I decided to try it. I rolled in low at the mouth of the canyon and the Huey popped a smoke, a white phosphorous rocket near the terminus of the stream in the bottom of the steep walled canyon.

I saw that the canyon floor was climbing at maybe ten degrees, so I just put my gunsight on the smoke and went level up the canyon, approaching the target level. The walls of the canyon closed in, and it was not a normal feeling to see a mountain ahead and the racing green jungle on both sides. I kept getting deeper and deeper and approaching the smoke, with the headwall looming larger and larger as I drew near it. When I was at the point of firing my rockets, I fired two salvos and pulled straight up, then turned to climb parallel with the slope on the left side.

I was able to climb in a steep climbing turn slightly more steeply than the slope and my nose started getting higher. I steepened my left bank until my nose was over the horizon at the top of the ridge, and I saw I was going to clear it, but nose high. I rolled into a 120 degree angle of bank and continued so that I was inverted and climbing just over the ground, but with my nose high enough to clear the ridgetop. Just as I approached the top, the jungle crown speeding by my canopy, I started pulling a positive G force and went over the top, inverted, wings level, and pulled down into the next canyon, rolling back to the 90 degree angle of bank, and turning down the canyon toward its mouth, recovering to the upright as I paralleled the bottom of the canyon. I had flown a wingover to the inverted position on the ridgetop and back to wings level as I accelerated down and out the mouth of the next canyon. I found flying the recovery exhilarating and challenging, in addition to pushing the A-4 to new limits or performance.

I watched my wingman do the same thing. Watching it was worse than flying it.

On my second run, my mark was even farther up the canyon than the first, and I didn't know if I could make it or not, but I had enough clearance the first time so tried a second. This time the mountain was right in front of me, but fell back more than it appeared. I did the same thing again, but this time pulled up a canyon to the 11 o'clock so that I didn't have the initial problem of having to clear the ground so soon. On my final run, I was light. The mark was back down the canyon, so I ran for it, faster than normal, and pulled off with heavier G force than before. I had my nose above the horizon early and rolled inverted, parallelling the ground and pulled down, right over the fire base at the top and rolled.
back into a 90 degree angle of bank, nose level, flying over them at fifty feet or less and waving to the Marines on the ground who were jumping up and down and waving their arms wildly in the air.

After flying such missions, there was a certain anxiety. Flying missions where you pushed beyond limits without thinking or having ever having done it before left one wondering if he wasn’t pushing well beyond his limits, or the limits of the aircraft. Flying so much gave one confidence, but not all the things I did had justification other than I was pushing myself. We flew and landed so often that I got so that I could set up the Skyhawk in trim at the 180 position and try to land hands off, using only the rudder. It wasn’t that hard after a few times to come close, but even trying it when we were in battered planes and could have suffered battle damage was not a safe thing to do.

At the end of September, I got orders to fly with the USS New Jersey as an Air Controller in North Vietnam. I was approaching six months in the squadron and would be leaving in seven, the 1st of November. I had to go to school to learn the procedures for controlling a ship as they were quite different than controlling artillery and other aircraft, which I already knew how to do. The school was at some remote base on Okinawa, and I would be leaving in a few days, though the orders had not come in.

There were almost as many pilots needed in the ground forces as air controllers as there were in the tactical squadrons and helicopter squadrons, and flying for seven months was about as long as one go to fly, though maintaining your minimum flight time was still required after that, while in another unit away from Chu Lai.

Flying in MAG 13, which had no A-4s except for two-seat control aircraft would allow me to keep flying, while those going to infantry units would have to come back every month or so and get a few hours and then return to their units.

MAG 12, which I was now stationed with, flying with Attack Squadron 311, also had two two-seat A-4s, two of the ones we had brought over in January of 1968. I was scheduled to fly on a mission controlling the USS New Jersey, a battleship that looked as big as half the fleet that was now stationed off of North Vietnam just north of the DMZ. I had seen it firing quite a number of times, but had not seen the results.

