Eternally at War

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1 Corps - Vietnam

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A4 Skyhawk Pilot
Feb. 1943

I have an image. It has been imprinted on my mind since I can remember anything at all. According to the newspaper article I found forty-five years later, I had been on this planet for one year and eight months.

It was during the last months of winter, in February, when my father had come home after work in his beat up, old pickup and had come into the house and told my mother to hurry up and get outside, that there was something happening at the edge of town. We all ran out to the pickup, me in the arms of my mother.

We had driven in the dark through the city streets of Walla Walla to a wheat field at the edge of town. The image that was formed on my mind was formed while parked there.

I was standing on the seat. My mother first put her head down, as though she didn’t want to look, and then started crying as my father left the pickup and walked into the darkness.

I was not as tall as my mother, even when standing. A powerful feeling I could not understand came over me. It must have been fear because fear in later years, burned images into my mind.

Behind us, a Chrysler with orange fenders and a light brown hood was parked with the lights off. It was perhaps thirty yards behind us and was lit up so that you could see it nearly as plainly as if it were day. A group of men, evenly spaced, heads down, holding their fedora hats over their eyes and wearing pullover jackets were standing equidistant from each other. They had their backs to the field and were looking over their shoulders at what was behind them.

In front of us, not well lit up, was a gray Chevrolet coupe, the paint dull in the darkness. No one was between the pickup we were in and the Chevrolet ahead of us. There were men, though, standing along the road, their hands in their pockets, also spaced apart from each other. No one was talking to anyone around them.

I looked, first, out the cracked front window, and then out the back before looking over my mother, her head down, with her light coat with the pads on the shoulders at the side window of the truck.

My mother was young, maybe twenty-two or three, had her
red hair in a squared off page boy style, and had a bandanna over her head, now bowed and crying softly.

Through the window, spreading from horizon to horizon and as high as I could see out of the side window, was a wall of flame, roaring, and beating at the night, perhaps three hundred yards away. It roared and rolled and ripped at the night sky, covering everything behind it so that all I could see was flames, bright orange and lighting up the field with the men standing silently watching.

None of the men moved. They stood smoking, none seeming to recognize the others' existence. There was a smell in the air that I could not identify at the time. It stayed in the pickup. Each time I rode in it from that time on, I could smell the same sickening smell when we rode in it, reminding me of the fire and the image that I did not like to remember.

There was another image tied to the flames. It was at the large Army Hospital that was on the west end of town.

When we drove by the hospital, which was an Army Evacuation Hospital, in the spring, summer, and early fall, the doors to the end of the buildings would be open and I could see the men in white strung up in their beds in the buildings which were used as wards. Other men in white were sitting on the grass near the buildings, smoking, or reading. None of the men were smiling, and there was a tall barbed wire fence around the hospital with guards at the gates in concrete guard houses.

We had to drive by the hospital when we went to Touchet, twenty miles away. Since my grandmother and most of my mother's family lived there, we went by the hospital many times from the time of my first memories. I would dive down in the seat rather than look out on all the sadness.

I have these images. They were the first images of my life. They were of war, though I didn't know it then. They were of death, but I didn't know that then, either. The images have always been there, and they remain there as clear as they were when I first saw the sights and sounds that put them there.
March 20, 1968

I was no virgin to being struck by war when I approached Danang on the 20th day of March in 1968. Unlike most enlisted Marines, who were 18 or 19 years old, and inexperienced in life, and other officers just out of the Marine Basic School for ground officers, I knew just what I was getting into. Due to rapid wartime promotions, I was a senior Captain.

I was older than most officers and enlisted Marines on their first tour of duty overseas. I was 25 years old and had more training than most other officers and had survived more traumatic experiences to prepare me for the upcoming 13 months. I had first been trained as an infantry officer, then as a jet pilot. I had taken the fifteen-week intelligence course and had a background in land management that gave me an understanding of the use of aerial photos, mapmaking, the use of camouflage, and the mathematical background to collate the data to determine whether it was usable or not.

During my training, I had talked to a number of other officers and enlisted men about their experiences from 1965 until just a few weeks before I had to leave for I Corps, the northern most province in South Vietnam. It was now engulfed in battles throughout the province following a major offensive by the combined forces of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army, The Tet Offensive.

Just prior to leaving the United States, I had seen the extensive news coverage of the battles around Hue, Khe Sanh, and near the DMZ and had seen some of the A-4E Skyhawks I would be flying making ground level napalm and strafing runs. Since there was no end in sight to the after effects of the offensive, I had been presented with a good overview of what was going to be expected of me.

As the Southern Airlines jet started our letdown over the South China Sea approaching Danang from Okinawa where I had initially brought the draft from Norton Air Force Base in California, I looked down at the scattered white over ocean cumulus clouds that are scattered in small, puffy white groups over the Pacific, and thought back to the year before to this anniversary of sorts. It was not the type of memory or anniversary that I would like to have behind me going into a
situation where I was going to be faced with flying under the arduous conditions I already knew were facing me.

March 19, 1967  Kingsville, Texas

I was a Naval flight student, a First Lieutenant in the United States Marines, flying my first tactical bombing training mission, flying number two in a formation of five TF9J aircraft. The Cougar jet was developed from the Grumman Panther that had flown in the Korean War. It was underpowered compared to more modern aircraft, but was a good training plane because power could not get you out of bad situations. You had to fly the plane to stay ahead of it. It was a Sunday briefing. We were flying seven days a week, from 4 AM until midnight trying to get out the pilots needed for the fleet. I was one of the few Marine Students flying because of a funding problem that prevented most from starting flying until the beginning of the fiscal year in July.

I had developed a lot of confidence flying the F9F8 during the last few months and was looking forward to the tactical bombing hop with a flight instructor and finishing flight training and going into the fleet. I had not received orders yet, but was going to graduate in two weeks, and was expecting them every day.

I drove through the sunrise from base housing to the squadron hanger. Navy Training Squadron 21 had a World War II hanger on the east end of the Texas field, located five miles from the Gulf of Mexico on the dry Texas plain near the large King Ranch that extended nearly 100 miles to the south.

The six students and two instructors were briefed for the bombing mission. I would be flying with Captain Fred Harsharger, a Marine who had just begun flying jet aircraft after an ejection in Virginia where he had ejected at low altitude, his chute catching in a tree, and snapped him like a whip. He had just come back on flight status and would be flying number two with me.

After briefing, we manned the aircraft, started them and taxied in line to the takeoff end of the east runway. While in the arming area, the lead aircraft aborted the mission, making me take the lead. As he taxied back in front of me, I called the tower for takeoff and motioned the other four aircraft into position up wind of me so they would not get in my jetwash.
I gave the hand signal to run up the engines, then put my head in the cockpit while I checked my own instruments. Since the F9F8 didn’t have an excess of power, it was not in one’s best interest to have something wrong that would limit the power in any way.

With the engine at full throttle, the instruments showing full power, the gunsight and armament switches checked, I checked for a thumbs up from the other five aircraft, noses lowered and at full thrust, and released my brakes and rolled.

We had twenty knots of wind right down the runway and I did not have to worry about the length of runway available as on hot days. I bumped along until the plane got enough speed to show airspeed, and at 6000 feet, rotated and lifted off.

Because of the lack of power for the weight of the Cougar, it was necessary to hold pulling up the landing gear for a second or two after getting airborne, and to hold the flaps until the plane had accelerated to 190 knots and reached 500 feet. Even at 190 knots, the plane would settle slowly downward, losing some altitude before the airspeed picked up enough to give the plane enough lift to start climbing at a normal rate of climb.

I was easing the plane into a gentle climb after liftoff and glancing periodically at the airspeed and altitude, waiting to pull up my flaps. It was dusty as I lifted off, and I headed for the small lagoon that led out to the gulf.

I had flown so much during the last five months that I was almost more at home in the cockpit than on the ground. I truly loved flying jet aircraft and could have stayed in the air twice as much as I was now flying if given the chance.

I was just leaning back and checking the airspeed at 140 knots and at 400 feet and reaching for the flaps when there was a loud metallic clunk from the aft part of the aircraft, and the nose of the plane pitched over rapidly. I jerked back the stick, but nothing happened. I had no control of the tail at all.

I saw the ground coming up and the plane was still pitching forward when I heard the instructor in the back screaming. I reached over my head and pulled the face curtain. Suddenly, everything was silent and seemed to be occurring in slow motion.

