000 hours of single engine jet time either flying in the same two seater or in formation with each other. Bud was one of the Air Forces' pilots with the most flying time in the F-100. He would be flying the F-100 from a nearby newly constructed air base. I was really looking forward to having Bud as my fighter top cover. I knew if I came up with any problems on top cover, a phone call to Bud would get instant action to clear up the problem. Bud would take it right to THEM as he was not known for a limp wrist approach to a problem. He told it like it was to whatever echelon in the chain of command it took to get results.

Bud had just left a Stateside Air Guard unit that he was advising and imparting his F-100 expertise to before they were to be called up for Vietnam duty. Bud had only

arrived at his new base a day or two before I could fly up to say hello and welcome to the war. Just by happenstance I was carrying two quarts of Johnny Walker Red label scotch. He was briefing for a flight when I found him and stuck those two bottles of scotch in his hands. Man! What a greeting I received. To this day I will never know if it was me or the scotch he was glad to see. Those fighter pilots at that new base were very short of scotch.

Bud and I were able to get off at the same time to run up to Tachikawa air base near Tokyo for a quart or two now and then. The first time we met up there, I had to get back sooner than he did, but I ran into some trouble down at the passenger terminal. Seems like a war staller had decided you needed official orders to catch a hop from Japan to Vietnam. I didn't have anything remotely official. I also didn't have a prayer of getting official orders to go back since I didn't have any orders sending me up to Tachikawa in the first place.

Bud had a set of official fighter squadron orders that were extremely well written. The reason for his trip to Japan was highly questionable but war stallers never looked at those parts of the orders. His orders had a high priority number and said in essence that the above named personnel would be granted all kinds of special support to insure they got back to Vietnam.

It only took about ten seconds to type my name under his name on his orders and I was on my way back to Danang. Bud really put me on about that. For years he and I had traveled on civilian aircraft going on temporary

duty, delivering airplanes or getting back to our base after an airplane we had been flying malfunctioned and we had to leave it at another base to be repaired. In those days the airline ticket for two military people traveling together would be made out in the name of the ranking officer. Bud outranked me so our airline ticket always read Major George Day "and one other". Damned if I wasn't in the middle of a war and I was still "and one other".

Bud stopped off at my base on his way back from Japan. I couldn't resist taking him out on some Ranch Hand combat missions. Bud flew the C-123 on several missions, earned his purple scarf and more that honorary Ranch Hand membership during his visit.

Like any normal fighter pilot who flew high and fast he wondered why anyone would want to fly low and slow over hot targets and get the daylights shot out of themselves.

His question was prophetic in a way for soon he was having the same problems I had had in trying to win the war against THEM. He opted to leave the conventional fighter bomber role he had been assigned to and organized and was made the squadron commander of a newly formed unit called the Misty Super Facs. These hardy, hairy chested souls job was to fly into North Vietnam and fly their jets low and slow as spotter planes looking for SAM sites and other VC targets for other jets to attack.

That was a real challenge. The last time I saw Bud during my tour we met at Tachikawa to say goodby since I was rotating to the States. He asked me if I had any

advice for him. My exact words were, "keep quiet and fly more than any other guy in your outfit". I really wish I had had the foresight to add that the more you fly, the greater your exposure to being shot down increases. As usual my Cowboy advice and my timing was bad.

Bud went back to the war, got shot down, captured, escaped, recaptured and spent nearly six years setting a resistance example that POW's in any war will have a hard time equalling. A very brave and courageous man.

When I met Bud in California after his release he did not punch me in the nose, so I guess he would have flown just as hard as he did without my advice.

Bud was awarded the Medal of Honor, the Air Force Cross, the Silver Star and several Purple Hearts. He also earned every combat medal the Air Force awards plus some very high decorations from foreign countries. He is acknowledged to be the most highly decorated Officer in the military. Bud requested that my wife and I be his escorts at his Medal of Honor ceremony, a great honor for us. If you ever read his gut wrenching book "Return With Honor" NOT the Bosnian shootdown story by Captain O'Grady with the same title..... you will see a full page picture of Bud and I going on a Ranch Hand mission in Vietnam. This picture has nothing to do with his book or his POW experience and I asked him why he included it in the book. His answer was simply, "It's my book and I'll put whoever's picture I want in it". That's a good friend!

CHAPTER TWENTY
ASHUA VALLEY

There were three smaller valleys that ran out out of the Ashua valley and sort of resembled a chicken's foot. We had good old "C" Flight set up to do our war thing in one of the valleys one morning. We had a red hot flight of B-57s for our top cover. After rendevousing and a short briefing over the radio we went down on our target. Our intelligence folks had assured us there was no major enemy activity in any of the smaller valleys. However, the VC were really laying in the bushes for us that morning.

