9 June 68

I was scheduled for two preplanned missions, the first one with an 1100 takeoff. Major Tom Lewis was going to be the flight leader and I would be on his wing.

I walked the two hundred meters from my Quonset hut to the briefing room and met Major Lewis, five foot nine and with a red crew cut. We briefed for the mission and caught a ride down to the squadron area. It was overcast over the land, but clear over the sea.

We launched off of the north runway. We were flying to the Hue/Phu Bai area, approaching the city of Hoi An, when we were called by Vice Squad and given an emergency divert to cover a RESCAP of a downed pilot in the Ashau Valley.

We switched frequency to get on the frequency of the RESCAP and heard them talking about the down A-4, a plane from our air group, and the pilot, who was alive and could be seen in a meadow near his chute.

His wingman was just leaving the area of the down aircraft, and we were returned to Vice Squad to fly our assigned mission, because no rescue aircraft or controller was available.

We flew the mission and returned to Chu Lai and landed. After landing, we were told that we would be going right back to the same RESCAP area and to hurry up and get turned around.

It took a quarter of an hour for us to find out the details and launch again. The pilot was from VMA 121, a Captain, Roy Schmidt, who had been in the flight class I had taken through Meridian, Mississippi in May of 1966. He had been shot down on the Laos side of the Ashau Valley, in a clearing near the Ho Chi Minh trail.

We grabbed a quick bite to eat and launched again to the north. This time we went direct to a point just east of the Mountains west of Danang and switched to Red Crown, the airborne rescue coordinator who flew into the area of down aircraft and coordinated the RESCAP.

We could tell things were not going well before we checked in. There were aircraft rolling in on the flak suppression calling to their flight about the heavy ground fire.

A Jolly Green Giant rescue helicopter was in the process of being shot down and went into the ground as we approached...
the target, taking all the crew with it. The second Jolly
Green Giant was orbiting five miles west of the down pilot,
and reported the first helo going in and that he was taking
heavy ground fire.

Our flight split up so that we could each analyze the
situation independently. I dropped back and looked down to
see if I could tell where the pilot was, where the ground fire
was coming from, and where the rescue helo would land. It
didn't take long to determine the situation.

The pilot, Capt. Schmidt, was in a clearing above a road
that led from Ashau Valley to the Ho Chi Minh trail to the
floor of the valley. It was possible to see the parachute in
the middle of the clearing, fifteen or twenty yards from the
treeline between the road and the valley. The Jolly Green
Giant, a large single rotor helicopter, was orbiting in Laos,
and the ground fire went as far as I could see in every
direction. I didn't see how anything could keep from getting
hit anywhere within sight.

Red Crown was coordinating the aircraft trying to
suppress the anti-aircraft fire, but even a nuclear explosion
would not have cleared what I could see.

The second Jolly Green Giant approached the area of the
pilot, but reported receiving so much ground fire that he
could not stay in the area much longer.

I orbited at ten thousand feet as two Phantoms from the
Air Force rolled in and dropped west of the position of the
parachute and the Jolly Green. They didn't even dent the
amount of ground fire in that area.

Not only were there small arms firing, there were the big
guns more typically seen north near Tchepone or in North
Vietnam. I could not believe that there could be that many
guns in all of South Vietnam of that size and wondered how
many thousands of troops had to be in the Ashau area to cover
an area that was as far as I could see in every direction.

Nine months after this, when the Marines sent a battalion
into Ashau Valley, the same appearance that now was before me,
was before me again, except there was an area that the Marines
occupied that was not firing at us. I believe that when I saw
how many guns were firing on us, compared to what the
intelligence reports indicated would be firing there, I took
a new look at how effective we were in destroying the enemy.
These would be the same troops that were at Khe Sanh during
the siege, which had just been lifted.

Our time was coming. There was only one flight ahead of
us and the controller, Red Crown, had given up on the RESCAP
because there were no planes behind us.
The Jolly Green now came up on the air. He said he was taking too much fire and was going down. He took up a heading to Khe Sanh as we rolled in to knock out whatever we could. The parachute was still in the meadow.

The lead, Major Lewis, rolled in and I followed. We didn't need much accuracy. I followed him down as he shot his load of Zuni 5" rockets into the overall pattern of flashes that were covering the face of the ground before us, and I salvoed mine just to the right of his, running south.

He pulled up and I kept going down, to just above the valley floor, at more than 500 knots. I skimmed the ground, looking up, and saw him above me six or eight thousand feet and pulled into a steep climb, joining over the mountains to the west as we cleared the area and went back to Vice Squad for return to the base.

We flew straight out to sea, and then down the coast. As we did so, we heard the RESCAP being terminated. Roy had no chance of being rescued from the time he was shot down.

After I landed, I checked over the plane, sure I would have holes somewhere, but was surprised that I did not. Major Lewis walked over to me and shook his head, saying, "how is it possible to fly through so much fire at the altitudes we were at and not get hit?" I said I didn't know, it didn't seem possible.

I returned to the living area and took a shower. There had been a note from the American Red Cross on the bed, and I went over to see if I had a family emergency or another child. I found out that I now had two boys, instead of one. I went back to the club and ordered a round of champagne and gave out cigars. It was my birthday.

The Jolly Green landed in the mine field of Khe Sanh. Capt. Roy Schmidt remains MIA, one of a number of pilots who were shot down in or near Laos that were never heard from again after being captured.
The effect of war

I knew from the first week in Chu Lai that I was different from most of the other pilots. The devil-may-care, tomorrow-we-may-die attitude that I once had had disappeared. The other attack pilots still were generally that way.

They laughed more than I did, were more open and friendly, and seemed to take things less seriously than I thought they should.

What seemed unreality to them, seemed real to me. I saw what was happening on the perimeter and what the intelligence reports from the Americal said, and kept up a map showing the actions, but I sensed a reality in it they did not.

I was different from them in all aspects of dealing with the war. I didn’t have any emotions about the things we did, but I didn’t think they were funny, or should be laughed at, though I realized that this was more a defense mechanism than anything else.

When I first saw what could happen, and was assigned to be a platoon commander if we were formed into infantry units to defend the base, I checked out the proper weapons and equipment in case that could occur and talked to the base perimeter commander about the conditions around the base.

After I did so and realized what was happening just a few hundred meters from where we lived, the realization of what could occur on short notice made me more concerned than they, who didn’t have that information.

When Maj. Reisner, who I had talked to about this, was captured, it came as a big surprise to everyone. After what he had told me, it didn’t come as any surprise at all. (The capture and escape of Major Reisner is a story in itself.)

I was never sure if the anxiety I felt was the reason I did not feel the same as they did when they spoke of it in the target area. Up to the point that I rolled in on a target, I felt as they spoke of, but once committed, time seemed to stop, and I focused on the target. I saw no ground fire when it was there unless it occurred at some time after or before I was on the runin. The targets seemed so big, so easy to hit, and so defined that I wondered how others could miss, or
I could, when I did. What I realized was happening, was that I was reacting to fear in a different way than they were, or they had no fear and I did.

The only time I ever felt any real fear, was when I walked out at night for a TPQ mission in bad weather. This was fear, not of combat operations, but of the claustrophobic conditions that we flew in in the A-4s tiny cockpit and fear of the unknown problems that could occur with instruments in the weather.

It was not until years later that I thought about something that was continually happening, where I saw other pilots change and become like me, that I realized what had happened.

When I was in Vietnam, from the first day, I was conscious of the continual flares, the shitters burning, the fires around the base when planes crashed, fuel was burned or something burned after being hit by incoming rockets or mortars. These things bothered me from the moment I got into country, and from that point thereafter in my life. Since I had experienced what happened when caught in such conditions, I was reacting to the reality of what could occur if caught in such a fire, where others had no reality of those sensations.

Depending on one's previous experience, a jet aircraft can be viewed in more than one way.

The way I had always viewed them were as beautiful works of engineering that allowed one to experience the emotional highs and exhilaration of flight in its extremes, flying aerobatic maneuvers, skimming the ground at high speed, and giving one an adrenalin rush just by being in such conditions, or seeing them flown by someone else.