The seat was above me in the blue sky. It didn’t move. It was stationary with the stabilization chute still attached. I rolled over slowly, the pace of the occurrences around me seemingly taking minutes to take place.

I was rolling to my left, and as I did, I could see the tail of the F9 sticking up out of waves of flame flowing ahead.
of it like the small waves that hit the shore on a nearly
windless day at the ocean.

I watched the waves for a fraction of a second and looked
up to see if I had a parachute. I didn’t. I looked back at
the advancing fire and saw it expanding toward me as I
descended and it engulfed me. It appeared as if I was
penetrating the face of a small sun.

I must have been knocked out by the impact with the ground
for a few seconds. When I regained consciousness, I was on my
knees in the middle of the fireball. There was no where to
run.

I was surrounded by the deep orange, roaring flames. I
could feel them burning me, melting the oxygen mask into my
face and the nylon from my G-suit onto my legs. The noise was
deafering. The deep orange flames rolled and reached out from
all sides. The deep orange of the loud snappi ng fire was made
more terrifying by the black hissing tendrils of smoke that
sizzled off the ends of each ball of flame as it whipped
around me.

There was no way to run out. Fire totally surrounded me,
and I could not determine which way to run to get away from
the fire and stayed in the flames getting more and more
panicky. Suddenly, a dark area appeared at my one o’clock
position. Instinctively, I ran toward it and found a canyon
between two walls of flame where Icould run and see
direction. I ran between the two towering faces, perhaps
caused by a wind gust. The walls of flame were so high on
each side of me that I could not see the top of them. Rolling
balls of flame would roll out of the walls and engulf me,
raping my side with pain as they rolled out and over me as I
ran.

It seemed like I was in the fire for an eternity when I
ran out into the burned desert grass. The fire wouldn’t stop
and kept following me as I ran. Finally, as I felt it burning
my back, I turned, raising my arms in defense, and saw the
parachute go out, leaving four or five feet of parachute
shrouds as the total remaining parts of my parachute, which
must have opened as I ran from the fire.

I pulled off my melted G-suit and torso harness and could
see by the skin on my arms that I was badly burned. I
recognized the symptoms of shock and the slowed time, unreal
feeling, and lack of pain that occurs in the short period of
time before you get out of shock and start reacting normally.

I saw a deployed parachute across the burned area. Most
of the fire had burned itself out, but a few patches of grass
and a few shrubs were still burning. I could see the outline
of Capt. Harshbarger in the grass. The fire had burned up to him and gone out. I was still in shock and recognized that he was bent in the wrong places for me to be able to do anything for him, but collapsed the chute so he would not blow downwind and become more injured if he was still alive.

A helicopter from the Air Station came in a few minutes with a doctor aboard. I was left on my own, since the injuries I had were not as visible, nor as extreme as those of the flight instructor. I was let off in front of the tower, and the chopper took the other pilot to the Naval Air Station, Corpus Christi. I was talking to another student in my flight class, Lt. Jim Denton, when an ambulance arrived just as the shock was wearing off. After a two-minute ride to the Auxiliary Air Station Dispensary, it was determined that I had more extensive injuries than had initially been thought. I was given a shot of morphine, bandaged, and sent by ambulance to Corpus Christi Naval Hospital, a World War II Naval Hospital with wood frame buildings and long wards for casualties.

The one-hour ride in the Pontiac ambulance seemed much longer. Because the accident was on all the radio stations, the other cars driving near us sensed that I was one of the pilots involved. I could see them as the sides of the ambulance were windows. I did not know how badly I was injured. I was burned over a good part of my body and had a piece of the airplane go through my shoulder. I could not understand why so many were smiling.

I spent the next four months in the Naval Hospital as an outpatient. I had been burned on the arms, legs, and face and had fractures along my spine, and a wound in the shoulder. I had asked to be kept in Corpus Christi if possible. Two other pilots, Navy Ensigns, had been transferred to the burn center in San Antonio and had died with burns of approximately the same type I had received. I had talked to others who visited them who said they died because they had given up after they had become depressed by the conditions at the burn center. The Navy doctors kept me at Corpus Christi, though I don’t know if my request had anything to do with their decision.

The hospital was used as one of the evacuation hospitals from Vietnam. When I was able to walk (I had not been able to move from the time I laid down in the dispensary at Kingsville until a week or more after I was in the Naval Hospital) to be X-rayed, I passed through some of the wards that had casualties in them. I never have seen anything like what I saw there, even in the war.
I had received my orders overseas a few days after I was in the hospital. I was ordered to the Western Pacific, after being given familiarization training at Yuma, a training squadron for the A-4 Skyhawk.

And everyone remembered me. The part in the tail that had failed, that had caused my plane to go in, was one that was going to have to be replaced in every F9 in the entire world. The advanced Naval Training Command of the US Navy was shut down at a bad time in the war. Everyone got leave.
I had been released from the Naval Hospital in July of 1967. Most of those who I had gone through flight training with had graduated and were now flying in the fleet with the Marines or Navy. I had finished flight training in six weeks, having to go through some basic flying again. I graduated on the first of September, with orders to the Replacement Air Group to Vietnam, the Marine Training Squadron at Yuma, Arizona. Seeing the effects of the war and experiencing them before going to Vietnam on my combat tour had changed my perspective in the cockpit. I was more cautious and more aware of what could happen. It took away much of my brashness, if not my confidence.

After fifty hours flying the two seat TA4F, I was transferred to fly a series of aircraft to Vietnam. They were set up to be used as air control aircraft and were to be used for spotting targets and air control and flown from Danang. Six of us, two flight instructors, two Marine pilots who would be staying in Vietnam, and two of us who were students but with wings that designated us a fully qualified Naval Aviators were assigned to fly the six aircraft with 22 other Marine and Navy Replacement aircraft across the Pacific Ocean, aerial refueling and flying from El Toro Marine Corps Air Station, near Los Angeles, to Kaneohe Bay Marine Corps Air Station, near Honolulu, to Wake Island, Guam, the Philippine Island Naval Air Station at Cubi Point, and from there to Danang.

Flying hours over the ocean in the tiny cockpit of the A-4 and seeing nothing but water for hours on end is physically and mentally numbing. If once you saw something other than water, heard anything on the radio, or had some reassurance that you were not totally alone a thousand miles from nowhere, the flying would not be so bad, but the tendency is to lapse into boredom for hours on end. Then when something unexpected happens like happened one-third of the way between Wake Island and Guam, you can wish you could return to your bored state rather than experience the stark terror you feel after the number two aircraft comes up on the air and says, "I hate to tell you this, but I just ran out of oxygen and you all better check yours." The sick feeling in your stomach that you feel when you see that you have the same amount of oxygen that number two does is replaced by two hours of extreme anxiety as you fly at a lower altitude where you can breathe the cabin
air, while your fuel flow goes up and you continue computing your fuel supply again and again while the search planes are being launched in your direction. We made it to Guam, with little fuel to spare, and had flown on to Cubi Point and into Danang. As a student, seeing Danang for the first time was an experience second to none.

We had been initially held on the runway at Cubi Point because we had loaded guns and the USS Pueblo, a spy ship, had been attacked by North Korea and was under attack when we were waiting to takeoff for Danang. It had been captured so fast that we were not needed for anything and had flown to Danang in the watery sunlight under a high overcast. I had never seen anything like the flight operations at that base. Planes were taking off, both to the north and to the south.

It was during the first days of the 1968 TET Offensive, and there were airstrikes being run on tower frequency. Planes were taking off to the north from the seaward runway and to the south from the landward runway. There was no way to make a radio call, so we flew over the field the first time without getting a clearance to land and would have done so again had we not just entered the flight pattern and landed without clearance from the tower.

I might have been at Danang for a week had not Captain Wilson, one of my flight instructors at Meridian, told me we had to find our own way back to the states on whatever aircraft we could catch a ride on. With Class 4 orders, we came just ahead of stowaways.

We hitched a ride on a C-130 to Cubi Point, on a station plane from Cubi Point to Clark AFB, on a plane owned by a railroad to San Francisco, and flew to San Diego and Yuma on a Bonanza airline after being checked to see if we were going to be allowed to fly with the pistols and explosive ordnance we used for emergency conditions if lost over the ocean.