I was scheduled to brief with a Lt. Colonel from the Group

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Staff. He met me at the flight line, and we had a short brief before we launched and flew to North Vietnam. I would be flying the plane, a TA4F, one I may have had flown across the Pacific to Danang the preceding January. The planes F-100s and TA4Fs that were flown by the Marines and Air Force in North Vietnam were two place jet aircraft with a higher survival rate than the small O-1, O-2, and OV10 control aircraft that were used in South Vietnam. The jet aircraft were able to fly higher, and had more room to install the necessary radios to be able to talk to the ground forces, the ship, and other aircraft.

I had heard the pilots who had flown for the battleship talking about controlling it from the first time that we had sent aircraft up to do so. It was not the same as controlling artillery, as I had learned to do when in Basic School infantry training. The battlewagon fired only one shot and not several to get first on line, then over and under and then firing for effect, with all guns firing after the bracket had occurred as did artillery pieces in unison.

We manned the aircraft. I would be flying the TA4 while the Colonel spotted and controlled the radios. He had instructed me to keep in a constant climbing turn to keep the guns from being able to track us with radar because we would be changing airspeed, altitude, and direction simultaneously.

There was a high overcast as I flew up the coast to Dong Ha. I could see the battleship off the coast ten miles up the coast and off of the North Vietnam beach. It stood out as it was larger than any of the other ships of the task force it was attached to by three times.

The Colonel checked into Dong Ha and got clearance into North Vietnam. I flew across the DMZ near the coast and proceeded up fifteen or twenty miles to a target area the Colonel had worked before.

I could see roads below us converging here and there, but no targets of consequence. I was busy trying to keep the plane so that the Colonel could see the area that he was working in while I stayed constantly changing direction and altitude.

Over the intercom, the Colonel told me to look at an area where roads converged in a large tract of trees. He said that he thought that this was a truck park or storage area because the pattern on the roads had been changing over the last few weeks.

Later, when flying along the Ho Chi Minh trail, I found that this was the way to determine enemy usage and intentions. Roads and trails would start getting wider and not growing.
shut and bridges would be rebuilt and the pattern would extend
to a certain area, and it was possible to tell where the
trails were leading.

I set up a horseshoe pattern around the suspected truck
park and began my orbit behind the target while the Colonel
called for a shot from one of the ships sixteen inch naval
guns.

A large gray blast below us 6000 feet showed where the gun
had been laid to fire.

The Colonel made a single correction. The impact had been
500 meters short and 1000 meters to the south, so the Colonel
called to add 500 and go right 1000. A few seconds later, the
entire grid square of 1000 meters by 1000 meters exploded in
dust fire and flame. It was truly impressive.

A radar or visually controlled gun position opened up on
us from some 500 meters south, just north of where we were
flying and the Colonel called for another correction and a
salvo. The gun emplacement and everything around it
disappeared. We had to return to the tanker to tank and
called Dong Ha for clearance out of North Vietnam. We flew
south to the DMZ and across to where the tanker was to be
stationed, but were unable to take fuel and had to return to
Chu Lai. We flew back down the flight corridor to the base
and landed. The Colonel gave me a long debrief that taught me
more in fifteen minutes than I learned later in Forward Air
Control School. He had been controlling the USS New Jersey
since it had come to South Vietnam and knew all the ins and
outs of flying and controlling it.

There was a clear and continual danger in flying, both in
North Vietnam and spotting for the ship.

The southern part of North Vietnam was covered with
anti-aircraft guns. Any time they wished to open fire they
could do so with effective results that could be made more
effective if they also fired three missiles so that you had to
dive down into the low thin overcast of gray, lead-lined
clouds. That they chose not to do so, always made me wonder
if we were hitting anything that was effecting their ability
to prosecute the war.

The second problem was the New Jersey itself. The
projectiles were fired nearly straight up, rather than
directly at the target. When they came down, they were quite
close to the horseshoe orbit of the planes doing the spotting
for them, and they were fused with proximity fuses so that it
was possible for them to go off near the planes controlling
them as much as near the ground and the enemy positions. The
Colonel warned me about flying the horseshoe pattern too close
to the vertical points above the target and then becoming a
target myself.