You could take another view, based on your experience. I had heard it from WWII bomber pilots and fighter pilots who flew in the worst conditions of WWII and may have been expressing what I felt in words.

The pilot of a jet powered fighter bomber, in combat, is flying nothing more than a blow torch in a flying fuel tank, loaded with explosives. The attitude that one takes depends on one's experiences, and my experiences would have left me with the second view some of the time.

I was surprised to see some of the pilots change. I didn't recognize at the time what was happening, but they were going from the probability of something happening, then experienced the reality, and it was changing them to be like me, one at a time.

The first pilot acting so was doing so when I got to the squadron. He had been shot down at night south of Danang and
had not been rescued until the morning. He no longer was on the night flight schedule for either radar missions, or Close Air Support missions.

During the time I flew with the three squadrons that I was assigned to, I saw fifteen or more of those I was with daily shot down in attacks on the enemy. Each time they did so, I noticed how they got a hard line in their jaw, their eyes didn’t laugh any more, and they did not join in the light banter about things that were not light, but withdrew from the conversation and were, one way or another, on the sidelines. Reality had replaced probability of serious things happening to them. They had found out how bad the situations were when truly experienced, and how frightened they could be. This had changed them and they were permanently changed, but it did not seem to effect anything that they did, other than the way they acted and reacted. I felt that they flew as well as before and did everything else as well, but were now conditioned to think differently than they had previously.

When we had pilots shot down, it was not known for some time what had become of them. When the duty officer, who kept up the flight schedule, got a call from group that we had a plane down, he would mark it on the board. When we found the pilot was rescued, the information would be given to the other pilots in the ready room, but when one was not rescued, and determined to have been killed, captured, or MIA, the name was just erased and the person ceased to exist. There really wasn’t anything that could be said. It took some time for the facts to get to the squadron and the effect would vary of one’s disappearance from one person to another. When I replaced the pilot, Capt. Porterfield, who had been killed when he ran off the end of the runway, I found out nothing about him except his name because no one talked about him at all.
The General

We didn’t get many missions to support helicopter operations. During the first part of the conflict in 1965 and 1966, these were fairly common. It was during one of the few support operations for an infantry insertion on a ridge seaward from Hue/Phu Bai, a Marine Air Station that I saw someone die unnecessary and witnessed by dozens of other pilots who would not have done the same thing. Had I been on the radio frequency, I would have said something, regardless of rank, to the aircrew.

Two of our A-4 Skyhawks were armed with forward firing guns and rockets to aid in a helicopter insertion on a ridge seaward and south of the Hue/Phu Bai base. Typically of coordinated infantry helo operations, the operation was behind schedule. Since we had limited fuel, only one and one half hours on takeoff, we were orbiting at ten thousand feet at two hundred and twenty knots, maximum conservation airspeed, while the operation was developing. It was in the late morning and I was leading the flight. We were watching the operation, ready to roll in at a moment’s notice, if it was necessary. The anxiety of watching one Ch-46 after another go into the zone, the Marines debark onto the ridge, and the helos depart, kept us alert. I had seen such operations when helos inserted and retracted teams, when the teams on the ground would call the CH-46 or Huey into the zone, whispering that there was no enemy, and then seeing the chopper fly into heavy ground fire landing or departing from the zones. Since it was at that point we had to roll in, we were kept alert no matter what we were doing in case the Ch-46s needed our support. Because this operation was delayed, we had to stay higher and slower and in a poor position to attack. We were more of a moral support factor because of our fuel limitations than a direct support factor. There had not yet been a need to roll in, but there were times when the NVA would let some of the troops get on the ground and then open up on the choppers when the unit was split, preventing, or trying to prevent, the rest of the unit from supporting that which was on the ground.

While watching the continuing operation, our flight was monitoring Guard frequency, the universal emergency frequency
used to transmit when in a crisis. In the areas we were flying in, it was also used to transmit all manner of instructions and warnings so that, most of the time when in the target area, it was necessary to turn off the frequency to be able to conduct a mission. This was not the case on this mission.

While watching the second wave come in, a Mayday came over Guard frequency from an Air Force RF4, a photo reconnaissance plane from well up in Laos. It had taken some ground fire and was coming into South Vietnam to try to get away from the Laos area where capture was certain if they went down.

Instead of going to another frequency, the RF4 Phantom stayed on Guard with a continuous relay of information to other aircraft in the area who were vectoring in to help them if they could.

I had to turn off my emergency frequency so that I remained in contact with my own mission. I would turn back to guard frequency when I could since we had the ordnance to cover a rescap, knew the bases available for the Air Force pilot if he wanted to land, and had brought in wingmen with battle damage to bases before.

As the injured bird came down into South Vietnam, I could tell that something was different because the pilot was being deferred to by the other Air Force planes. He kept up his running commentary on guard, and I could only follow part of what was going on. He was now in South Vietnam, and I had to turn off the frequency for two or three minutes. When I came back up, he had decided to land on the beach.

He still must have had some altitude because he kept talking for some time. I didn’t know where he was and what beach he was talking about because of the need to turn off the channel, and because he was being escorted by someone already.

When I heard he was going to try to land on the beach, I wanted to come up on frequency, but didn’t know where the plane was, what condition it was in, and if it was escorted by someone who knew I Corps. I was running low on fuel, so I departed the area, switching on guard again after I had talked to my wingman.

I had seen half a dozen planes after they had ditched. The biggest piece of any of them that I had seen afterward was a tail, burned and beyond recognition. Although these aircraft were not F-4s, they were structurally just as strong.

When I turned back on guard, the plane had crashed and had been destroyed with one crewman ejecting. Upon landing, I found that the plane had crashed within just a few miles of where we were orbiting, less miles from the Hue/Phu Bai Air
station, and that the pilot, an Air Force General, had been killed.

Not knowing the situation in detail, I cannot say for certain if I could have prevented his death, but I would never ride in a jet aircraft if I could eject, and I would never have bypassed the runways he did.

I had seen older pilots killed several times doing just this. A jet aircraft is different than the older propeller driven fighters. They had the fuel in the wings, the moving parts of the engine that are at high temperature enclosed in an engine block, and the engine ahead of them. They carried much less fuel.

A jet aircraft was different. That is why they put ejection seats in them. The pilot in a jet sits in front of the engine. The engine has vanes in it that come apart and fly through the fuselage at 450 degrees centigrade or more, and the fuselage and wings are all fuel, hydraulic fluid, and integral parts of the aircraft's flight control system. When the plane hits anything, it starts to come apart and the engine will likely come forward and the vanes will go through the fuel tanks.

I was not on frequency long enough to stop what appeared to be the useless death of the Air Force general, as the pilot turned out to be. His co-pilot, in ejecting, made the better decision. Since all the aircraft airborne for two hundred miles every direction heard this happen, and ejecting was mandatory under such conditions, I am left to wonder if he died because he was a general and no one would counteract his decision, or if the chase plane told him not to ride it in and he did so anyway.

People I knew and did not know were being killed every day. When seeing someone killed so uselessly, when it did not need to happen, it effected me more than the combat casualties, especially when an example like this was seen by so many who knew what to do, including the co-pilot, and no one was able to prevent it from happening.
The Marine Corp Supply System

In June, 1968, I had flown enough missions to be a section leader in combat. I would occasionally pick up the briefing for a flight and meet the wingman at the squadron area. I was experiencing for the first time the command structure in the air wing as it varied from the ground forces for which I had my initial training.

In the ground forces, officer’s rank defined command, and in the air, it did not. Ground rank was superseded by experience and recent qualifications and the rank started with wingman, went to section leader (two aircraft), division leader (four aircraft) and up. I was not in the habit of telling Lt. Colonels and Colonels what to do, but when airborne, I was doing so when the group pilots came to fly who were not section leaders. I was in that situation as I waited on the road near the briefing shack for a ride to the squadron area.

I always wondered why the US Army could have privates riding around in their own jeeps and we had only one six by six for over 150 Marines and had to often find our own way to our missions. I was picked up on this mission by someone who wondered the same thing.