I had returned to Yuma to find orders waiting for me to return to Vietnam. These were not temporary duty orders as when I had flown with Navy Ferry Squadron 12, but permanent change of station orders to fly for thirteen months with the Fleet Marines in the Western Pacific, meaning Vietnam.
March 20, 1968

The Southern Airlines transport was in the first stages of the approach to Danang. The four officers were seated in the front of the aircraft as requested by the flight attendant. We had been on the same draft since we left from Norton Air Force Base in Riverside, California five days prior to our arrival at Danang. I had been surprised to find that I was the senior officer on the DC-8 that was taking 243 individual replacements to I Corps. I had been given a manifest and the responsibility of getting them safely to Okinawa. I had sealed the Honolulu Airport and had found that seven of the draft enlisted men had tried to buy tickets back to the US. I had left them with others at Okinawa while we got shots, were trained for immediate action upon arrival at Danang, and familiarized with the M-16 rifle.

The other four officers and most of the enlisted Marines were going to the Marine Air Wings. The two other Captains were pilots and the Warrant Officer was a maintenance officer with a helicopter squadron at Hue/Phu Bai, twenty miles north of Danang.

As we made our final approach to Danang, which I had left less than eight weeks before, I watched the Phantoms and F-106s taking off toward us on the north runway to seaward.

We rolled out and parked near the old French terminal on the north mat on the west runway, waiting for someone to tell us where we were going. All of us had orders, but the flight attendant relayed the message from the aircraft pilot that we were to remain on the airliner until told what to do.

The air conditioning was left on for the five or ten minutes it took to bring a liaison officer aboard. During that ten minutes, we had the option of looking at nothing but the inside of the airliner, or looking out the round windows at a C-123 unloading casualties from the northern part of I Corps.

There must have been fifty casualties, mostly covered with white bandages. Most, if not all, were ambulatory. As I watched them, I thought of the casualties I had seen in the hospital at Corpus Christi and the ones I had seen up until 1947 in Walla Walla. I was surprised at the lack of emotion I felt when seeing them, and surprised at the others' reaction
to the first effects that they were seeing that was the reality that we were facing.

The enlisted Marines were separated from the enlisted personnel from the Army, Navy, and Air Force. The plane was empty and the air conditioning off long enough so that the cabin area where we were sitting had become like a furnace before they let the officers off the plane. The three other officers were met by a vehicle from Marine Air Group 36. I was left on my own to get to Chu Lai, 43 miles south.

Since I had just left Danang, I knew my way around enough to know how to get from one place to another. Since the roads were not secure, one had to travel from base to base by air. Each major base had an air freight facility that handled all of the cargo that was transferred from base to base, and it was to Marine Air Freight on the west side of Danang that I set out for.

The heat on the mat in front of the old French Air terminal was suffocating. It must have been more than 120 degrees on the concrete mat. I picked up my B-4 bag and my flight gear and started for the nearest road. I was picked up within five minutes by a six by six, a five-ton Army truck, and rode around the north side of the Danang Air station, past graves registration and over to the Marine Air Freight terminal near the hanger area for Marine Air Group 11.

It was now nearly sixteen hundred hours (4PM). I found that there were no aircraft expected until the next afternoon that would be going south to Chu Lai. I did not know that I could stay at the Marine Air Group 11 transient officers barracks, so I walked over to the transient quarters that were available to anyone near the Marine Air Freight building.

Why anyone would have located the transient quarters where they had located them, I could never imagine. The Southeast Asia hut, with tin corrugated roof and screened sides, was located at the focal point of activity on the Marine side of the base.

After walking to the nearest mess hall, a temporary one near the Marine flight line, I walked over and threw my possessions on one of the dozen bunks, without blankets and showing the effects of months of use under the filthy conditions that prevailed around the Danang area, surrounded by red dusty roads and storage areas, jet fuel, as well as the bodies of who knows how many Marines, soldiers, and sailors passing through from one field command to another.

The building was perhaps fifty yards from the main taxiway that all jet aircraft on the west side of the base used to
taxi into and out of the MAG 11 line. The 100 degree heat was augmented by the jet blast of Phantoms and A-6 intruders taxiing into and out of the flight line, blowing their jet blast through the screened sides and adding thirty or forty degrees to the temperature and deafening those staying within. Since the aircraft operations continued around the clock, sleeping on the dirty mattress consisted of trying to rest with the blast of the jetwash, enjoined with the roar of Phantoms going into afterburner, meshed with the sounds of the occupants playing guitars, cleaning uniforms for R and R, all the while leaving one to wonder what the flares overhead were for and where the distant machine gun and artillery fire was directed.

I slept for two or three hours, as I had been awake for more than thirty six. I awoke near midnight, the sounds still overwhelming in the 80 or 90 degree humid night. I got up, still clothed in my cotton utilities and walked over to the Marine Corps hanger area some 100 yards to the north. It was lit up from inside by large fluorescent lights so the maintenance crews could work around the clock on preparing aircraft for flight or repairing gripes the pilot had written up or other maintenance crews had located during preflights. I walked over to the lighted area. Two Marines, with dirty utilities and half covered with grease, were working arming an A-6 Intruder using their normal professional terminology that I had seen used to obtain everything from another helping of food in the mess haul to a complex electronic test device for a radar.

"Hey, asshole, get that motherfucker over there, will you, I need the cocksucker to fasten this thing together?"

"Fuck you, get it yourself. What do you think I am, your cocksucking servant? If you want the son of a bitch, get it yourself!"

It was good to be back with the reality of the Marines. There was no use in wasting words that you couldn’t understand when you didn’t need to.
I had to wait at Marine Air Freight until 1400 (2 PM) before I could get my ride to Chu Lai, where I would be attached to Marine Aircraft Group 12.

The terminal at Danang was a large sheet metal building 75 feet by forty feet in width. The only construction inside the building was a desk at the west side of the building. When you were waiting to fly out, you had the comfort of whatever you were carrying for a pillow and the concrete floor as a bed. Since most personnel travelling were tired, marines, soldiers, and sailors, as well Vietnamese men and women with blackened teeth sitting with their arms around their knees and feet and buttocks on the ground, were evenly spaced around the building, all impassive while waiting to go somewhere that few of them desired to be, their duty station in I Corps.

When a plane or helicopter arrived, the air freight duty NCO would take a manifest from the counter and call off the names of the next group of persons who wished to be airlifted to the air station the aircraft waiting was going to. Five or six planes, C-130s, C-123s, and a CH-46 took loads of waiting troops from the terminal.

When the duty NCO called out forty names for Hue/Phu Bai, Dong Ha, and Khe Sahn, then under siege, a low moan passed over the group still waiting.

I missed the first flight to Chu Lai, but at 1400 a Marine C-117, a converted C-47 with longer wings, bigger engines, and a stretched fuselage, arrived and I was finally given a seat and we took off with five passengers for Chu Lai. We flew just off the yellow sands of the coast, south 43 miles to the Marine Air Station and the large Army base of Chu Lai.

As we flew, I had a good view of the coastal plain and the first five miles inland. The ground was torn up from various combat actions, and it was possible to see both jet aircraft and helicopters flying to and from targets, or operating tactically, attacking them. We were only flying at 1500 feet, and it was possible to see details of the villages, roads, and the small Vietnamese fishing boats along the shore.

I was able to see Chu Lai long before I could see any detail. It stood out from the surrounding green mountains and fields by its color. It was not green, but looked like a big
sand box from ten miles away. As we approached, I could see the tin roofed, brown buildings scattered in clusters along the main concrete runway that ran 160 degrees, parallel to the coast. A matting crosswind runway ran perpendicular to the concrete runway, and a second matting strip was parallel to the first, but only a few hundred yards from the water. I could see the black smoke of the burning shitters before I could see anything else.

As we rolled out on the concrete strip, I looked out at the brown Southeast Asia huts, the hangers, and revetments for the Phantoms and A-4 E Skyhawks. Along the strip were also the remains of several Phantoms which had flown their last flight. They had been cannibalized of parts and sat on ground near midfield, one burned, building up dunes of sand and dust near their broken fuselages. All the planes but those fueling, were in concrete and metal revetments with metal roofs to protect them from incoming mortar, rocket, and artillery fire.

We taxied to air freight, a small 12’x 14’ building on the taxiway on the north end of the field. I got off the plane and looked around for someone to catch a ride with. I didn’t know my way around Chu Lai. I finally had the duty NCO call the Air Group I was to be attached to and they sent someone to pick up me, my flight gear, and my personal baggage.

While I was standing at the air freight building, I was able to watch flight operations in progress. It seemed like there was a plane taking off or landing every ten or fifteen seconds. Some did not even stop after taxiing, but taxied into the takeoff position at full speed, ran up their engines and departed, all totally loaded with ordnance of different types. Interspersed in the pattern were CIA aircraft, C-46s, and one short takeoff plane that needed less than 100 feet to roll and takeoff. I didn’t know how the tower could control all of the aircraft I saw on this one small runway. I must say that I was awed by the frenetic nature of the flight operations.