I was flying as leader and immediately took a .50 caliber slug right through my left engine nacelle but the engine continued to run just fine despite all kinds of wires and things sticking out of the big hole in the engine nacelle.

Being a superior combat flight commander I analyzed the situation with the speed of light and made a battlefield decision that the valley we were in would be immediately removed as a target for that day. Even though I showed a high degree of intelligence in getting "C" Flight smartly out of that valley, I wasn't ready to call the war off yet. Our top cover guys were having a grand time beating up the valley where the VC shot us up. I asked them to save their ammunition and bombs since I now had deduced that if all the VC were in valley number one, the valley number two would become our target for today.

We lumbered into valley number two and shortly discovered that all the VC who missed the turn into valley number one were in valley number two. This group were an even superior group of gunners than the valley number one group. Their first burst of groundfire hit two of our

three aircraft. One bullet did the weird thing that bullets do and neatly clipped the HF (high frequency) radio antenna wire right off at the connection just above the cockpit. This wire is stretched above the aircraft from the cockpit to the very top of the tail. With the front connection shot away the antenna wire now streamed behind the aircraft since it was still connected to the tail.

We were flying in close trail formation and as I looked back at the planes behind me it looked as if the number two aircraft who had his antenna trailing behind was towing the number three airplane. I'll bet the VC are still telling that story to this day about how the Cowboys and their planes were so tough that even after you shot their planes up they would throw a tow line to the shot up plane and tow it back over the target.

After the first pass and the increased and more accurate ground fire in valley number two I scratched it as a target for today. Finally, I figured the odds on all three valleys being full of VC were minimal. After all our intelligence folks had told us there was no major VC activity in the area. Well, we had already discovered more VC in valleys one and two than were estimated to be in all of South Vietnam. Therefore valley number three had to be relatively safe.

Wrong again. We made one heart stopping pass through valley number three which contained not only more VC than in valleys one and two, but these guys were real 9 level expert marksmen. The VC in valley three were wide awake since we had made a lot of noise in valleys one and two. These folks had extra ammo stacked up all around

their positions so they could reload their guns faster.

I headed the "C" Flight for home. This was not our day. We had a swinging "this is not our day" party at the club. Our top cover pilots added a great deal of color and champagne to our party when they joined us later. They had had a superb morning with three valleys full of VC to beat up on.

It always amazed me how happy we made our top cover pilots by trolling along low and slow attracting VC ground fire. After the VC would shoot at us and expose their positions then the fighters would put guns, bombs, rockets and CBUs on their positions. That always made a top cover pilot's day and we made a lot of top cover pilots happy.

During one period I went 68 missions in a row without me or my aircraft taking a hit. I mentioned earlier the Cowboys were weird about keeping their hit count up. I began scheduling tougher and tougher targets. This resulted in greater numbers of volleys of ground fire being directed at "C" Flight. All that resulted in was the rest of the flight was getting the daylights shot out of them while I remained unscathed.

Soon I began to find it difficult to get anyone to fly with me. I tried swapping aircraft positions at the last minute, even swapping seats with other pilots while walking out the aircraft. Nothing worked. No self respecting Cowboy wanted to fly with a guy who didn't take hits.

This was bad, I was getting an unwanted reputation

of no hits. This is not good for a Cowboy's image. I even considered shooting some holes in my own aircraft on the way back from a mission to get my morale up. I dropped that idea when I realized that with my luck I would probably hit the only vital spot in the plane.

I could only find one flight engineer to fly with me on a regular basis. He had seven kids at home and the other flight engineers made him fly with me. They had seen pictures of the kids and told him he owed it to the kids. No one ever mentioned their families. It was very spooky in that regard.

Because our crews had to think exactly the same when the two of them were flying one plane simultaneously I left the matching up of the crews to the individuals. Thus, when my string of no hits mounted to the ridiculous point, the pilots began drawing straws to see who had to pass up getting hit and fly with me.

Finally in desperation, I scheduled a mission into the Ashau valley. Now there was a target. If we had an engine shot out, which was an all too common experience, we could not get out of the valley since the mountains around the valley were so high our planes could not climb over them with an engine out. Although there were three small airfields in the valley, they were all mined. The VC totally controlled the area.