I was picked up by a Navy Jeep, one not seen often at Chu Lai. It was being driven by a Chief Petty Officer. Since I thought that the only Navy Personnel on the base were medical personnel, I asked him what he did, and he said he was with the Seabees, a reserve unit called up out of Boston, and they were responsible for the base water system, roads and unloading ships. He asked what I was doing.

I told him I was meeting a full colonel, the base commander, to fly a combat mission to the Danang area. He seemed to be utterly amazed at the statement, and asked about our transportation situation.

I told him about the transportation situation and the situation in general. We were being supplied by the Army in some situation, like our food supply, which was brought by ships, and by no one, apparently, in some areas.

My roommate, Captain Pritchard, had been eyeing a flight suit that was drying on the line for several days. He only had one. I had one, also, and one with the side torn out of it. My t-shirts and underwear, as well my sheets, had been
dissolved by the Vietnamese laundry, and the flight suits smelled so bad after one mission that it was hard to live with yourself after that. It was worse than being in the bush.

He dropped me off at the squadron, with a list of things that I needed.

Since we were housed in the airconditioned quarters, we had water available to wash our clothes, so anything we could accumulate would be able to be saved from the Vietnamese laundry by washing the items in water we collected in ammunition cans beneath the air conditioners.

When I got back from the debrief of the mission, I found a gross of boxer shorts, a gross of t-shirts, fifty or more sheets, light globes, paint, and the address of the Seabee unit in case we needed anything else. On top of my bed, in new plastic wrap, were two brand new Navy Nomex flight suits.

I had just been introduced to the Marine Corps Supply System. I had been seeing it all along. It operated continually at all levels and was scroungery at the highest level of proficiency.

As we lost planes, they were replaced with ones the Navy didn’t want. When they left Yankee Station, off of North Vietnam, their planes, albeit with hundreds of carrier landings, hundreds of recent combat missions, and each somewhat different from the others were transferred to the Marines.

We painted over the Navy markings, the Navy names on the cockpit rails and flew them as soon as they were brought aboard. The dark gray paint over the letters did not totally hide what was written. Even if the planes were not in the full bloom of youth and would not have looked good in an airshow, they fit our needs, filled our revetments, and kept us flying.

As these replacement aircraft came in, cockpit configurations started showing up with new modifications that we had not seen before. Switches that had on/off, modifications for weapons we did not carry were put in them, and different engine and fuselage modifications made every flight a challenge, but it was a flight and it met a mission requirement and we made the adjustments to keep flying.

After my experience with Chief S--------y, and the aircraft replacement, I started observing that these were not the only things being replaced by a system that I had not learned about.

Six by sixes and jeeps started showing up with Marine Corps numbers that I had not seen before. Some were of makes that the Marine Corps did not have. I found out how this
Someone would get a case of bourbon from the mess or from the Army. This was the unit of exchange at the Army wrecking yard. The NCOIC would accept a case of bourbon for two six by sixes, one that had hit a mine under the front wheels and one that had hit one under the back wheels. We put them together and had one six by six. The same was true of the jeeps. We would paint USMC numbers on the equipment and they would be ours for a period of time until the US Army made an inspection of our area, checked the engine numbers against their records, and retrieved their equipment, which we had restored.

This originality in restoring broken down equipment extended beyond the Marine Corps at times. A Navy A-4 landed in the arresting gear and destroyed the forward part of the aircraft when it had a front landing gear fail on landing. Shortly afterwards, an A-4 from another ship landed that had the after portion destroyed by an oxygen fire and could not land on his carrier so it landed at Chu Lai. The Navy had struck two aircraft, but the Marine Corps maintenance crew disconnected the aft part of one and replaced it with the forward part of the other, and one pilot flew it back to one of the carriers, the front numbers on the aircraft from his carrier and the after numbers from another.

I had obtained flight suits, underclothes, and other items for my personnel use, and also started collecting weapons and other registered items, all from the US Army.

Anything that caused an injury, or loss of any kind had to be investigated. Since we were experiencing constant injuries and losses, investigations of all kinds were assigned to officers in their spare time, and spare time or not, the investigations got done.

My first investigation was done after one Marine had shot another accidentally when loading a .45 pistol. In examining the situation, I found the pistol to be stolen from the US Army, and I was unable to return it because the system they used to keep track of weapons was not accessible at our base, the headquarters of the Americal Division. As a result, I ended up with the weapon, which was going to be used if legal action were taken against the sergeant who fired it accidentally. I had to keep it with me to maintain chain of evidence. Without wishing to do so, I had acquired a .45 pistol which was now my responsibility and no one else's. I found a holster, put my .38 in my emergency flight vest we wore if shot down, and carried the .45 until I left Vietnam.

I got several of these investigations. When I could not turn in the weapon to the Marines for maintaining chain of
evidence, I had to keep them locked up myself. I was able to turn in the M-16 I had checked out if called on to lead a platoon, and use one I had confiscated, a US Army rifle that I kept locked in my quarters.

Most of the items I had were weapons from the Army. I never determined where they came from.

After I was transferred to Danang, I started taking possession of weapons, vehicles, and equipment that had been left at air freight by those going on emergency leave that did not come back and that had been delivered or left with no one to pick it up. Since at that time I was a company commander with a bomb dump, armory, and flight line to use as a storage area, I got enough various weapons, and vehicles to equip a small unit, all unaccounted for somewhere.

I finally put this equipment to use rather than store it. I had an almost impossible time getting equipment and replacements from the Marines, and often was berating their constant inability to supply me. Maybe they knew what was available and didn't bother to send what I asked for because they knew the system better than I did, and knew that there was abundance in vehicles, equipment, and weapons. Their inability to supply me would be overcome, the relative abundance elsewhere. Their expectations were that I would find it on my own eventually. Perhaps I had found the Marine Corps Supply System and put it to use as they had planned by keeping me constantly without what I needed.

In June, July, and August of 1968 we flew and flew. It did not seem to stop. We climbed out of one cockpit and into another. We saw sunsets and sunrises day after day. Time as it had had any meaning before ceased under the conditions we were operating in.

A day is defined by that period between midnight and midnight the following day. That had no meaning under the conditions that prevailed. It was possible to fly at 0800 and 1100, stand the duty from 1800 to midnight, fly at 0200 and 0500 and fly four missions and stand the duty and log only two missions a day but fly 4 in 24 hours.

With all the flying, the duty, the intelligence work and extra details, sleep started to be left out and had to occur during short periods of time, on the night duty, or whenever one stopped long enough to drop off.

We started having accidents occur because of the fatigue and by pilots who would normally not be expected to have them. One major, who had been a test pilot, took the arresting gear
the wrong way and an aircraft had to be struck from the rolls due to the damage.

The constant going also showed up in aircraft problems and problems that may well have occurred because the ground crew were also working at their limits.

On one mission in early August, we were launching four aircraft, early, when the runway was cool and we didn’t need to worry about blowing our tires with heavy loads. We equipped the aircraft with JATO bottles (jet assisted takeoff).

We took the runway, two at a time. We made a normal run until 50 knots, then punched the JATO button and the added power would get us enough airspeed to get airborne, after which we would jettison the bottles and go on with our mission, which was a direct air support mission in North Vietnam.

I was to be the second of four aircraft. We were taking off in sections and joining when airborne.

I watched as the first A-4 rolled and lit his bottles normally. He was well airborne before I rolled. I got to fifty knots and hit the JATO switch and the plane veered left as only the right JATO bottle fired. I was heading for our hanger area and not the end of the runway, holding full right rudder to keep the plane on the runway for any length of time. I had in full right rudder and the plane was almost off in the sand when the right bottle went out and the left bottle fired, veering the nose back to centerline and across so that I was facing the field behind the tower. I was accelerating at the same time and my takeoff airspeed was reached as I was veering right, so I eased back on the stick and took off just as the second JATO bottle quit with me in 30 degrees angle of bank, fifteen degrees off runway heading and just above the ground.

I leveled the wings and pulled up the landing gear and turned to runway heading and accelerated and was able to climb safely out over the sea and jettison both bottles.

I joined up on the lead aircraft and we orbited, waiting for the third and fourth. They both got airborne normally, but one had only one JATO bottle fire and the other had to return and land when he was unable to jettison his bottles.