I was picked up by a CWO, Gunner Weatherford maintenance chief of Attack Squadron 311. I now knew where I would be going to fly for the next six months or more.

Meeting another person with the same last name as I had was a surprise, but it had already happened before when two of us were in flight training with the same last name and in the same level in training. At least, Gunner Weatherford was not going to show up on the flight schedule and cause the confusion that had occurred previously.

We drove down the taxiway, in the 100 degree plus heat, to
the Marine Air Group 12 flight line. I met two of the pilots I would be flying with, the duty officer, and had a chance to look around the squadron area. The hanger was worth noting. It was half gone, the roof was hanging down in the back, and it gave little protection to the aircraft within. It had been the victim of the bomb dump being hit during the Tet offensives first hours some two months ago about the time I was ferrying aircraft from the states to Danang.

We drove up to the squadron area and I turned in my orders. Gunner was giving me a rundown on every aspect of the base, but little of it was registering. I was overwhelmed by the last twenty-four hours and my mind had absorbed all it could for a while.

I was not given an assignment to quarters the first day. I had arrived late in the afternoon, so I went to the transient barracks, one bed in the middle of a Southeast Asia hut and slept for two hours before meeting the Operations Officer and Commanding Officer, Lt. Col McCrary. I wondered what the day had in store for me.

I found the duty clerk in the Commanding Officer’s small office, another SE Asia hut, open at the sides, screened and with screened windows, a metal roof and with four desks inside.

I was unprepared for what I was told. My flight log book had been examined, and it had been decided that I didn’t have enough flight time, or experience to be a combat pilot. I had less than 110 hours in the A-4, and thirty of those hours had been over the ocean in formation, I was less than eight months out of a Naval Hospital, and I had 0 hours in the single seat A-4. It was decided that I would be sent to Japan to the squadron at Iwakuni to get more flight time, familiarize in the single seat A-4C which they had there, then be returned to Vietnam to fly when more qualified.

I went to bed thinking about Japan and what it would be like to be stationed there instead of in Vietnam.

I had no illusions about the glamour of flying in combat. I was elated to be going anywhere but where I now was. I knew what I could expect here, and knew full well that going to Japan would be better.

I was too tired to go to the officer’s club that had been built for the Officer’s mess and for us to use when not flying. It was suffocatingly hot, I was being devoured by mosquitoes, I was soaked through with sweat, and I was already red from the dirt of the roads on the base. I fell asleep to the sound of afterburners again.
22 March 1968

I woke up after the sun was up. I could not tell any difference in the flight operations from the night before. They never stopped.

I took a shower, one of the amenities of being in the air wing and not the infantry, put on some clean utilities, and after shaving, went to the Officer’s mess to eat. The officers had built a grass-roofed, tile-floored Mess and club that looked like a large hut the Vietnamese used to gather in like a public meeting hall in the states. It was less than one hundred yards from the South China Sea and had an uncovered veranda where you could sit during the evening and look out over the South China Sea. The MAG 12 engineers who had built it, had taken the advice of the Vietnamese and built a thatched roof, had not underlain it with anything, and it kept out the rain. MAG13 had not trusted the Vietnamese experience and had underlain theirs with black plastic and it had rotted almost immediately.

I ate with several of the other pilots I had gone through flight training with. There were only 80 or ninety A-4 pilots at Chu Lai. Most had been stationed together before, and if you had not met someone personally, you had met someone that he knew.

I walked over to Operations. I didn’t know how long it would take me to get away from Chu Lai, but the way things had gone so far, I expected to be in Iwakuni by the following sunset. I was ready to leave any time they wanted me to. The constant sound of artillery and the flares around the base at night were none too comforting, and if I could avoid them for any period of time, I was going to do so.

I walked into the hut. Change is the unknown motto of the military and change is what greeted me when I entered. The road back to civilization was paved with obstacles, and my first obstacle was going to be a 13-month tour of duty and not a shorter one, because I was not going to Japan.

Two or three days before, a squadron pilot, in a fully loaded A4E had not had his airspeed at midfield and had aborted. He had not been able to slow the plane enough with the brakes and had missed all of the arresting gear. He had ejected as the plane left the overrun and died in the explosion that followed. The squadron never had more than
seventeen pilots to fly the 20 planes Gunner Weatherford usually had available, and the loss of one made me fully qualified to fill the cockpit he had left vacant. My orders were stamped, and I was given the written tests for the A4E. Previously it had taken me a week or more to familiarize myself with aircraft. I did it with the A4E in one afternoon. I went through the tests and found the model I had flown different in many ways, but not in ways that would make flying difficult. I took an hour after I had taken the tests and went out and started the aircraft, found the basic differences, and was deemed ready for flight as a wingman.

All pilots were given three familiarization flights in the TA4-F so that they could see the ground they would be flying over, learn the radio calls, and learn the basics of flying in I Corps. My three flights were all at dusk or after dark. I saw Danang off the port wing, Danang off the starboard wing, stars above, stars below, and heard all manner of radio calls, some to us, some on guard, and some to others, and knew no more after three missions that I had known before flying them. When I returned at midnight from the third, I saw my name on the flight schedule for two missions the following day. My first mission would be to Khe Sanh, with a Capt. Trumpfeller. It was under siege, and I had heard what had been said about flying there. I would be flying my first mission, with napalm and five hundred pound retarded bombs, basically as an advanced student, with 0 hours in the A4E. I was confident, more so than I should have been.

I had been assigned a SE Asia hut next to the road and a Caterpillar generator. There were six officers in each hut and twelve enlisted Marines in a hut in the area where they slept. We were given sheets and a blanket, more to fend off the rats, bugs, and mosquitoes than for warmth, which was not a need. I made up my bed, put my pillow over my head to keep the mosquitoes at bay, and went to sleep, not thinking about anything but getting some rest. The heat and constant noise were fatiguing in themselves. Even though you could scarcely shout over the generator, it was not as bad as the Phantoms taking off and landing at Danang, and I did not notice anything during the night. I was awakened at daybreak by the duty truck driver, Frenchy, and got up to fly my first flight.

As I went to sleep, I wondered if I was in the bed vacated by the pilot who had been killed. When someone was killed, it was as though they ceased to exist, and I knew nothing about him, except how he died. I knew one thing about him that would not be repeated by me.

You could fly, focusing on every detail and plan to catch
any problem before it happened and take appropriate action. The problem with doing so was that you lost your overview of the overall situation by continually focusing on details.

I would never die doing what he did. When I pushed the throttle forward, and nothing adverse happened when I did so, I would be at the end of the runway when I made a decision what to do with the plane at its maximum speed, regardless of any problems. If I was airborne, I would be turning over the land toward the South China Sea. If I was not, my wingman would have to avoid me, the seat, and the explosion. I was not going to pull the power back and go off the runway at any speed but the maximum I could obtain. I had already seen several people killed analyzing what was going to kill them, instead of surveying the ground from their parachute and trying to avoid the cactus where they were going to land.

23 March 1968 Khe Sanh

I met Captain Trumperfeller, a career Marine and former flight instructor. We met in the briefing room, which housed the air intelligence section, and got our target briefing from the air intelligence officer. Our squadron six x six picked us up and we rode the two miles to the squadron area. The field near the briefing shack, where the Marines were once stationed had been taken over by the US Army and was now used by the 14th Aviation Battalion.

We drove down to the eight by forty foot trailer sitting in front of the half destroyed hanger and he gave me a long brief, leaving out nothing. It took forty-five minutes.

I checked out an aircraft, preflighted it, checking the fuses on the 500# bombs and the napalm canisters. The plane captain helped me strap in the tiny cockpit. I checked over the switches, gave the signal for power, and lit off the jet, a Navy plane that had been sent to the Marines as a replacement aircraft when the ship it had been on deployed back to the United States from Yankee station.

The Marine ground crew looked exhausted and wore tattered utilities covered with grease and dirt from working around the leaking hydraulic fluid, fuel, and water from various tanks scattered around the periphery of the flight lines dusty perimeter.

I received a call on channel 1, the base ground frequency, and taxied out following the lead. He called for takeoff and I pulled up into position just aft of him, upwind of his jet wash. It must have been 150 degrees in the
cockpit, since the air conditioner didn't cool the cockpit until the engine power was at 80% or above.