During the next month, while I was in Okinawa training to
control aircraft, the ship, and artillery, the ship shot down
two of its controllers. One ejected over the fantail of the
Jersey, but the plane, instead of drifting away and crashing
safely into the sea, continued to orbit and nearly hit the
fantail of the ship.

The USS New Jersey could fire nearly half way across the
southern portion of North Vietnam, and could fire across the
coastal plane of South Vietnam where most of the combat was
taking place. If we had possessed three battleships, and had
the ammunition to keep them firing, we could have covered
nearly one-half the area our planes flew in in North Vietnam
and saved the hundreds of planes we lost, if the ship could
have been as effective as it was during the few times I saw it
fire.
A Beautiful Day, October 9, 1968

Normally, when I awoke anywhere but in Vietnam, I felt a moment of joy that I was greeting a new day. I would then look outside to see what the day was like and what I would be doing.

At Chu Lai, I would awake and feel the moment of joy for perhaps one-half of a second, then laying in my sandy bed in the Quonset hut, when I was lucky enough to be in one, my mood would slowly sink into a sick feeling in my stomach when I realized where I was.

October 9, 1968 dawned cool and clear, much like the climate in which I had always lived near, the mountains of SE Washington State, Northern Idaho, and Montana. When I walked out for the first brief, my flight suit did not soak through with sweat as normal, but stayed dry. The weather was unusually cool and clear. I stood at the top of the sandy hill where the Quonset hut was built, looking over the South China Sea and took in the beautiful morning.

It was going to be an easy day. I had one scheduled flight and then the duty, but the squadron was not going to fly in the PM because we had six hours of standdown because we were taking the hot pad at 1800 hours. I would have the squadron to myself and the only thing that would be happening would be that the day crew would be loading aircraft for the hot pad during the afternoon.

I briefed for a 0700 launch to the area around Camp Carroll, west of Dong Ha and perhaps seven miles inland on the highway to Khe Sanh, now abandoned. I had a new pilot, Lt. Barger, to fly with me on one of his first flights. We met in the squadron area, checked out two aircraft with bombs to be released at 2500 feet, not at ground level and took off to the north, the day as clear and bright as any I had seen anywhere. The South China Sea sparkled as did the ships on the sea and in Danang harbor.

I flew several miles farther out to sea than normal and over the large island that lay off the coast of Danang, something my exploring nature had wanted to see for some time.

We had been flying almost every aircraft in support of Thuong Duc, inland between Danang and An Hoa ten miles SW of the big base and four NE of An Hoa. An attempted insertion by CH-46 Marine Corps helicopters had been a failure and all the
bombing had not stopped the ground fire from shooting at the insert, preventing it. I could see the area as we passed it flying past Danang.

It was possible to see completely across South Vietnam as we flew north to the Dong Ha area and flew the mission, which seemed to be something other than the combat mission to destroy enemy bunkers that it was. It seemed to be too pretty a day for a war.

We landed and I made a trip to the living area to get a clean flight suit so that when I stood the duty, I would be able to breathe the air in the ready room. With the ability to wash our flight suits in the water we caught from the air conditioner, it was not necessary to wear our flight suits until they stood up by themselves in the corner.

We had food available at the flight line, two miles or more from where our living area was, so I went down, took the duty, signed in the log book, got a sandwich, and opened the door to the 8x40 trailer, and prepared for a pleasant afternoon of reading, napping, and doing little else.

The base was almost silent during the afternoon. I wondered what had happened to the assault on Thuong Duc, because we had thrown so much at it.

During the afternoon, I read and sat with the door to the trailer open, letting in the cool air and looked out across the flight line to the mountains to the west of Chu Lai, benign enough in the afternoon, but in actuality, shielding some enemy units the size of divisions that used the area beyond them as a rebuilding area.

The flight line was wet from the occasional showers and the flight line crew was present at times loading ordnance for the night launches if they came.

At about 1720 hours, I heard my replacement coming early, Capt Hammack of Amarillo, Texas, a former cadet and now a pilot with a hundred or more missions. He was standing in the door, in his flight suit, and talking to me, when a hot pad launch came over the field phone to work in an area we never had flown before, the area south of our base that the Americal Division had declared so unsafe to fly over that we were to stay at 1000 feet or above when making an approach to the north runway.