Our emergency plan was to fly around the valley on one engine until a large rescue force could fly in. We would then make a controlled crash landing in the twelve

foot high elephant grass with rescue forces overhead. In any case, that target solved my no hit problems and after getting thoroughly shot up, things got back to normal for "C" Flight.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE
TAJ MAHAL EAST

Late in my one year tour after hot bunking in other flying units quarters or living in damp grunchy tents, it was decided that the Ranch Hands should have a place of their own.

Althought it beat tents, the barracks they offered us were less than plush. Actually what THEY gave us was the former stables the Foreign Legionnaires had built for their horses many years before. I saw Pierre loves Fifi carved on one of the two posts that held up the roof. The barracks (?) were wooden, completely louver sided and the latrine was down the street. I've seen dirty barns but even a musk ox would have turned that hovel down.

The walls were louvered so the tropical breezes could waft through. What that really resulted in was the monsoon rains blowing through unhindered and the rats had easy access to our belongings and our toes and fingers.

As soon as it was official that we could occupy the open bay, wooden structure, I made an immediate inspection and came up with some quick calculations. With the space available and the number of Cowboys to be billeted there it came out each guy could have an area of his own exactly eight feet by six feet.

The first thing I did was move everyone's cot down three inches on one side of the open bay. Cumulatively, this gave me 114 inches by 96 inches or nine feet six inches by eight feet for my personal space. With my added space assured, I began to build what became known as TAJ MAHAL EAST. This entailed a few midnight requisitions from base supply and other sources to get enough materials to

enclose my little corner of the open bay.

After walling off my area with plywood I soon was able to add a door and acquired a large amount of electrical wire. Next came a lock and wonder of wonders a full sized wall locker. The really good beds like a new one, medium sized with a brand new, fat mattress on it were hard to come by. A six pack of New York cut steaks to the base bedding supply sergeant produced the bed.

Next a hole appeared in my wall that coincidentally had the same dimensions as my air conditioner. I had mailed myself a small air conditioner along with my other personal stuff when I was assigned to Vietnam. I still thank that old combat commando who advised my to do that before I left the States. I had to mark the air conditioner "professional books" since there was a perennial shortage of electricity and THEY had outlawed personal air conditioners. Professional books were OK but personal air conditioners were out. Of course all Colonels and other wheels had air conditioned trailers to live in. I did not meet a lot of professional book readers in Vietnam, but I sure met a lot of troops who would have sold their souls for an air conditioner.

I had over a hundred feet of heavy duty electrical wire and it only took me an hour to bury the cable in the soft sand between my hut and the Officer's club back wall. I cut a door knob size hole in the club wall behind the juke box outlet and plugged my line in. The base engineers monitored all the electrical power boxes on the base except the O-club to catch electricity cheaters. Further, no one

would pull the plug behind the juke box since you couldn't tell where or what it went to. Masterful!

I traded about half of our outfit's supply of metal work benches to the base carpenter's shop for some finished interior wood paneling. Finished wood paneling was in short supply in Vietnam outside of THEIR offices but at Bien Hoa metal work benches were in shorter supply.

Over at Saigon someone backed a C-123 up to the loading ramp and made off with a half a plane load of acoustical ceiling decorator tile. The unidentified airplane that snatched the tiles unloaded them near the Cowboy ramp area. The new Ranch Hand squadron commander had asked only the day before if there might be some acoustical tile for his office. It seemed the continual noise of aircraft activity at the base made it difficult for him to work. It also made it difficult for us to sleep. It was probably a coincidence, the tile appearing like that, but there were a lot of coincidences like that in air commando units.

Our new commander was pleased with his new tile, but surprised to find there was not enough to do his entire office. I was very pleased with my acoustical tile which was enough to do my entire room, walls and ceiling and effectively sound proofing my TAJ MAHAL.

After a quick trip to Tachikawa I had a large mirror, a pretty rug, a stand up lamp, an overstuffed east chair and some beautiful Japanese tapestries for the walls. Meantime, my favorite Stateside female had airmailed me some striped sheets with matching pillow

cases.

I was now settled into my TAJ MAHAL EAST and living better than most of the colonels on the base. Alas, my fellow flight members couldn't stand this orgiastic display of opulence and with all too much frequency they would drop a smoke grenade into my air conditioner. In a small, tightly enclosed room this immediately gave one a supreme case of the smoke filled roomitis.

Since the effect of the smoke grenade was to color everything the smoke touched, they scouted far and wide for colors becoming my cubicle. In one week's time I had a red, orange, blue, green and white room at different times. However, since purple was our squadron color I could only compliment them on their ingenuity in combining several smoke grenades to give me a purple room. I know we could shorten our wars considerably by reducing the number of THEM, throwing out most regulations for the duration and just turn the inventive youngsters loose.