224-1, the lead plane with our mission number, dropped his hand, signalling that he was releasing his brakes and started rolling. I gave him thirty seconds and released my brakes.

Later, I would watch A4s takeoff from the opposite end of the runway from where they started.

It was possible to see both aircraft run up their engines from the end of the 10000 foot runway. When the brakes would release, the nose would come up, but it was not possible to see the forward motion. You could see the nose lower as the small delta winged aircraft accelerated toward you. You could see the speed as the plane approached midfield, rotating its nose, and raising the gear at the same time. The landing gear would come up and the doors would close, but the plane would not climb. As it approached you, the sense of speed became more apparent as it flew a dozen feet or less above the runway, nose high, the bombs facing you as it accelerated toward you. As it approached your position, you wanted to run as the plane was now nearing two hundred knots, was ten or fifteen feet above the runway, and barely airborne when it passed you, still nose high, but the nose lowering as the aircraft, without afterburner, and with a quiet turbojet engine, turned a few dozen feet above the ground toward the coast, away from possible ground fire and started climbing more rapidly. Just as you were collecting your thoughts and thinking of looking for the next aircraft, it would come by at less than fifteen feet, turn and follow the lead, joining up abeam the midfield marker of the runway, over the coast, less than a mile out to sea.

I rolled until I had 150 knots on my airspeed indicator and turned at less than 100 feet after I had left the runway behind. I turned inside the lead, who was turning wings level and joined less than a mile from the takeoff end of the runway, immediately getting a signal to move out into cruise formation, a position where I could follow maneuvers without being previously signalled that they were going to happen.

I settled into cruise formation, fifty feet from the lead and well aft.

"Vice Squad, Vice Squad, this is Hellborne 224 lifting off Chu Lai, request inflight following." I heard the lead call on his radio.

"Roger, Hellborne 224, squawk emergency ident." There was a pause as the lead hit the IFF button, then, "I have your
radar contact 224, we have sav-a-planes at the 180 to the 200 radial of Danang Tacan from ground level to 5000 feet."

"Roger," replied Dash 1 (short for 224-1). We continued to fly up the coast to our point of landfall.

I was icing up inside the cockpit and could not find the cabin pressurization switch. When I finally did so, I almost blew my eardrums out when the cabin pressurized, the steam and ice disappeared and I could see out normally again. I could see the coastal plain by looking past the lead aircraft. It was clear enough in the spring haze to see almost to the mountains. From ten thousand feet, it was possible to see the land well. It was torn up from the coast inland. There were scattered bomb craters, places where there was smoke from fires or artillery, and shattered villages visible near the coast.

There was constant chatter on the radio, both on Vice Squad and the guard frequency, supposedly used for emergency broadcasts and monitored by all aircraft.

As we approached Danang, I could see the constant flow of aircraft on the runway and in the air around the large air station. I now had a good idea how it lay in relationship to Chu Lai, and points north to North Vietnam.

We flew for nearly half an hour, then turned inland just south of the DMZ (demilitarized zone). As we flew inland, I could keep the lead in sight and still look at what was below.

The ground was battered beyond belief. There were overlapping bomb craters from the coast inland. There was almost nothing that had not been bombed. I couldn't believe that many bombs could have been dropped any where.

I didn't have time to look further. I heard Dash 1 tell me to switch to a pre coded frequency. I called "Dash two up," and heard the lead call.

"Fingerprint one two, this is Hellborne 224 inbound with delta two and delta nines (500# retarded bombs and napalm) for your control."

Immediately there was a reply from the small single engine O-1, an aircraft smaller than a Cessna 150 that was used as a target spotting aircraft by the Marines. "Proceed inbound to the 090 radial of Channel 109, Hellborne, and hold."

Dash one moved me into trail and I set all my armament switches that I could while moving back. I now was in a position to look at Khe Sanh, then surrounded and under siege by more than forty thousand NVA Regular troops.

I dropped back and set my flaps at one quarter to give myself a little more lift and surveyed the scene laid out below.
The first thing that caught my eye was how small the Khe Sahn base was. It looked like a piece of tape, red and torn laid across a small ridge surrounded by taller mountains. There were wrecked aircraft on the mat and there were rounds impacting inside the perimeter.

From the perimeter outward, there were concentric rings of trenches, blown apart and separated from each other by almost interlocking bomb craters. The hills surrounding the base to the north, hills 881 north and 881 south, appeared to be in our possession as did hill 861, which I had been shown in the briefing. The mountain of Coroc in Laos, overlooked the base from four or five miles and appeared to have caves in which artillery pieces could be located.

There were air strikes being conducted by more than one air controller and the impact of bombs could be seen west toward Laos from where I was orbiting.

I could see the flames from shitters burning, and the mottled layout of the base which was covered with bunkers, debris of types I could not recognize from my altitude, and material stacked here and there.

The trenches went for as far as I could see to the north and west. A bombed out road ran past Khe Sahn to the west, and there was a bombed out French style building along the road just past Khe Sanh on the way to the Laotian border. Khe Sanh was a benign name for what was laid out below.

I had no more time to observe as the controller was giving us a mission.

"Hellborne 224, I have a mission, are you ready to copy?" The voice of the controller was self assured and commanding.

"Roger," replied Dash 1.

"Run in heading will zero six zero, left hand pull. Friendly forces will be at your eleven o'clock at five hundred meters at Khe Sanh. Ground fire is expected to be heavy."

Capt. Trumpfeller, Dash 1, read back the brief as it had been given. He was descending and maneuvering to a position so that he would be at the roll in point when permission was given to roll in.

"Do you see my mark, 224?" Fingerprint had shot a smoke marker between the base of one of the mountains and Khe Sahn. I saw Dash one turn toward the smoke, call "Roger, Dash one in hot," and start down the chute and toward the target, with all switches armed. We were going to drop all our bombs and napalm on a single run.

I was too far behind to roll in on the target as he called off. I watched as he rolled inverted, did a double half roll
entry, leveled out and released over the target, the orange winking of ground fire coming from his nine o’clock position abeam the target.

I pulled up on the run in line, watching the napalm from the previous air strike run behind the lead aircraft, but behind him and beneath him. I turned on the run in line and rolled inverted, holding the gunsight rings above the smoke and moving 100 meters to the right as the controller had indicated.

I had turned on my master armament switch as I had pulled up on the run in line. As I started the run down to the target, suddenly time slowed to a crawl. Dash 1 was turning back to the left, the smoke and fire of his ordnance drop was drifting toward Khe Sahn slowly. The target seemed too big to miss as I pulled the gunsight ring down below it and started rolling back into a wings level upright position. Time seemed to crawl. The area of the smoke was so large I could never miss it as I watched it get bigger and bigger in the gunsight picture. I saw no ground fire, and never did when on a bombing run. I think I was too intensely focused on the target and hitting it.

I pressed the target until it looked like it was going to impact with the aircraft, hit the button on the top of the stick and pulled up and to the left, Khe Sanh above me a hundred feet or more.

I kicked my rudder hard left to see what was happening behind me, and could just catch the napalm and flame in the mirror on the right side of my canopy.

The air controller, Fingerprint 12, was reading the bomb damage assessment to Dash one before I had time to get my armament switches off and try to find him in the haze toward the coast near Dong Ha, the last place where I had seen him.

I could not write the bomb damage assessment, fly the plane, look for him and get my cockpit in order all at the same time. When he had the BDA (bomb damage assessment) written down he called and asked if I had him in sight.

Just as he did so, I caught sight of him at my one o’clock a little above me, and called, tally ho, and joined on a big black F-100 flying in the same approximate direction I wanted to go. I flew with him for a minute or two, then saw a single A-4 flying down the coast and moved away from the Air Force F-100 and joined on my lead.

As we flew back on Vice Squad frequency, I was more aware of what was around us than when we came up the coast the first time. I saw other aircraft using the same airway to and from the DMZ, got a better look at the location of the bases from
the DMZ south to Chu Lai and got a more comprehensive view of I Corps as a whole.

We checked each other over for battle damage or hung ordnance while we flew down the coast.

At ten miles, we descended from 8000 feet. I was given the signal to drop back and I followed the lead onto the runway and to the flight line.

I felt totally drained after one mission. The insufferable heat taxiing, the stress of trying to meet the demands for the first time, and the buildup of fatigue in just getting to Vietnam left me almost totally exhausted after one mission.