In the absence of any pilots in the ready room, Lee and I left the truck driver, Frenchy Oulette, in charge of the squadron and took two planes loaded with napalm and 250 pound bombs used against the enemy to break contact when they were attacking US forces.

We took off to the north, just before sunset. It was
clear over the ocean, even if it was cloudy and broken over the land, a typical situation with which we had become accustomed.

We joined abeam the O'club and proceeded south to the field boundary. The target area was almost in the field flight pattern and we made landfall at the West German hospital ship that was anchored some 4000 meters from our targ, a neutral ship which treated all Vietnamese. We could see the target now from the coast.

We flew on inland, with both Lee and I noting that there was not a sign of conflict on the ground below. It looked like Vietnam must have looked before the war, but the appearance was deceitful, as it was one of the worst areas in our sector. It had not yet been assaulted with any large size units and bore no scars of such an action, as other areas to the north did.

The sun was just setting as we approached the controller, who gave us a mission to attack the only intact village I was ever to see. As I looked at it, I saw only the peaceful appearance of the Vietnamese countryside in the setting sun and no sign of any enemy.

The village was beautiful in the setting sun, though nothing was benign in nature in this area.

We napalmed the village, and left it burning, the flames nearly one hundred feet in the air. We went then to a hill above the village while the village was bombed by two Phantoms. We left as they strafed what had been a peaceful country scene in an area that was yet to be destroyed by war. After landing, Lee took the duty and I went to the O'club. It was still cool and now clear. The stars were bright over the South China Sea. Just as the club closed at 2200 hours, the squadron truck driver came with operations officer to the bar. We had just received the biggest launch of the war off of the hot pad, and they needed every pilot who could still be capable of flying to man the aircraft for the hot pad launch. I was one capable of flying, or so it was determined, though I had some reservations after flying two missions, standing the duty and drinking several beers.

The decision was made by me, and no one else, and I went back to the squadron area and took an aircraft and moved into position behind Maj Jim Lent as we flew toward Danang and Thuong Duc which was in danger of being overrun.

I was so tired and had enough alcohol in me so that I could not stay in formation, so I drifted out some 500 feet and flew to the target area, which was now covered with clouds that came up to the ridgetops on both sides of the valley.
The tops of the clouds were not all that clear since there was no moon showing through a higher overcast.

There was a hole in the clouds at the upper end of the valley and the mouth of the canyon was clear, but everything in the canyon was under the overcast which had to go to less than 500 feet above the ground.

An air controller was beneath the overcast and flying in the vicinity of the target. He was in an OV-10 which could turn in small areas and could go slow enough so the pilot could maintain control of the aircraft and the situation on the ground.

In order to drop our ordnance, we would have to penetrate the clouds at the upper end of the valley, go on instruments down until we flew out under them, then pick up the target, drop on it, and climb up and out of the clouds on instruments again. It was too dark below them to fly down the canyon under the overcast with our speed with any safety. The valley was narrow with side ridges that we would be in danger of impacting if we flew out the bottom to the mouth the valley.

The lead two aircraft off the hot pad were leaving just as we arrived. Lt. Col. Overturf, Executive Officer of the squadron, and Captain Sandlin were not able to get onto the runin line, make the approach and bomb safely, and were now out of fuel and leaving for Chu Lai, leaving six of us to try to get under the overcast and attack below the clouds and hit the enemy, which was putting a marine unit in danger of being overrun.

I couldn't see any way to get under the clouds without flying into the ground. If I had been flying a slower aircraft, it may have been possible, but not at the speeds we were flying. I had never really been in formation and was now flying behind the number four aircraft when I was number six, and he was flying so far out of formation that he was flying alone as number one instead of number four. Whether this had anything to do with the fact that we were the only two to have been put into the formation out of the bar, I cannot ascertain.

Suddenly there was a flare over the target area under the clouds and the plane ahead of me called in and rolled into the clouds. I saw him disappear. It was Capt. Donovan who was out of formation, but just at the head of the valley. I followed his track and saw the white light of his bomb's explosion under the clouds. I kept my eyes on my instruments and my heading toward the area where I saw the explosions. I kept my airspeed down and did not accelerate to 450 knots as usual, but flew at 300 knots down through the clouds, my power
back switches armed and ready to drop.