Whether it was lack of use, the ground crew, or the JATO bottles, is not possible to know, but when operations are going at a normal pace, everything can be checked to make sure that it works, and it cannot be done when there is no time to do so, and there wasn’t the time to do so when we were flying up to sixty missions a day. It was better to just stay with standard operations, not using things we had not used prior to
that time.

Sometimes I would take time to look at some of the 18 year old and nineteen year old Marines who loaded our aircraft with fuel and ordnance or preflighted them. In their tattered, greasy t-shirts and utility pants, they looked forty years old.
Overhaul and Repair Trip

I had flown 140 missions by the middle of August of 1968. If I had not been out of country for 20 days, I would have had thirty or forty more, with more than three months to go in the squadron.

I was getting tired and having problems with the injuries I had received the year before, and was getting so tired that it was getting hard for me to sleep when I should be sleeping and easier to sleep by catnapping all the time.

I casually mentioned this one day to the Assistant Ops officer and within forty-five minutes I was scheduled to take a plane to Japan for overhaul and repair, something that had been done for a number of pilots during the time I had been with the squadron.

I would be flying one of two A-4s to Atsugi, Japan for overhaul, with a Major Korman, from Seattle, a career Marine who had been in the squadron since I had arrived.

I had just missed Rand R in Hawaii with my wife, when she got ill after the baby was born and could not meet me. This trip would help take the place of what I had missed.

I was getting used to packing on short notice to go away. I went and packed my B-4 bag and got my 200 dollars, all that they would give a pilot going out of country. They had previously given whatever an officer had asked for, but now limited us to 200 dollars because it limited the time you could stay away. Others had taken advantage of the trips to overhaul to stay away long periods of time and, as usual, all were penalized for the actions of a tiny majority.

I went back and checked the flight schedule, since I would not be leaving, I had found out, for two days, and had to fly the following day. The flight schedule showed something I could not believe. I was scheduled to be number four of a forty plane flight that would join another forty plane flight and be number forty-four in the gaggle, going to North Vietnam for an Alpha strike.

I went to our O'club, our only source of activity. I had a couple of beers before going back and reading, and wondering what it was going to be like flying in the middle of an eighty plane flight, forty coming from Chu Lai and forty from Danang. Some would be A-4s, but most F-4s and A-6s. I hoped it would not be IFR. We had not had many instrument missions, except at night.
We briefed in the dark. It was 0400 when we sat down to brief. It was raining a light drizzle, and it was too early to tell if the base was under instrument conditions or not. We did not have weather forecasts like we had in the United States, and it was often the reports of the pilots that determined whether we knew exactly what flight conditions were in the small area of 160 x 70 miles that we flew in.

I manned my aircraft in the rainy predawn. It was dry, but I was wet and went through the zapping on my moustache and fingertips going over the switches in the cockpit. It was starting to get light, and when I checked in, I found that I was going to be number four on an instrument takeoff, flying wing to Major Korman, with whom I would be going to Japan at this time the following day.

We taxied out, and I could see that the base was overcast and the overcast was not above six or seven hundred feet. We would have to takeoff and join on top, making a TACAN (the main navigation instrument in tactical fighter bomber aircraft—gives bearing and distance to a station) rendezvous on top of the clouds. We had briefed on how we would do this, in case it was necessary, but it was going to be like a beehive if we had to do it, because there were going to be forty aircraft doing it in the same space because we were taking off with a normal interval. If we took off at a 1 minute interval, the A-4 aircraft, which carried much less fuel than the others, were taking to the air first, would run out of fuel before the mission got to the target area.

We taxied behind two Phantoms from MAG 13, who took off with a thirty second interval, or less, and disappeared into the clouds. Bob was in the takeoff position before the second aircraft had gotten airborne and I followed, running up my engine as soon as I was in position.

He reported to departure that he was on the roll, and I gave him twenty seconds and followed, noticing that two A-6 Intruders were already in position to roll when I rolled.

I had my landing gear in the well and was turning when I went into the clouds at 400 feet, a low overcast to be flying into and recovering, even with a radar controlled approach.

I was flying north, the world outside as white as the inside of a milk bottle, and dark for the time of day, even in the overcast. I was climbing through eight thousand feet, and had heard no one call on top, and should have. I was none too sure what I should be expecting. The target information and the rendezvous information was not given to any wingmen, so I had no idea where we were rendezvousing the two flights or where we were going or at what altitude. While I was flying
at reduced throttle and 300 knots, the following radio transmissions came over the departure frequency.

"Vice Squad, this is Lovebug 501, out of Chu Lai, over."

"Go ahead, Lovebug 501."

"Roger, Vice Squad, this is 501 at 32,000 feet and we have no tops in sight."

"All aircraft in the Chu Lai vicinity, be advised that the Chu Lai radar is down. This is Chu Lai tower on guard."

"All aircraft airborne in the Chu Lai and Danang areas, this is Vice Squad on Guard, hold within forty nautical miles of your base."

One flight of eighty had just become eighty flights of one. It was a good thing that the radar controller did not have a radar scan for the next hour. The appearance would have been of a hive of bees having all of their bees orbiting around the hive, all blind, all carrying loads of explosives, and all coming back to the same hole at the same time.

I didn't hear a sound on the radio for a full fifteen minutes as I flew five miles off the coast, maintaining my position by TACAN radials and distances. I stayed low so that I would stay away from the Phantoms and A-6s who would be orbiting higher with their more powerful engines and greater fuel load.

After perhaps fifteen minutes, an F-4 came up. "Chu Lai departure, this is Lovebug 532, request clearance to the ordnance dump area, over."

"This is Chu Lai departure, 531, be advised the ordnance dump area is closed due to friendly vessels in the area."

There was another fifteen minute pause while all eighty aircraft found some place they felt safe, and all 40,000 pounds of bombs dropped randomly into the South China Sea.

I knew about where I was, set my ordnance to drop and unarm and salvoed the entire load into the ocean fifteen miles NE of Chu Lai and hoped I didn't hit anything. I had plenty of fuel for an A-4, but not compared to the other types of aircraft. In addition, I was one of the first planes airborne and decided to be one of the first ones back.

I did not wish to be in the same airspace as all of the other aircraft, some of which, like the A-6, could shoot an approach on their radar.

I decided to come in from the east, shoot an approach as yet to be concocted by me, then arc into the base.

When I got down to 4000 pounds of fuel, well over what I felt I would need, I called out in the blind that I was coming down the 100 degree radial, starting at fifteen miles. I
opened my speed brakes, slowed to 220 knots, and put them back in and started a gentle guide to visual conditions or five hundred feet, which ever came first.

It was a thick overcast and I had to watch my instruments carefully as I was descending into unknown conditions.

At two thousand feet, the soup was just as dense as before. I eased my descent to 500 feet per minute and slowly passed one thousand feet at seven miles and started my turn onto the five mile arc when I broke out at less than seven hundred feet over a wild gray ocean, whipping up with whitecaps. I stayed on the five mile arc, unable to see land until I was a mile away from the beach near the Americal Division Headquarters, northeast of the runway. I then moved into a three mile arc from the base TACAN and approached runway heading and turned to my final landing heading, still not seeing the runway over the intervening trees.

I was now down to 300 feet under a lowering overcast, but had the field in sight when I looked up and saw the wheels of an A-6 above me, just dropping out of the cloud cover over me.

I turned immediately, right over the trees, and went into a 360 degree turn while the A-6 landed. When I got back on runway heading, I saw that a Phantom was in the first arresting gear, and I decided to take the second. The A-6 had disappeared, apparently making another approach. I flew low over the Phantom and took the second arresting gear, the midfield mostest, and while in the mostest, a third aircraft, another Phantom, took the one beyond me.

I was able to get clear of the runway before the big run on it was started. I was the first plane back at our line. By now, planes were landing one after another, all coming in out of the soup with no ground control to separate them.

It says something of the experience of the pilots at the time. A crisis situation was handled with no more difficulty than a change in a combat mission because they were so conditioned to make such decisions rapidly, and successfully, that each made a decision on how to recover, did so without major consequences, and did so because of a confidence level developed by the constant challenges of the daily flying.