There was not much of a debrief. There wasn’t enough time. Before I had a chance to get out of my torso harness and G-suit, a major who I did not know from the group headquarters came over and asked “are you ready to brief, Captain Weatherford?” He looked at me like I had been there forever. “We are going back to the same place you have just come from.” And we did. It was a lot easier the second time than the first.

After debriefing from my second mission to the Khe Sanh and DMZ areas, I took off my flight gear, went into the ready room and got a beer, and walked around to the office of the Intelligence Clerk, Corporal Crowley. I introduced myself as the new Intelligence Officer and asked him to show me what was going to be expected of me in the job.

Being assigned as the Intelligence Officer of a squadron was no present. No one cared what you did until you lost a classified document. Then the full force of the wrath of the full organization fell on you. The best you could do, if you did everything right, was to be noticed by no one.

I had the training and interest in the job, and had asked for it. I thought it would be more interesting than working as an officer in Operations, Maintenance, or the other jobs in the squadron.
Intelligence Officer

With the science background I had, finding unknowns from the study of facts was natural for me. This was all that intelligence work was. I liked doing the work, and most others I knew avoided this type of job.

I found out after ten minutes of discussing the past procedures with Corporal Crowley that there were two parts to this job. What I wanted to do was a small part and keeping track of the classified documents as they came in, registering them in a register, and disposing of them when they were no longer needed was the main part.

I knew the penalty for losing a classified document was a permanent black mark on one's record and that it took a lot of time to keep track of the documents we had.

I also had the responsibility to destroy all the documents if the base was overrun.

After looking at the hundreds of documents we had, I decided that we were going to simplify the recordkeeping system.

The documents we were keeping were out of date, not used, and generally only occupied space. I had Crowley make a burn list and we burned most of them. This took care of the recordkeeping and the need to dispose of them if we were overrun. After doing so, I could spend what time I had on Intelligence reading the new reports that came in and analyzing them for use of the squadron.

I received intelligence reports that gave a daily summary of what happened on the base perimeter, and others that went on to give analyses of actions occurring throughout the eastern hemisphere. I was not comfortable carrying the knowledge I had over North Vietnam and Laos day after day and night after night.

Flying over I Corps, seeing combat, and talking to those engaged on the ground and then coming back and reading the reports given to the Third Marine Amphibious Force at Danang gave me an overview of what was happening that few people had.

Between flying, standing the duty, doing the intelligence work, and taking care of the mundane jobs that always cropped up, there was little time left for sleep. I started doing the work in intelligence when I was standing the duty at night.
At three in the morning, even when we were flying a night schedule, I could find the time to work in my office.

The commanding officer wanted me to keep him informed of anything of importance in the daily three reports. I also kept up a map for the pilots of the latest known location of all the small units around Chu Lai and the large units from Quang Ngai, fifteen miles to the south, to the DMZ.

Col. McCrary had me brief the enlisted marines on the way we flew, the equipment we needed and how we used it, the locations of enemy units, and what we saw when we flew against them.

I was surprised at the response. They had known little but what they saw on the flight line on the planes they worked on. They had not known what the instruments were used for or what we were doing when we got to an assigned target. Once they knew how important each instrument, arming system, and other component was to the success or failure of the missions we flew, they took an entirely different approach in attitude to what they did.

They were not aware, either, of the conditions just outside of our perimeter. We had people captured within a hundred meters of the wire.

I started accumulating a lot more information than the other pilots, since I was getting the reports from units we supported from the air, saw who we had supported, and saw statements of the results. I got to the point where I knew where most of the battalions were operating.

There were times when I wondered if the mission that was being reported, was the same mission or three different missions, especially in the reports of small unit actions around Chu Lai, the reports being from units of the US Army’s Americal Division. The report from the pilots would conflict with the reports from the ground commanders, and the press release would appear to be a different situation entirely from either of the two preceding reports. Since I was making some of the pilot reports, I wondered what the ground commanders were seeing that they had not reported to our flight.

I did not get back to my hooch until nearly midnight after my first day of flying. I had a brief a 0600 the next morning.
9 April 68, Japan

At 0700, I flew as a wingman to the Danang area. The preflight briefing in the squadron area before flying by the flight leader had shortened to the radio frequencies and pointing toward the door. It was tiring to fly, and flying two missions a day, working on other things, and standing the duty caused little things to be overlooked and never completed. Sometimes I did not know the pilot I was flying with. We had pilots that were from other units come fly with us to get their flight time. They were attached to divisions or other units away from Chu Lai, and came back for a few days at a time to get the monthly required flight time.

About the only thing that changed from mission to mission was the ordnance load and location. The procedures getting to and from the target were always the same.

After my second mission, up near the Hue/Phu Bai Marine base, I landed and was met by a Major Durham. He and another Major told me I was going to Japan with them and to get my bags packed because we were leaving in less than an hour. He handed me a copy of orders to sea survival school at some place south of Tokyo named Numazu and operated by the 5th Air Force.

I just had time to get out of my flight gear, get my B-4 back packed and get into some utilities. I could not get rid of my pistol, so I put it on.

I stayed with them. They knew how to get around better than I did, and seven hours after boarding an aircraft at Chu Lai air freight, I found myself with them, standing in Tokyo International Airport in red dusty Marine utilities, carrying a red dusty B-4 bag, wearing a .38 pistol, and separated by two or three yards from everyone else in the busy terminal.

There was an Air Force bus that went from the air terminal to the base at Tachikawa where we could get a room in the transient BOQ, and we boarded and took it to the Air Force base and each got a room. It was nearly midnight. I had started the day by briefing for a mission at Danang eighteen hours before and had flown two missions, been on three different transport aircraft, and now was 2500 miles away from where I started.
Two days later I started out, alone, to cross Tokyo and find my way to Numazu. I didn’t know a word of Japanese. Major Durham had showed me the general direction of the train station, and I walked up to the ticket counter, handed the clerk in a train company uniform a handful of bills and said "Numazu?".

He took an amazingly few bills from the stack, handed me a small ticket covered with Japanese symbols, and turned the hands of a large clock next to the window to 7:32 and pointed to a numbered post. I walked over and stood there, after setting my watch to the station time.

At 7:32, a train pulled into the station, the doors opened, and a blue horde of children dressed in blue school uniforms flowed off the train. I got on and took a leather strap in my hand, and stood in the aisle as the train left the station.

The train was jam packed with people, about half of them the blue uniformed students. I could see over all of them and see that there was almost no room to move. Again, I didn’t know where I was going, so I gave my ticket to a small boy in a blue uniform and said "Numazu?".

He seemed pleased that I had asked him and pointed to his small watch and gave me a time to get off the train. He then wanted to practice his English. I understood a few words. His English was far better than my Japanese, but we had a ways to go before we could talk at any length.

My one-word command and question got me through Tokyo, Shinjuku Station in the center of Tokyo, and to a concrete train station platform at dusk. I had been on trains for almost twelve hours when I handed my ticket to a small, older Japanese gentlemen standing at the post where I had just left the train. He pointed to the ground, looked at me and said, "Numazu," and walked away.

I hailed a taxi and survived the ride to the small Air Force training facility outside of town on a beach near a bay off the ocean. It was freezing cold, windy, and no place to be swimming for another three months.

We spent three days in lectures and made one freezing jump into the water to learn how to use a sea survival suit. I doubted that I could get into the cockpit of the A4 with one on, and was not going to wear one when the seawater temperature was 80 degrees, as it was off of South Vietnam, so I was taking the course more with the attitude that I was having a vacation than learning something again (I had gone to sea survival school before in Florida) that I
already knew.

On the fourth day, we learned how to pack a seat pack used on an ejection seat. Each of us was recovering from a long night out. The three officers, the two Marine Majors, and myself were always first, the ranking officers being the first to have to complete any assigned task.

We had parachute riggers to rig our chutes. I would not have flown if I had to pack my own. The one time I needed one, it didn't work right, and if I packed it, it would be guaranteed to be the situation again.

One by one, I picked up each of the articles that went into the seat pack. I stomped down on the top and managed to get it closed. The raft was on top, and the shark repellent and sea dye and other small necessities were underneath.

I stood next to mine, waiting for it to be inspected when the unexpected occurred. I was told to pick it up and go down to the beach. There was an outboard powered, open speedboat there, with a reel coming out the back and a parachute hooked to the end of a rope attached to a release mechanism. Before I could think of some way to get out of the situation, I was hooked into the parachute, and the class was briefed on how to use it while I was there.

Well before I had worked up the courage to go on, the speedboat took off out to sea, and I was lifted in the chute with my seat pan strapped on, in a survival suit, and the shore disappeared behind me.