One night my flight must have run out of smoke grenades to drop in my air conditioner because the next morning after an uneventful night I found my motorcycle on top of the mortar bunker. I figured asking any dumb questions about how a heavy Honda motorcycle got way up on that bunker would be a waste of time.

Several possible explanations surfaced at the bar that night. One theory was that I had a female Honda and a male Honda from one of the fighter squadrons was seen chasing it up there. It stayed up there a couple of days because I couldn't figure out how to get it down. If we could divert the energy, initiative and manpower those young

tigers devoted to getting the cycle up there into the war effort we would have won the war in a week.

When I originally wrote back to the States that I was beginning construction on my TAJ MAJAL EAST I soon received a goodie package that had a mini tool kit, a Snoopy book and a coin taker bank. I put the tools to good use improving the TAJ and reading my Snoopy book was the only funny thing I did that week.

The coin taker bank was one of those tricky gimmicks where if you put a coin on the top of the bank a little hand comes out of a trap door and pulls the coin into the bank. It reminded me it was a great deal like the combat pay system. I never figured it out but my Air Force pay declined the whole year I was in Vietnam. I would never have made it as a mercenary.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

ORDERS

We began to hear rumors that the war had progressed to the point THEY were contemplating spit and polish, discipline and maybe even Saturday parades and inspections would be initiated. One of THEM actually told me it was possible THEY were even considering giving flight checks to combat aircrews. Good grief! If the Cowboys wouldn't use checklists and I couldn't criticize them as their leader, can you imagine what they would do to a non-combatant check pilot that made any derogatory remark about their flying ability?

We did not see any of that during my year, but THEY did come up and inspect Danang. THEY told the Danang commander he would have to clean up the base and get it spiffy looking even if the VC mortared it frequently. And so began the "area beautification program". At first the Cowboys did their best to avoid this nuisance project. We even volunteered our crew and planes to the Air Search and Rescue folks. We didn't know what we were looking for, but we searched the South China sea with great diligence. Finally the base commander felt we had ignored his edicts long enough and he made it clear we were to get on with the "area beautification program".

One thing you can say about Cowboys is that even if a chore was stupid and or distasteful to them, if they decided to do it, it would be done with a flair. In a matter of days our area looked like a Stateside showcase. I thought it looked rather cozy, particularly the white picket fence, the large Ranch Hand sign and of course the curtains in the windows.

The classic touch was the Cowboy who waited at the base gate for a cement truck. He commandeered a truckload of cement intended for one of the wing commander's pet projects. Our cement steps and patio were the envy of the base. I did think the circular cement Honda motorcycle parking area was a little too much. Did I forget the full sidewalks around our area so we wouldn't have to walk in the mud?

I made up my mind if I ever went to war again I would wait until the area beautification programs were completed. A person sort of loses the commando spirit while sewing curtains and painting white picket fences.

If I thought giving up our go-to-hell hats and nasty patches, gun belts, and the attempt to take our scarves away plus area beautification programs wasn't enough of an indication that the war was going to hell, the real blow came on the the 18th of April. Mark that date well as it ranks ahead of the Ides of March or even the attack on Pearl Harbor.

On the 18th of April the Officer's club posted the new bar prices. Just plain old bar whiskey rocketed to twenty five cents a drink. Scotch, the common variety at that, went out of sight at thirty cents drink. My beloved Seagram's VO ballooned to an all time high of forty cents a drink. I could no longer afford the luxury of being a combat Air Commando. It was a terribly black day for the Cowboys. It was time to call off the war and go home.

As I neared the end of my tour the Personnel Division asked me to fill out about two dozen forms stating my preference for reassignment back to the States.

Naturally, being a double combat volunteer, I had no doubt I would get exactly what I requested. You may have guessed I asked to back to Florida and fly fighters.

One day while patiently awaiting orders back to the States, a Cowboy who was due to rotate home about two months after me, received his orders sending him to the base I had requested. Right off I knew something was very wrong if a fellow two months behind me had his orders and I didn't it could mean big trouble.

With my usual cool approach to a crisis I ran the one-half mile to the personnel office and threw a spectacular tantrum right on top of the personnel weenie's desk. Personnel weenies never, never receive complaints since everyone knows the Air Force always sends combat vets to the assignments they have requested. He said he was surprised at my attitude. He proceeded to explain to me that because of my tremendous experience level attained while performing as an Air Commando, I was being considered for a very special assignment that would be of great benefit to the Air Force and to my career.