I was ready for a trip to Japan for a break. I met Major Korman at the ready room, and we picked up the yellow maintenance sheets for the two planes going to Japan for overhaul and repair. I was looking for a few days rest, a few beers, and some sun that was not heating the air to 110 degrees. I considered the flight, from Chu Lai to Cubi Point
in the Philippines, from there to Okinawa, and from there to Atsugi Japan, mostly over what I hoped would be a clear blue ocean where I could relax and enjoy the view.

My plane had been stripped of some good parts, and I had no workable TACAN so was forced to rely on Bob to navigate to the Philippines since I could not shoot an instrument approach when we got there.

It was a beautiful, clear day at Chu Lai. I looked forward to the two-hour flight, the steak dinner at the Cubi Point Officers Club, one of the nicer Navy Clubs in the Orient that I had been to.

Bob prepared the flight plan and got the weather, which showed no problems enroute, though that didn’t mean anything but that they may have no idea what was enroute since they didn’t get all the weather summary reports.

We took off on a compass bearing to the Philippine Naval Base at Cubi Point, the air station that was also at the Subic Bay Naval Station.

It was clear and blue, the sky and the ocean, as we flew in loose formation toward our destination. I was comfortable and relaxed, flying fifty feet back in cruise formation, a loose formation that allowed one to keep in formation easily by flying the plane loosely and away from the need for constant corrections from the throttle to remain in formation.

We had an extra fuel tank in case we needed some extra gas. It gave the aircraft more stability and somewhat more range.

We passed the two small, sandy islands that were between Chu Lai and Cubi Point and were on course. As we did so, we started entering high status clouds, and I pulled closer into formation and immediately got vertigo, something that always happened when I was flying in clouds in formation. As we flew further east and got closer to Manila, the clouds got denser, and I had to fly closer and closer until I was flying in parade formation, the closest formation, and the one having the greatest control by the flight leader.

We were about thirty minutes west of Manila, according to the clock on my canopy rail when I heard Bob call Manila Approach, who rarely answered.

"Manila Approach, this is Hellborne 231, inbound from Chu ??/%$/#@. He passed me the lead, his finger on his earphones in his flight helmet, the hand signal for radio failure.

I thought; you son of a bitch, I have no TACAN navigation and don’t know where we are. I knew we were soon going to be at the Philippines, about ten minutes wide before reaching the Pacific Ocean.

I called. "Manila Approach, this is Hellborne 231 inbound
from Chu Lai for Cubi point, over." Nothing, and I didn't expect anything. They never answered, and I was heading somewhere at 450 knots and had to do something, so I called 231-2 and asked, "Dash two, if you can read me, click your mike."

"Bzzt Bzzt." He could hear me. "If I am on course, click your mike once for yes and two for no."

"Bzzt Bzzt." Shit.

"If I need to turn right, click your mike once for yes and two for no."

"Bzzt bzzt." Shit.

"For every five degrees I need to turn left, click your mike once."

"Bzzt bzzt bzzt." Shit.

We were way off course for as close as we were, so I had 231-2 switch to Cubi Approach and called. "Cubi approach, I have two A-4s inbound for a radar pickup and a GCA, over."

"Hellborne 231, this is Navy Cubi Approach, be advised we are now shut down and are in Typhoon condition one, you may shoot the TACAN approach to a radar pickup. The approach end is 0/0, but it is clear on the south runway. After Cubi is visually sighted, circle and land to the south." I passed the lead to the lead aircraft and told him to shoot the TACAN and GCA, and I would monitor the radio calls. He signalled that he had the lead and we started down.

We were flying through what appeared to be a waterspout, and I could just see his wing when we broke out in the clear over the numbers of one runway.

We had been told to go to the other end of the runway where it was clear and to circle and land. I followed the no radio plane while he flew a circling approach, the normal approach made in visual conditions.

He took the midfield arresting gear and left me nowhere to land. His mike unstuck, and he said, "Dash two, there is no one out here to pull me out. Say your intentions."

I rogered his call and said I would have to divert to Clark Air Force Base and turned toward the direction shown on the approach plate to the divert field, pulled my nose up and climbed out of the mountains and found a hole at 10,000 feet that showed the ground below as being cultivated and began an orbit.

When I found the frequency for Clark Approach, I found that my mike was stuck now. I started beating on the throttle handle trying to get the radio back, but finally started stacking my maps and other gear that I had in the cockpit to one side. I was getting quite low on fuel and had nowhere to
land with no radio or TACAN. I switched the IFF to emergency and tried one more time to get the mike unstuck and suddenly heard, "Aircraft on the 100 radial of Clark Air Force Base turn right 180 for identification." When I did so, I heard, "Radar contact, descend and maintain fifteen hundred feet, you are seven miles on the 092 radial of Clark AFB."

I acknowledged the approach and shot a ground controlled approach to a final landing. On rolling out, I checked my brakes and found I had only one, a left brake with little braking power in it. I called the tower three times and asked if they had an arresting gear, but they didn't answer, so I shut down the engine and slowly drifted left, finally running off the runway right where the arresting gear was hooked. I sank into the mud and settled into a left wing down position as the 14000 pound aircraft came to an inglorious stop.

I climbed out of the cockpit, dropped to the ground, and set the pins that locked the wheels. An Air Force Colonel in a dress khaki uniform was watching me in my dirty flight suit, my day-old shave, and with my .45 hanging in a holster on my flight vest.

I knew he shouldn't be leaning at that point on the aircraft just ahead of the cannon, but it was too late to tell him when I pulled my B-4 bag from the forward hell hole where the hydraulic lines were located and carried it over to his sedan.

As he walked back, he looked at his filthy black shirt and told me "I guess you did what you had to do." and never spoke another word.

Bob met me the next day, but it took five days to fix the brakes. I slept or read most of the time during the day, and we went out one night into Angeles City, the civilian city next to Clark AFB that had its usual complement of strip joints and bars for the entertainment of the troops.

We hired the standard means of transportation to get us to the end of town, a jeepney, a WWII jeep fitted with a top decorated and painted up to look nice. We rode with them to the club, but found it deserted and caught another, and we were riding in it when they turned off the main street and headed into the dark, unlighted part of town and told us they were taking us to some woman's apartment. It was obvious where they were taking us, and there was some question if we would be returning. We tried to get them to stop, but they wouldn't, so when they slowed down, we jumped out past the two Filipinos that were seated behind us and headed for another
Jeepny, who was shouting at us that the one we were in was owned by "bad guys."

A big altercation followed with threats being made by the first drivers, who we finally gave five dollars, highway robbery, and left for the lighted areas.

We were not in as much trouble as Bob thought because I had heard about Angeles City and was carrying my pistol concealed, and we could have ended up with the jeep if it had been necessary, of course, assuming that they were not armed more than I was.

We had the jeepny take us back to the Police Constabulary, just outside of the base. Bob went in and started complaining to the person who must have been the officer in charge. He was really raising hell with the officer, who in the US would be a National Guard officer in the paramilitary organization.

I didn't think he was going to get anywhere so I walked over to a guard who must have been something like a duty non-commissioned officer in charge of the watch.

I pulled out some twenty dollar bills. He looked interested. I gave him twenty and he seemed more interested. I gave him twenty more and he put them in his desk and walked over to the officer and said something to him and he looked interested too, said something to two PC soldiers, and they disappeared for twenty minutes, then came back with the driver of the Jeepny. (We had been able to point him out when we came back in the other vehicle.)

They had confiscated his vehicle and locked it in the yard after catching it downtown. They took him into a room next to the guard room and the sounds were unmistakable. When they came out, they had a full confession. Whether the price of justice was forty dollars for this offense, or whether I just had spent one-fifth of the money I had received for no reason, I will never know. The results and justice were swift, either way.

We finally got away from Clark and were cleared to Okinawa, but at 39,000 feet, well higher than we were capable of flying with two aircraft with two tanks, and not fully capable of maximum thrust. They were sending B-52s and their KC-135 tankers down at the lower altitudes for Vietnam, and we were not going to get any clearance at any lower altitude, nor were we going to be flying at 39,000 feet, but we took off anyway, into the edge of another typhoon that was in the Pacific Ocean.
We climbed to 36000 feet, and there we stopped climbing even though we were at full power. My cabin, again, iced up, and I scratched a small hole in the ice to fly formation on the lead. I could see the ocean below and we were below a high overcast the same as we had the first part of the first leg of our journey.