We went out three miles into the choppy bay, and I saw the crewman in the after part of the small craft wave his hand in a sweeping motion.

Suddenly I was falling fast into the sea. I reluctantly pulled the release handle on the seat pack and looked down expecting to see all the contents drop into the sea and leave me to die, alone, in Japan, because of my own ineptitude in packing a raft and seat pack.

I was overjoyed to see the raft and contents hanging below me, but not for long because just as I was assured I would not drown at sea, I hit the water and found myself tangled in the parachute shrouds.

With a single sweep of my right arm, I had the raft under me and the parachute unhooked and floating away.

The raft was just big enough for my body. The water temperature was 49 degrees, but the survival suit was keeping me warm enough. What bothered me was that with the waves the way they were, I could not see land or any of the other unfortunates nearby.

I took out the shark repellent and deployed it and the
green dye, which stayed around the boat and dyed it and me green. On top of one of the waves, I saw the mountains of Japan for the first time and started paddling toward them. Unknown to me, a current was rapidly carrying me toward shore, and it was not thirty minutes before I saw the beach in the distance. I drifted toward it and saw that I was going to land in front of a school.

All of the children had been let out to watch the fools swim in the ocean in late winter. As I drew near, I looked toward the area I thought the other pilots and crewmen would be in their rafts and could not see them or the Air Force encampment. I had been the first one dropped and the farthest from the camp, though I didn’t know it then.

I let the raft drift up on the beach and got out. I was turned around and didn’t know which way to go back to the camp. I was on a spit of land and could have gone either way.

The children were well behaved and looked at the yellow-green man in the flight helmet carrying the seat pan without comment. I walked down the beach to an older man leaning next to the wall that prevented the beach from eroding further and intended to ask him which way to go.

Now the children were laughing and pointing. I wondered what had caused them to do so when I saw that the man had his pants down and was masturbating while looking at me and smiling. I walked down the beach away from the children and the old man masturbating, wondering what more the day had to offer.

After survival school, the fourth one I had been to, I decided that in the future, I would start learning how to survive by learning how to avoid such torment again. I would start my survival techniques long before others attending the school, because I would start by trying to survive by surviving the survival school by never having to go there.

I was never more miserable than when starving, freezing, cold, and wet or being eaten in the jungle by everything in it which bit, stung, slimed, and threw things at you.

I decided I could be just as miserable the first time as any time thereafter and didn’t need the practice beforehand. I made the decision too late. I was never again sent to a survival school.

On termination of the school, we took a few days to travel back to Chu Lai. When I arrived back at the squadron area, I was put on the flight schedule for a late TPQ, or night bombing mission.

We had been assigned new quarters. I also had a new
roommate.

My new roommate was from Texas and had been a few months ahead of me in flight school. His name was Capt. Prichard, and he had a twin brother who I had just seen in Okinawa and thought to be him.

We had Quonset huts built for us with air conditioning. It made it possible to sleep during any time period, unlike the SE Asia huts where sleeping was difficult to impossible during the day, and none too pleasant during the night. Flying tired all the time was hard on aircraft. Small careless mistakes were taking their toll on our planes.

I moved my few belongings to the new buildings on top of a sandy hill. Afterwards, I went down to the beach and spent some time in the warm water and returned and got ready for dinner.

I went to bed at 2200 hours and just seemed to close my eyes when the night truck driver, Corporal Heislen, from Pennsylvania, was shaking my shoulder and telling me it was time to fly.

In less than a minute, I had on my flight suit and was in his six by six and riding to squadron. I walked into the ready room just after midnight, picked up a mission card, and got into my torso harness and G-suit, and went and signed out an aircraft. I was still half asleep.
Night TPQ Missions

To some outside observer, the night TPQ missions would appear to have been the easiest flying of all the missions we flew, and the safest. All that the missions consisted of was a radar controlled flight from Chu Lai to a target and back the same way, all the time being under radar control and having to fly on instruments from takeoff to landing with little chance of having any enemy fire directed at you.

This may appear simple, but I found the night TPQ missions were the worst missions of all we flew. Because we were under radar control, the missions could be and were flown in all kinds of weather. Since both the spring and summer monsoons had weather associated with them that made flying hazardous, flying TPQs could put you in hazardous conditions flying and recovering that daylight close air support missions would not.

During the summer monsoon, a line of thunderstorms would develop a dozen miles inland, move over the ocean in the early evening, and dissipate near dawn. When this line was present, it was necessary to penetrate the thunderstorm line four times going to and from the target areas we flew. We would take off and immediately penetrate the line to get away from land and out to sea, penetrate the line again flying to the target, again leaving the target, and again just before landing.

On one mission, in July 1968, I launched into just such conditions.

There was not a particularly low overcast, so I made a visual takeoff with six five hundred pound bombs, our normal night load. I turned to the north and penetrated the clouds at 1500 feet and started climbing to my assigned altitude. I was focusing on my instruments and the climb schedule of airspeeds and altitudes when I felt a presence in the cockpit that I had not felt before. I was half way between Chu Lai and Danang and was being vectored between thunderstorms when the feeling of the presence overpowered my need to keep my instrument scan going. I looked away from the instrument panel and forward over the nose probe on the right side of the fuselage and saw it glowing blue. My mind disconnected from the hand holding the stick for the next thirty seconds, and
the plane flew itself while I looked at the blue glowing wings, the blue cone around the nose and nose probe, and the blue drops of water on my canopy in the boundary layer that did not move.

The plane looked like it was irradiated, and I was about to call on the radio to Vice Squad, but was afraid of making a fool of myself, so I flew along for thirty seconds looking out at the blue glowing light, the plane flying well without any commands from me. I finally did take back control and finished the mission, but not before being vectored into the edge of a large thunderstorm and getting the plane banged around by the vertical air currents.

I made a hard turn out of the storm and landed. After doing so, I found that what I had experienced was being reported by other pilots, and was my first experience with Saint Elmo's fire.

There were times when I would push the throttle forward when I could only see halfway down the runway, fly into the clouds at four hundred feet, and stay there the entire mission. The aircraft were reliable for day operations, more so than for night instrument conditions. They had a lot of landings that shook the antennas, a lot of 20 MM cannon fire that did the same thing and were always damp in the climate of SE Asia. More than once, I flew missions where the TACAN, the main navigation instrument, failed, the radio failed, or the bomb release system left me having to land, at night, with three bombs on one wing, no bombs or racks on the other, and having to shoot an instrument approach when the plane would not turn right, was nose high, and at full right rudder. One such mission of the eighty or so that I flew comes to mind.

I was pulled awake in my sandy bed by Corporal Heislen at midnight. I had two TPQ missions scheduled in the rainy, overcast that was prevailing. He took me to the squadron line, and I dressed and got my mission, a 0130 takeoff for North Vietnam.

I checked out an airplane, preflighted it, I got into the cockpit and did my checks with electrical power, my moustache and the tips of my fingers shorting out the mike and making small sparks when I touched any of the electrical powered devices in the cockpit. I called tower before starting the engine and found the base was currently overcast at 400 feet. It was lightly raining.

I went ahead with the mission. I started the engine and taxied to the south runway, at the far end of the Chu Lai Air Station from our flight line. It was jet black out and the
runways and taxiways were shiny and slick from the light rain.

I called Chu Lai departure and got on their frequency so that I could have flight following immediately after takeoff in case something happened before I could get under radar control of Vice Squad, the enroute controller.

I taxied out to the center of the wet black runway. It was a minute or two before I got clearance to takeoff, and I set the lights in the cockpit so they were bright enough so that I would have no trouble seeing, and looked down the runway from the takeoff position. It was like looking into a black void. The runway lights disappeared into the gloom at five or six thousand feet and the lights of the flight lines of MAG 12 and MAG 13, the Phantom group, were dim in the light rain. I was finally given permission to takeoff.

I eased the throttle to 100% power and started the bumpy roll down the runway. I was accelerating normally without any problem. I was glancing down at my airspeed so that when I reached 150 knots I could rotate and not risk blowing a tire. Just as I looked down there was a sudden shuddering of the aircraft, and I was being bounced around the cockpit like I wasn’t strapped in. I pulled back on the stick to get the nose off the runway. I had blown my nose tire.

I jerked on the stick. I had to get the tire up so the plane would accelerate to takeoff speed, 155 knots. It wouldn’t accelerate and the nose would not come up.

There was no sense pulling back on the power. I was staying right at 150 knots, and pulling back the power was going to do little to slow down a fully loaded plane with a wet runway under the rock hard tires.