Straight away I told him the only benefit I wanted was exactly what I wrote on my assignment preference statement and that specifically requested a quiet, peaceful tour in Florida. He just went right on extolling the great effort the Air Force had put into finding the right people for the right job and I should be proud that I was being considered as "Mr. Right" by the Air Force.

I tried the combat veteran routine and explained that people who fight wars should get special privileges like being assigned where they request to go, just like the

recruiting posters say.

I tried another tack and reminded him that in one of my early letters back to my favorite female I mentioned I might have trouble finding things of interest to write about. I pointed out to the personnel officer that the letter I wrote had obviously been written before THEY had given me. I think custody is appropriate, of "C" Flight. I told him I had not once complained to my congressman when the dropped six whacky bastards on me all at once. The personnel guy did not seem impressed. I tried a different approach.

I refreshed his memory of some of the hardships I endured without complaining. For example, I told him how I had kept requesting my favorite female to send me boxes of those little return address stickers for my envelopes. I made this same request at least twenty times. Each time it was dutifully carried out, but that wasn't my gripe. It seemed THEY always changed my unit designation or my address before the address labels got to me.

I never got to use on damn printed return address sticker I received. They still work pretty well taping down the corners of the Christmas presents I wrap each year.

I had the feeling he was not paying much attention to my pleading since he continued to pick his nose and stare at the playmate centerfolds under the glass on his desk top. I headed for the O-club where a couple of quarts of Seagram's VO might ward off the sinking feeling I felt coming on.

The Seagram's VO helped, but the assignment I got the next day was an absolute disaster. I had been "selected" to be assigned to Washington, D.C. to an unspecified job. In short, from its' location I knew I was headed for the high rent district, unbelievable traffic jams, and unrealistic hours in a windowless world. I had no idea what my specific job would be. All I wanted was a little old flying job at a little old Florida air base like for the rest of my career. To hell with career progression. I thought only West Pointers and regulars went Headquarters.

I wrote and called every former friend I ever had and sought maximum help in getting this obvious malassignment cancelled. All I got was a very few cryptic replies from now ex-friends who did not hold Headquarters bound people in very high esteem. I had become a weenie. I was marked. I would be considered one of THEM by all who used to be my friends.

My next problem was to find out what my job would be up there in the head shed. That was my first indoctrination in Headquarters mumbo-jumbo. As a Headquarters weenie you must learn never to say or write what you really mean. I never was able to decipher the job description personnel gave me. It was 150 words long, but so broadly worded I decided I was either the commander or the janitor. I never quite made either position during my Headquarters tour.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

GOODBY VIETNAM

As my tour wound down to the final days, I was in the habit of saying I'm going to burn everything when I leave this place. Lots of combat people make figurative statements like that, however, you are not encouraged to make them in front of fighter pilots.

My last night in the O-club was spent telling every top cover mother in there what a wonderful job they had done and in the meanwhile I was paying for all the drinks in the club that night. Was I ever popular! The club also had the first round-eyed American girl singer I'd seen in my whole years tour.

About the time the girl singer was getting into her repertoire I was suddenly aware that about 30 single engine hired killers had me surrounded. Before you could say Gypsy Rose Lee, I was handed my wrist watch, my shoes and my wallet and allowed to stand in the front row as every stitch of clothing I used to have on burned brightly on the dance floor. It was a pretty liberal club, the gal singer sang to the ceiling and the club officer didn't put out the fire till it burned through the floor.

I heard later that my totally nude departure with wallet, shoes and watch in hand was done with grace and finesse. It also allowed the girl singer to stop singing to the ceiling and thus averted her having a stiff neck the next day.

The next morning I put on my Stateside uniform and packed a very small big since the majority of my clothing went up in flames at the O-club the night before. I slipped down to the flight line and emulating great Ranch Hand leaders before me, I climbed into a lumbering Cowboy

airplane and flew my last Ranch Hand combat mission. The Cowboys who let me ride the console on the day I was leaving had their necks out a bunch, but hell that was what it was all about.

Instead of recovering their aircraft at Bien Hoa with the other aircraft in their flight, they landed at Tan Son Nhut in Saigon. Really great guys, they taxied right up to the civilian 707 airliner that was to fly me back to the States.

I climbed the boarding steps of the 707 with my purple scarf around my neck and the jet soon lifter off.

Crossing the Pacific I reflected how this one group of seven combat fliers had viewed the war differently than most. I've often thought was stories the other Ranch Hand flights could tell and what about the five more years that rebellious outfit existed?

There is probably more than enough material in Ranch Hand lore to write a book.