I broke out under the cloud layer and had an instant to make a correction. I saw the fire from the napalm burning, could make out the narrow ridge system the controller had been talking about in his briefing, made the correction, and salvoed my whole load. I pulled back into the clouds, nose high, since the steep side ridges were on both sides of me. I watched the airspeed bleed off to 125 knots, just as I broke clear of the clouds, more than 20 degrees nose high. I eased the stick forward to 0 Gs, and the plane went ballistic with no lift on the wings. It slowed to below 110 knots but fell back into the clouds, nose low, in an angle of bank of less than ten degrees and accelerated to flying speed while I steered for the coast, which I had seen when I popped up. I broke out of the clouds as I left the mouth of the valley and flew back over the South China Sea, landing back at the base at Chu Lai just before midnight. We waited in the ready room as each of the pilots came back singly, all without bomb damage assessments. I wrote up the controller for a decoration since it was his actions that assured the mission and not ours.

I took the duty six by six back to the squadron area and went to the mess, got something to eat and took a shower. I was in bed at 0130 and had been up nearly 22 hours.

If it had not been for the initiative of Captain Donovan and the ability of the aircontroller to describe in terms we could understand what we would see, there would have been no ordnance dropped.

We had had some slow times due to bad weather, but with the exception of those few days, we had flown almost constantly since January, when the TET offensive had started, forcing everyone to operate to their limits. Had I not gone to Japan twice, I would have flown nearly three hundred missions in six months, with seven months more to go. As it was, I had more than two hundred missions and still had one month in the squadron.

There were other jobs in the Marines for pilots other than flying. Usually, after six months or less, a pilot could expect to be transferred out of the day-to-day stress of flying a helicopter or jet in combat and would be transferred elsewhere to fill a position at Wing level or with a Division in the field.

The most disliked of these ground positions was an assignment to a battalion in the field as a forward air
controller. This was the direct opposite of flying.

It could be expected that if one did get assigned such a
duty, it would last six months. If one completed the six
months and had a few weeks or a month left, one could return
to the squadron and fly for the last few weeks in country.

It was mandatory that a pilot stay qualified, and the
divisions allowed each air controller with them to return each
month to fly enough to keep current.

I had flown with some of these pilots who had not flown
for some time and had flown myself after periods of time when
I had been gone and the proficiency of those who were
returning after some time had badly deteriorated to the point
that some of them were dangerous in certain types of missions,
just as I was when laying off for some time. When flying in
close contact with friendly forces, we became, for short
periods of time, as much a liability as an asset to those
using us.

Finding yourself behind the aircraft, a stranger in the
cockpit for a few minutes, and not having your bombing runs
develop as you expected, surprised you as much as it must have
those who are flying with you who had come to expect you to do
certain things, when, for short periods of time, you were no
longer capable of doing them.

I had one wingman who had been gone for several months
return and drop his load right on the friendly forces and not
the enemy. Fortunately, he missed them with his ordnance, but
he had dropped on the smoke they had popped to show their
position rather than on the one used to mark the enemy
position. He was an unusually competent pilot, but his
skills had deteriorated during the time he had been gone.

The A-4 was good at making last minute changes when on the
run-in to the target. With a flip of the wrist, the gunsight
could be moved fifty to one hundred meters and a correction
made at the last minute if necessary. It was often necessary
when the smoke was away from the true target, but you picked
it up on the run in.

It was necessary to stay alert at what was said over the
frequency in the target area, also. The enemy monitored our
frequencies, even though they were coded, and occasionally
bogus calls were made, in English, for corrections that would
not place the plane or ordnance in a place they could hit
their assigned target. These spurious voices came out of Laos
and had both American and foreign accents. They usually were
asking for things so far from what we normally did that they
were nothing but a nuisance, but one wondered who they were
and what they were doing in Laos helping the NVA.
Another situation that occurred (see last scene in movie Platoon) was when a friendly unit was being overrun. The general situation in South Vietnam was that prisoners were not taken. The NVA could be especially brutal when overrunning a unit and the units last airstrike may well be called in on themselves as a last hope of survival. When they did this, usually the pilot would not know. They would say on their last broadcast "hit the green smoke" and then pop a green smoke grenade, leaving the aircrews overhead to wonder what had happened when all the radios went silent.