I could neither get the plane airborne, nor stop the violent shaking, which was getting worse. I was like a log going down a sluice.

I had missed the first arresting gear. I was starting to drift left and couldn’t control the drift, so I slammed down the arresting hook. The plane immediately went into the midfield morest, taking the wire off center and rolling out to a stop with my nose fishtailing to the right as I did so.

I rode back to the flight line on a crash truck and was handed another yellow sheet just as I got off of it.

I couldn’t believe it, but I signed it off, got another plane, and taxied out just like I had done twenty minutes, or less, before. When I got to the takeoff end of the runway, they were still getting my previous aircraft off the runway. It had taken all of the energy and will I had to walk out to
the second aircraft after nearly wiping out the one before.

When departure had given me clearance to takeoff, I pushed the throttle forward and did so, lifting off at a point just before the location of the tow truck and crash trucks that were towing my aircraft from the taxiway to our flight line. I was over an hour late after I landed from the first mission, when I walked into the ready room to get a beer. I had had it for one night, but instead of a beer, I got another mission. I said I didn’t want to fly, because I was too tired. The duty officer called group and asked to cancel the mission which was now going to be late if flown at all.

The Group duty officer at headquarters near the living area didn’t cancel the mission, but asked for the name of the pilot.

What he was saying when he did so was "who do we have here who doesn’t have the intestinal fortitude to fly under these conditions?"

I got so angry I just took the mission, checked out another plane, and took off. After I returned, just as the first light of day showed over the horizon, I rode up to the debriefing shack at air intelligence to debrief. When I tried to do so, I found I could remember nothing of the mission, but had the coordinates on my mission sheet from my kneeboard.

After I took a shower, I lay down in the sunlight that penetrated the green window of the Quonset hut and tried to keep my eyes open, but found it impossible to do so.

It was a pilot flying under just such conditions that took the arresting gear the wrong way a few weeks later, doing considerable damage to an aircraft.

Flying at night was exhausting because there were too many things to do during the day, in addition to being tiring flying by nature. Captain Prichard, one day walked in after a mission and said every time he walked into the hooch, he met himself walking out again. That was a good way to put it.

Flying TPQ missions was a different experience when the weather was good, but still they were no fun. Perhaps one half of those I flew were, in some degree or another, under visual or semi-visual conditions.

With the background I had flying tactically during the day and having intelligence reports of action all over I Corps, I was in a position when flying up and down the coast at night to fly off the coast and see the panorama of the war and know generally what was happening.

Typically, I would be pulled awake by Heislen, and ride down to the flight line with him, the moon lighting the west
field where the Army had their choppers, the POW Camp at the intersection of the road and the west field runway with the access road, and the sandy reaches that were open around the Chu Lai area. It would be pretty, in a way, with the sand reflecting the moonlight and the stars bright over the sea. Tempering the beauty was the constant pop and orange light of the flares and the tracers on the perimeter.

When I got to the squadron area, I would get my mission on a sheet of paper and see who else was flying that night. It was written out in grease pencil on the board where the flight schedule was written.

The tension was not as great when we didn’t have to fly instruments because we didn’t need clearances, have the problems with failure of instruments needed under instrument conditions, and could fly the missions faster.

If I wouldn’t have been so tired, I might have enjoyed flying them, because I did like to fly the A4, but not when everything was a crisis or needed total concentration to be successful.

We flew radar missions ordered from controllers at Chu Lai, Danang, Hue/Phu Bai, Dong Ha, just south of the DMZ, Khe Sahn until it was abandoned in May, 1968 and with an Air Force Controller. Khe Sahn, the Air Force Controller, Milky, and Dong Ha radar controllers would run our aircraft into North Vietnam. None of the others would do so.

During the time Khe Sahn was under siege, the majority of the missions we flew were sent there. I was glad to see us abandon the base because the 2000 Marines trapped there couldn’t conduct operations, and we were sending an inordinate number of our aircraft there and were not supporting other units in contact.

On the night TPQ missions, I would preflight the aircraft, make a rapid start, do all the checks, and try to get airborne rapidly to meet the flight schedule. When we flew with the Chu Lai radar controller, the missions were so short that if we didn’t log taxi time, they would probably not have qualified as a flight. It was more like going around after being waved off on a landing.

When flying at Chu Lai with the radar controller, I would take off, make a hard turn out to sea, another turn over the sea, roll wings level, get the controller, who would follow us on takeoff, to get on line to the target, drop the bombs, dump enough fuel to land safely, drop the gear, and land. It was possible to fly a mission to the Chu Lai radar controller and log flight time in less than twenty minutes, including taxi time.
Although the missions ran together over time, typically we would fly up the coast to the northern part of I Corps, near the DMZ. We would be under the control of Vice Squad until we got near the ASRAT (radar site) and then be turned over to the ground controller.

He would give us a turn for identification, and then put us on a radar vector, calling out the meters to target. He had to keep us within narrow margins of airspeed and altitude and when within 5000 meters, would have us arm the bombs and fly until he gave us a signal "mark-mark" and we would release the bombs.

Although usually at altitudes of 10,000 feet or more, the bright white flash of the bombs would be visible to us in the cockpit.

North Vietnam was a black void at night. There were no lights anywhere. South Vietnam had lights in the cities, the larger villages, and over the ocean. Fishermen fished in small round boats the size of an old washtub and each had a light. Under certain conditions, the ocean and the sky looked the same, and vertigo was a possibility if you didn’t keep scanning your instruments or watch the coastline.

Even during visual radar missions, there could be moments of excitement.

One evening, I was flying at 11000 feet over North Vietnam on a vector from Dong Ha. I was ten or fifteen miles north of the DMZ when I caught the glimmer of a flicker in my canopy. I looked at my instruments to see if my generator was going out, as that was a symptom of that happening. I saw nothing wrong until I looked out and saw I was being perfectly tracked by explosions from a radar controlled or visually controlled 57MM gun or larger. I could see why he was following me so easily. I had all my lights on. I had forgotten to turn them off when I left South Vietnam. I flipped off the master light switch and made a hard turn toward the South China Sea. The orange balls of flame passed through the position I would have been at just after I turned.

When the North Vietnamese opened up with ground fire at night, it was not piecemeal. It was occasionally possible to see a photo plane, an F8 from the Navy, or a Phantom from the Air Force flying his photo line. It was marked by extremely bright flashes, one after the other like a continuous dotted line of fire. It would trigger all the guns in sight and thousands of them would be shooting at the straight line of fireballs as they came south.

Coming out of North Vietnam and flying back to Chu Lai visually gave me a chance to just watch the war.
On the best nights, it was possible to just see Chu Lai, one half hour to the south and 140 miles away, and everything in between that was lit up.

There would be airstrikes visible in Laos, and occasionally South Vietnam. You could tell where they were since it was possible to see virtually all of I Corps on clear nights from 12000 feet over Danang. By comparing the light from the cities and bases to the location of the flares and bright flashes of the bombs, it was possible to see most of the airborne action from the coast as you travelled down it. The most destructive and impressive thing I saw on one of my flights down the coast, occurred at 0200 hours after I had just departed the DMZ.

I was two or three miles off shore and watching my instrument panel when it got as light as day. For a moment, I thought the sun was rising.

I looked landward over the canopy rail, and sure enough, the sun was coming right out of the ground. A giant bright white and orange ball was five miles inland and appeared to the sun rising from the valley between the coastal plain and Ashau Valley.

I called Vice Squad to give them the location, and they had me maintain radio silence. I flew back along the coast and landed. I reported what I saw, but it didn’t show up in any intelligence report, but I heard from an Army pilot that 144 Army helicopters brought into country by a new unit had been parked together instead of separated or put in revetments. A VC sapper unit had been able to penetrate the defense and get them burning. After getting a few burning, the rest followed.

The flights down the coast at night gave me more of a chance than at any other time to relax and observe the overall picture of the continuing battles of I Corps. Combined with the intelligence reports that were generated, my own observations during day missions, and talking to others, I could see the full extent of the war in I Corps. It was violent and massive. There were two and one half Marine Divisions, two Army Divisions, Arvn units, and hundreds of aircraft fighting in an area that averaged forty miles in width and was 140 miles long. At night, on certain occasions, it was possible to see the aircraft expending their ordnance, the ships on the coast firing inland, artillery being fired here and there and ground units in contact, the flares marking their positions. There may have been three hundred thousand combatants in that small area of 600 square miles.