We finally reached 39000 feet about the time we had to begin the descent into the big Air Force Base on Okinawa from which they flew the B-52s and their tankers. Enroute, though, we heard an A-6 from Chu Lai calling in the blind that he was landing at Naha, the Navy Base, and we diverted into the same base, flying a GCA and landing in a light rain, but under relatively clear conditions. I felt I had survived another combat mission. These two flights from Chu Lai and from Clark were worse than flying in Vietnam, and these trips were supposed to be a chance to get away from the war and the stress of flying in combat, not designed to test you more.

We spent three days at Naha. We would just get one plane fixed and something would go wrong with another. No one could fix the A-6, so it had to fly with Bob and I. We taxied out three times to takeoff and taxied back with one complaint or another.

We could not fly without all the aircraft because we had one radio, mine, that worked regularly, one TACAN, Bob’s, that worked at all, and the A-6, flown by Captain Suter and his bombardier Gray Kramer, another trained forester from Maine, had a navigation computer, but only one frequency to talk on, and that was a Chu Lai frequency we used in the Air Group for ground communications. On the third day out, we just about got airborne with all three aircraft, when Maj Korman blew a hydraulic line and taxied back. The A-6 and I decided to go to Japan, equipment or not. He set his navigation computer, and I set my radio and IFF and we took off, me following him.

I found out immediately that the A-6 and the A-4 had different climb rates, and we had to stair step to altitude for him to keep from losing me in the clouds. When we finally got to altitude, my cabin again iced up, making communication difficult. They had to give me a hand signal when they wanted to make a report because I was on the enroute frequency and they were not.

I had no faith whatsoever in the computer in the A-4. I would trust the wet compass and the sun before I would trust it, but the A-6 didn’t deviate, and when we broke out in Japan, we were at 8000 feet on runway heading after 1100 miles. I led the approach, since I had the radio, and landed
first, only to have my nose gear collapse just as I stopped, in the midfield morest.

   It had taken me so long to get to Japan that I had little money or time left for me to enjoy it. I got some good meals in Japanese restaurants and spent some time sightseeing before having to catch a plane back to Chu Lai.

   I caught a plane out of Atsugi, flew to Iwakuni, where I thought I would be stationed in March, and then caught another plane back to Chu Lai, through Taipai, Hong Kong, and Danang.

   Bob was behind me somewhere, and when I got back, it seemed like I had been gone a long time. I had been on the edge of battle fatigue off and on since June, and when I left for Japan, it disappeared and came back only for short periods after that.

   When I got back, I had several letters from my wife and friends of mine in the US. My wife wanted to know when we were going on R and R, and I had replied to her that I thought Christmas would be a good time. Because of one thing and another, everyone else had gone in five or six months, and I would not be going until nearly ten months, guaranteeing me that I would get the time and place I wanted.

   I read the letters and tore them up.
My Family

I had a wife and a three year old child when I left for Vietnam. We had been married for four years and our second child was born in June, on the same day Roy Schmidt had been captured and I had been notified by the Red Cross.

I received letters in bunches, and I had pictures of my wife and children on the wall above my bed. I took my hometown paper, the Dayton (Wash) Chronicle, to keep up with local news. I was then able to keep up with a world that scarcely seemed to exist.

It didn't take long, though, before the letters were coming from a world I could not identify with. They were most welcome, but I had become hardened and numb to things that I had not seen before and the letters were from what seemed to be another world, where people I knew lived, and where I had lived less than seven months before, now seemed to be an existence that I couldn't even identify with. It got to be painful to think of that world because I lived day to day, hour to hour, and did not think about the past, or the future. To think about life in the middle class was almost like thinking about life on Mars, when viewed from the daily routine of flying, flares, tracers, bombing missions, and the traumas that occurred along with combat flying and the things that went with it.

Once, I got a tape and could only play it once. It was too difficult to listen to, and I could scarcely identify with the things that were said.

As far as I was concerned, when I landed, I lived until I flew again, and nothing impacted me if I could help it.

Once I had learned to live only for the moment, the stress of war didn't bother me. What was in the past didn't matter because it was over, and what was in the future didn't matter either. Things changed rapidly, and I had dealt with the crises of the past and didn't think the future would be any worse. If it was, it wasn't worth the time to worry now. I would deal with it then.

There were too many things in the present that had to be dealt with immediately to have time to focus on the problems of my family and the things going on there. I was not sure I would even be seeing them again, though I planned on it. People I knew were dying every few days. One half of my
flight class was already injured, dead, or MIA, and there was no guarantee that that would not happen to me.

We did not seem to be gaining on the NVA. They could strike at will and this constant conflict with them was keeping us flying so much, there was not time to think about home.

I thought the only person who felt this way was me, but the CO tore up his letters into tiny pieces just as soon as he had read them, just as I did, and I wonder to this day if many did the same thing.

I wrote home frequently, but don’t remember what I wrote about because I certainly wasn’t writing about what I was doing. I also kept a diary. There is no emotion whatsoever in it, regardless of what happened. What we had for dinner was written in the same tone as what I saw after a rocket attack had hit our NCO area directly.

We were able to call home in the stilted language of the MARS system, a radio that called a ham operator in the states, who called your wife or family for you. You could speak to them for three minutes, but couldn’t talk about anything because of the restrictions. During that time, there were those who blocked these conversations from the United States, of infantrymen, usually, in from the bush. Some were talking, perhaps, for the last time to their families.

If I ever run into one of those persons who did this, I would make no attempt to control the anger I feel for them for their actions to 17 and 18-year-old Marines and Soldiers living under conditions they would never imagine to exist.
Air Base Operations

We were still flying two missions or more a day and would have each flown sixty or more missions a month, but other pilots from group and other units in the field took some and collateral duties, and standing the duty took time away from flying. We had flying with us from group headquarters one Marine who was approaching five hundred missions, Lt. Col Johnson.

I was picked by the squadron to go to Base Operations every third day to stand the air base duty from 1800 hours until 0600 hours each third night. In addition, I would still be scheduled on the regular flight schedule of the squadron.

I went over and took my first night, the 2nd day of September, and had a lot of time to analyze the operations of the Chu Lai Air Station which I would be in charge of during air operations from early evening until early morning.

I got involved right away. A CH-46 helicopter from the Marine Base at Marble Mountain disappeared off the coast of Chu Lai just as I took the duty. It disappeared while over the South China Sea on instruments and was not seen again.

I was the subject of an immediate investigation as the Marines were always looking for some failure that could have caused the accident. I had done nothing wrong and they had to look elsewhere.

Several times each night, I had to check all of the runways to make sure the lights were working, there were no other problems and flight operations could continue. It was pleasant to get a jeep and drive around in the early evening and the early morning, but somewhat less so when I had to do checks at midnight or two in the morning.

Survival in dangerous conditions depends a lot on the habit patterns you develop that keep you away from danger, or react to properly when you are put in a dangerous situation. One such occurrence happened when I was not prepared for it one evening during my night duty when I was surveying the base facilities with my jeep.

It was dusk, and the sun had set. I had just checked the tower and GCA shack to make sure they were fully manned and in working condition. I was waiting at midfield for two A-4C Skyhawks from VMA 223 to takeoff. I could see them running up in the shadowy evening haze some 5000 feet down the runway. The first plane, on my side of the runway, started rolling and
I could see it accelerating toward me. I watched it approach the midfield marker, raise its nose and pull up its landing gear and start accelerating, then settle back on the runway on its bombs, continue off the end of the runway and explode.

Instinctively and foolishly, I decided to be a big hero and try to get to the plane and rescue the pilot if it was possible. I could see that the plane was intact.

I just started to release the clutch when the second plane went by, lifted its nose and retracted its gear, missing me by fifteen or twenty feet. I drove across the runway to the beginning of our flight line and then turned down the taxiway to the burning aircraft, getting to its position in the sand off the south runway less than five minutes after it had run off the end of the runway and was resting on its bombs and racks.