I had one advantage over the other pilots of the squadron. Over the months that I had been flying, I had also been keeping up the intelligence reports. I knew what operation I was supporting and what units were in the operation. If we were away from an operation of any size, I knew we were dealing with a patrol or other small unit action. Since the controllers on these small units were not as proficient, it was necessary to take more caution in operating around them. It was best, if an airborne controller could be brought to the vicinity because he was more familiar with the ground around them and the operations they were on. It was not always possible to do so, and our effectiveness was reduced accordingly.
Having been up for most of the preceding day, I was lucky and not scheduled to fly until the afternoon hot pad. That would most likely be two missions, but they would be over more than likely by early afternoon, and I could take a dip in the ocean, have a nap, and then take in whatever the evening offered.

I flew one mission early in the afternoon, but nothing came up later. I waited in the ready room in case something did come up, rather than have to be called from the living area and make the long trip back.

I was waiting for the squadron six by six when a hot pad launch came in from a unit near Camp Carroll.

Captain Forney, who I had lived near from 1966 (and do in 1995), was available and we took the launch and flew in the near darkness past Danang and to a point just south of the DMZ. It was not quite totally dark when we turned inland and were skirting the DMZ enroute to our target, in a valley we had never flown to before, but which was near the area I had seen the 144 helicopters on fire.

Just as we made landfall, all the guns in North Vietnam opened on something, though I could not see what.

It was truly a spectacle to behold as we flew some five or six miles south of what appeared the be the flashing lights of a large city. There were guns firing from small arms to 100MM guns with explosions in the sky as high as you wished to look. I had a hard time focusing on our mission with all that going on just north of us.

Captain Forney was another of the pilots in our squadron who I had gone through flight school with, then through the Marine Training Squadron at Yuma, and who was now at VMA 311.

We approached the target area in the first valley inland off the coast just south of the DMZ. An OV 10 was the controller, and he gave us a mission, not unlike the one of the night before.

Our target was an enemy position at the head of a blind canyon, with the main units just half way up the hillside. We would have to run up the canyon bottom, with rockets and guns, attacking the hillside which faced us, then climbing over the long low ridge to our left, coming around, and firing again. It was hard to tell where the bottom of the canyon was, and it
was hard to tell when you got to the right position to fire in the darkness because there was poor depth perception. We had enough ordnance on board to make thirty runs if we had to. I started my first run well back into the valley, lowering my nose, and accelerating down the valley floor, with every thing black on both sides of me and the headwall of the canyon facing me. Things I could only sense were going by me on both sides in a blur. As I approached the headwall, I placed my gunsight on the center of the hill, fired all sixteen rockets, and saw them hit, telling me I was too close and forcing me to rapidly pull up and roll banking to the left, rolling over the ridge and down the other side where there was no enemy ground fire.

On the second run, it was even blacker than the first. I armed my Hughes gun pod and ran again down the valley near the bottom and pulling up near the headwall at the head of the canyon and pulling the trigger, and sending a two-second burst into the area of the enemy units.

Two solid red tracer lines tore into the hill, and I could see them bouncing around after they hit, the plane slowing 75 knots and forcing me into the straps of my seat harness. I was in the floor of the valley and pulled the two beams up the hill, doing a little soft shoe on the rudders, sending red beams back and forth over the lower one third of the headwall.

I was slow this time, but the ridge was not high, and I pulled up easily and rolled over to the other side and climbed back to my roll in altitude. The Third Run was the same as the second, but I increased my airspeed so that I had more remaining after the burst. Again, I could see the disruption the bullets were causing all over the hillside. They were flying every direction, every fourth one a tracer, and the tracers alone looking like they totally covered the target. After the second gun run, whatever had been there was gone and we were released with less than ten percent of our bullets used. This was the first and only time I ever fired a gun pod at night and the number of rounds going out and coverage of them was astounding to see. The amount of lead going out had to be tremendous to slow the 16000 pound plane as much as they did. I would not have liked to have been on the receiving end of the fire.