I was not the first one to the aircraft, as two enlisted marines had come from the perimeter and were trying to get near the plane without success. The fires were burning under the aircraft in the bombs which had been knocked from the plane still in their racks.

I could see the canopy was still closed and the pilot still in the cockpit. I got out of my jeep and started to go around the wing when all six five-hundred-pound bombs went off, all low order, (blast, but no fragments) literally lifting me up and setting me back down ten or fifteen feet from where I had been.

Surprisingly, the jeep was not hurt. I was shaking like a leaf, but had no injuries that I could see, although my ears were ringing and I felt like I was floating over the ground rather than standing on it.

What wits I had still with me told me to get the pilot out, as he could be burned if he stayed in the cockpit, but when I got to the front of the plane, I found the canopy gone and no pilot to be seen.

I looked around in the dark and couldn't find any sign of him, but a shout from the dark toward the coast indicated that he had been found. He had been blown out of the plane a good distance into the darkness by the explosion which must have lifted the entire aircraft up with its concussion.

The pilot, relatively uninjured, was taken to the Americal Division Hospital.

The tower was generally good about keeping pilots in the pattern warned about conditions around the field, but totally ignored some conditions that happened nearly every night that put pilots in some danger.

The Americal Division units around the perimeter were in
constant contact with some enemy unit or another. Often, more
often than not, this contact was on the approach to the runway
that was the main night runway, or the south runway. When
they were operating, they had illumination available from
mortars, and larger artillery weapons and they didn’t hesitate
to use it.

The tower never warned any of us, and it was not unusual
to greak out of the clouds at 1200 feet and suddenly be
dazzled by two one-million-candlepower flares, one on each
side of the cockpit. Your night vision went in an instant,
and for a few seconds even the thunderstorm light in the
cockpit would not give you enough light to see the instrument
panel.

I also asked the ground maintenance crew for the base
operations to pull aircraft out of the arresting gear if the
base was under rocket or mortar attack, to no avail.

Coming in and landing, and hearing "Chu Lai Rockets" over
the tower frequency and then hearing nothing more while
sitting in the arresting gear while rockets came in was
anything but conducive to peace of mind. You had to keep your
lights on so another plane wouldn’t land on top of you and
wait while the attack went on and until after the all clear
sounded before the arresting gear crew would pull you clear
and you could taxi back to your flight line.

In a base of that size, it never seemed to stop. There
was just one situation after another that came up that had to
be dealt with on the spur of the moment.

I was sleeping at two in the morning when I was awakened
by an Army mechanic who had driven over from east field. He
said to me, his eyes as big as two pie plates, "there is this
great big white airplane sitting over by my hanger. It came
in and just stopped and didn’t move. I don’t know what he is
doing there."

I had an idea what he was doing there, since it was socked
in and the runways were at minimums. When I got to the plane
in the east field arresting gear, I found a pilot sitting in
the cockpit of an F-8 Crusader who had come into Chu Lai with
no radio, had landed on the east field and had no idea where
he was. His eyes were as big as the mechanics.

I signalled to him to shut down and he finally did so, and
we towed the aircraft across the crosswind runway to the main
runway. I am certain he thought he had landing on some
matting strip in a fire base or one not manned, because he was
frightened half to death.

One night I saw a tiger, or some similar animal, on the
crosswind and once ran over a black snake some four or five
feet long that was probably a cobra. The tiger didn’t run, but kept walking just at the edge of the light of my jeep, occasionally looking over his shoulder. Tigers were reported to have been taking sentries near the DMZ, and I was none too sure I wanted to find out if this one had such intentions. No one was hunting them, and they seemed to be losing their fear of man.

Night after night was like this, but one early evening just before I took the duty, something happened that I couldn’t believe even though I saw it.

I was just leaving the squadron area. I saw that the crash trucks were moving to the vicinity of the first arresting gear. I couldn’t see any aircraft coming in.

Some few minutes later, I heard that a Phantom had its gear up and couldn’t get it down. It was going to try to make an arrested landing on its drop tanks. I got myself in a good position to watch and waited, along with most of the rest of the Air Group in the squadron area.

I then saw the Phantom, some five miles away, approaching on a gentle glide slope. He was nose high, and as he approached the morest, I could see he was too high and he went around again, this time setting up his glide closer, but still too high.

He went around the pattern again, his landing gear all in the well and no doors open. This time he was too low, but took the initiative to set the plane down and slide into the arresting gear, which flipped up over his left drop tank. It pulled the plane more than 45 degrees from the runway heading and down to a speed of less than fifty knots before the wire broke and left the plane skidding on its drop tanks down the runway, at an angle of 45 degrees off runway heading.

I was waiting for the plane to hit a light or something and blow, but the pilot hit left afterburner and turned the aircraft back toward the center of the runway and then hit the second afterburner and started accelerating on his drop tanks, which now were sending up a roostertail of flames behind the accelerating Phantom.

The plane was getting closer and closer to the ground as the drop tanks kept grinding down, and the fire was behind the plane, some forty feet in the air.

When the plane got flying speed, he jettisoned the tanks and rotated, catching the next arresting gear and pulling it out by the roots. Arresting gear cable in his hook and with no drop tanks to land on, he eased the plane into a gentle climbing, turn over the bay of the South China Sea where we
had built our runway, and both the pilot and radar intercept officer ejected, the plane making a gentle descending turn into the ocean.

I had seen some demonstrations of power of the Phantom and some other planes over the years, but never anything to duplicate seeing a plane take off on his belly with his landing gear in the well. Seeing one do so was almost beyond the imagination.

In addition to standing the duty, I was also flying a full schedule. Since we were still flying up to the capacity of our maintenance’s ability to keep our aircraft airborne, our pilots ability to keep the cockpits manned was keeping us quite tired.

A major offensive had taken place fifty miles to the west and a large Vietnamese air base had been overrun by the NVA. We had been flying there, as well as elsewhere. It was a key junction and intersection point for roads into South Vietnam and access to them from the Ho Chi Minh trail. The base was fought for by our forces, but was overrun in just a few days, giving the NVA access into our area through the roads to Kham Duc.

The squad that got away.

I was no longer standing the base duty, and had just got off the squadron duty. We were on the hot pad and had flown in the morning and stood the duty in the afternoon. It was just getting dark and we were preparing to go back to the living area and eat.

A hot pad launch came in and Maj. Carr and I took it, since I had not flown since morning.

It was hazy and the sun was just setting. It was still light, but with the haze and the long distance we would have to fly, to the DMZ near Dong Ha, it would be dark before we got there.

There was no time to brief, but briefs had become redundant because we followed the same procedures each time we took off. The changes could be handled when they came up. I flew so much that I had the checklists memorized and could run my fingers over the cockpits switches and set the instruments by rote.

We each got an aircraft from the line shack and lighted off and checked in on button, the squadron frequency, and called for taxi/takeoff. We rolled into the takeoff position.
and launched to the north and joined.

We climbed up over the haze and back into the setting sunlight and flew up toward the Dong Ha area as the sun set below the clouds.

When we got there, we were sent to contact Fingerprint, the Marine Controller, that covered that area.

We were going to have to stay low, as there was a thin overcast quite low over the target area, where a marine squad was trapped in a shell hole by a large unit of North Vietnamese.

The controller gave us a brief. It was nearly dark and it was hard to make out the ground, much less a single crater made by a five hundred pound bomb among hundreds.

There was a fire team that had been on patrol and got pinned down in a bomb crater and were now surrounded by the Vietnamese Army. We would be using our napalm and five-hundred-pound bombs to try to get the enemy to break contact by dropping on them and getting them to move back so the two helos could extract the team before they were destroyed. They were orbiting about three miles back waiting to get in and get the team out.

The fire team had a strobe light they were using to mark their position, but the light was interspersed with the ground fire of the enemy. The controller gave us a mark, fifty meters from the position of the team. That is so close that even during daylight hours it was like dropping on your own position.

Dash one called in, and I watched as the ground literally burst with ground fire, and he laid his first napalm right on the mark. I rolled in, and was directed to attack just ahead of his and drove right down to the ground, time again in slow motion, the target area seeming to be so big I couldn't miss.

I pulled off the target, pulling to the right, and watching a quad fifty tracking me, the four flashing barrels silent in the darkness, but firing at me and following me around.

The controller then called Dash one into thirty meters at 9 o'clock from the team in the bomb crater, which I never saw. Thirty meters isn't measurable at night, but Dash one rolled in and laid his first two five-hundred-pound bombs right at the controllers smoke. I followed and did the same, again, watching the quad fifty firing as I pulled around the target pattern.

The controller called the lead into fifteen meters. I couldn't believe he would accept, but he did, and rolled in again. Fifteen meters is dropping the ordnance on your
position because it has to be sensed in the cockpit and not 
seen. Nothing measures that close.

We were so low, we were taking heavy automatic weapons 
fire from the entire target area. On my last run, I had 
little hope of hitting the small area, but focused as much as 
I could and released and pulled up with Maj. Carr, and we 
departed without getting a bomb damage assessment.

I had flown each run, more sensing the ground and target 
than actually seeing it. It was as surprising to me as to 
anybody how we had hit targets so close so many times when it 
seemed impossible to do so.

When we left the target area, we did not know what had 
happened, but before we got halfway back to Danang, we heard 
that the two Ch-46 helicopters had pulled the team from the 
bomb crater. They had done so, according to the next day's 
intelligence reports with the enemy within 100 meters on every 
side.
Days had run into weeks and weeks had run into months. We had two or three week maintenance flights out of country and two and three week schools to break up the rapid pace of flying. We did not have permanent squadrons and pilots, and enlisted maintenance men were coming and going, and the squadron was changing every week. The new pilots were put with the experienced pilots and became experienced themselves in just a few weeks.

In September, we tried a new type of hot pad mission. Units on the ground had complained that we were not getting to them fast enough, and that was probably true since we were stationed with the Americal Division well south of where any ground units were stationed from the Marines.

It was decided to station aircraft with normal ordnance loads at a preplanned location near the center of I Corps. When a hot pad mission was called in, the aircraft would already be airborne and could be flown rapidly to the area where they were needed. The delay would be cut to no more than ten or fifteen minutes.

This sounded good to those making the decision, but it didn’t work as well as they thought. We had to preguess what type of ordnance they needed and ended up with mixed ordnance loads that were not wanted by anyone.

We took off and flew to an area fifteen miles west of Hue, just east of The Ashau Valley and took up an orbit at ten thousand feet to stay away from any other aircraft that would be transiting the area.

Since we were sometimes orbiting for three hours, I got to know the area between Hue and Ashau quite well.

I could watch the air operations at Hue/Phu Bai, the Marine Air Station just below us and toward the coast and see the Ranch Hand C-123s flying in flights of six or more spraying the jungle below us. They covered several hundred meters at a time with Agent Orange, killing the overstory and everything else under it.

They were definitely taking away the foliage the enemy hid under, the immediate need, but the unknown effects were also effecting us, which we didn’t know.

These were the most leisurely flights we flew. Because we were not going to be used immediately, we took our time and did a little sight seeing on the way to the target holding area. We saw parts of I Corps we never flew in and saw things
that we wouldn’t have expected to see at all.

I flew six of these missions or more, and never one time got a decent target. We had some of the ordnance others on the ground wanted, but usually only some, and we ended up carrying half or more back to Chu Lai.

After an hour and a half, we would have to go out to sea to refuel with a C-130, flying to a position abeam his wing, slowing to 200 knots and moving in to take the drogue and start refueling. It was discomforting to be flying behind the big propeller of the C-130 in front of you and have a face looking out the window just a few feet away. As we were refueling, we would have to stay alert and not move ahead or out. If we got too close, the crew would guillotine the fueling hose and we would be left with it when we landed. Flying in an orbit for hour after hour was boring enough so that it was not easy to stay awake and was hard on your body because the plane’s cockpit was so small that you couldn’t move around and got quite cramped in the cockpit. Flying just off shore was not something I liked, either because we were in the middle of the airway up and down the coast. The planes that went by us were not that far away, and I was afraid one of them would hit us while we were hooked up. Just after I left Vietnam, that happened, when two Phantoms refueling on a C-130 were hit by two Phantoms coming down the coast, sending three Phantoms into the Ocean and one C-130 into the ocean with its entire crew. A good idea on paper turned out to be a bad idea in practice.
In the Cockpit of a Fighter Bomber

After less than one month, flying became second nature to me, and I started feeling confident enough to make changes in the standard procedures to fit certain conditions. Bombing and strafing took concentration and skill that required one to deviate from the normal procedures that were used because of variation in the ground, weather, and enemy and friendly locations. I started developing my own techniques that worked for me, but did not expect others to use them.

I learned to attack a target with guns and hit it almost every time by changing the way I approached it and the way I aimed.

Normally, when strafing an enemy position, one rolls in and keeps the plane upright while approaching the target. As the gunsight gets close, you squeeze off the rounds, pushing or trimming the plane down so that the nose doesn’t rise when firing and increasing speed. I never could hit anything this way. I learned a technique that worked better for me. I didn’t like trimming down the nose as I was accelerating into ground fire and getting in slight negative G force situations.

At first I went ahead and made the standard upright run, but couldn’t keep my bullets in the target area, which was usually shooting back.

One time I rolled in and got my nose too high and rolled inverted and pulled my nose down to the target and realized I could stay in positive G forces and keep pulling down and shooting and did so. I put all my bullets right into the target area, and when I saw they were passing over, I rolled into a 90 degree bank and pulled them back with my rudder, then rolled level and pulled off the target.

I later improved this by rolling into a 90 degree angle of bank and strafing in the 90 degree angle of bank if I could, and rolling inverted and strafing if necessary. By rolling in with the gunsight mark over the target, I was pulling positive G forces down to the target rather than staying in a negative G situation all the way down. The only problem I experienced was if I rolled in too far away, I could not hold the inverted position and had to come back to the ninety or less degree position to get my nose higher to return and then strafe inverted.
There was a feeling of exhilaration seeing the ground and target from that position, the ground below you speeding by so fast it was a blur, and the plane gunsight coming down on the enemy and seeing the bullets impact in groups. It was the type of exciting feeling, though, that got one killed by flying into the target, and it was necessary to remain totally alert for fear of something like that happening.

When flying with the Hughes gun pod, it was not possible to go fully inverted, and I stayed at 90 degrees angle of bank or used the standard strafing procedure. It fired so many rounds per minute from two barrels that the plane slowed 75 knots and set you up in your seat, just like the speed brakes did. Flying inverted and strafing with a Hughes gun pod would get you too slow and put your aircraft in a dangerous position, so I kept inverted and semi inverted strafing to the internal guns and rockets, and not the gun pod, though I would strafe a 90 degrees angle of bank with it.

When I first fired the gun pod and heard the growl of its 1200 round per minute firing rate, saw the two solid red beams of tracers, each fourth one a tracer, and felt the plane immediately slow to from 450 knots to 375 knots, I felt an exhilaration and feeling of awe, simultaneously, that left me not knowing if I had had a positive experience or a negative one, but realizing that I had a weapon on board with a number of uses that had not been explored.

We had few strafing missions compared to bombing missions or missions firing rockets, usually the 5" Zuni, which sounded like a freight train leaving the wing stations. One mission using Zuni rockets in conditions that I had previously considered impossible, shows what the A-4 was capable of, with its short turn radius and rapid roll rate. We had flown early one morning to work with a helicopter controller from the Marines. He brought us into the Hue/Phu Bai area to support some Marines down in a canyon that had made contact with an enemy unit. When he gave us the mission, I had to take a second look.

He was having us attack up the bottom of a blind canyon that had a mountain at the end of it that we could not possibly get over. The canyon was deep and we would be running right up the canyon bottom to the mountain at the head of the canyon. We would then have to climb out one side or another and fly over into the next canyon and fly down it to recover our airspeed.

Once in the next canyon, we would have to descend to its mouth, climb back to altitude, and enter the main target again from the bottom.