We flew back down the coast. The guns were still firing in North Vietnam when we flew back toward the sea, though I never saw what they were firing at.

After checking over the planes, I went into the ready room and found that I had immediate orders to Okinawa for Forward Air Control School. I tried to beg out because I had already
seen hundreds of air strikes controlled, had flown in control of the New Jersey, and wasn’t going to go with a battalion to the field, and didn’t need to learn about something I wished to avoid, anyway. Logic was never a cause to change preconceived actions, and I went back and again packed my B-4 back for another trip out of country with 200 dollars to spend.

I went in and checked on the intelligence reports I would have to turn over. A red haired male was seen leading an enemy patrol near Danang and a group of Caucasians, probably deserters, were operating near Hue, independent of any unit. There was a report on the total number of deserters and where they had deserted from. I skimmed the reports, the last I was to see and wish now that I had been transferred one day earlier.

I flew on a C-130 to Forward Air Controller School at Camp Butler on Okinawa. The fifteen pilots, all junior officers that were at the school, could have taught the school rather than been there as students. We had seen more aircraft controlled in the hundreds of missions we had flown, by more types of aircraft than 99% of the military pilots that had ever worn a uniform in all the countries that had air forces. The school was redundant except for the special training on the battleship, and on some new procedures that had been developed that we could have figured out on our own had it been necessary.

The last day, we had a chance to use all the radios, usually the weak link in any military maneuver I had ever been in, and again found that true when we were never able to control any of the planes that were flying for us because the radios broke down.

The school was finished in five days, and we had two days to get back to Danang. We were told, as previous experience had shown, that we would be in big trouble if we didn’t get on the C-54 that was flying to Danang the next morning, and they would make special examples of us if we stayed in Okinawa any longer.

That was double jeopardy, as far as I was concerned. They had already done the most to us that they could do by taking us out of the cockpit and sending us out as forward air controllers in other aircraft, or with the infantry battalions. If they really wanted to punish us, they had done so already, so the next morning the plane left nearly empty for Danang.

One week later there was a party at the Naha Officers
Club. Having little money left, and nothing else to do, I went to the party and found most of the FAC school there, broke and planning on returning the next morning to Danang. As luck would have it, we had to stay three more days before a plane could be found to take us back for our reward for our efforts. I had three days left in the squadron when I returned.

I flew my last mission with VMA-311 and landed, looking forward to my new job in Marine Air Group 13 as a forward air controller flying the TA4-F in North Vietnam and Laos.

Captain Hammack and I, who had flown the mission south of the base where we had attacked the intact village and left it totally obliterated, were met on this last evening, after we had checked the two planes we were required to each month, the inspections being made by us to make sure everything was correctly connected and placed on the aircraft by Major Stanley McGeehan, the Assistant Operations Officer of the squadron. He handed us writeup for a Distinguished Flying Cross from the Americal Division General Staff for the mission south of the base.

We declined to authenticate it, as Marines had a dual authentication process and the medal had obviously been written up for some other mission and mistakenly sent to us. If it was not a mistake, then the Army had a loose definition of what a medal was to be given for, and we would not wish to be decorated for a mission that didn’t deserve it, and that one was one of the easier ones we had ever flown.

I had flown quite a few times with Captain Hammack, and was sorry I was not going to be able to do so again. He was young, perhaps twenty, and flew well. I was never to see him alive again. He was killed sometime later.
By the time I was to be transferred to spot for the battleship and work as an out of country air controller, I knew I wasn’t being sent to a job that was sought after by any means of the term. Flying a horseshoe pattern for hours on end in North Vietnam was risky at best. As previously noted, the ship had now lost two or three controllers of the eight that were controlling it from the Marine Corps.

I had already flown once in the aircraft spotting for the nine 16 inch guns, and was developing in my mind how I could improve on what I had seen the Lt. Colonel do, who I had flown with, but had come up with nothing when the problem was solved. President Johnson called a bombing halt in North Vietnam and the battleship was to move south.

The day I heard this, the 28th of October, the plane I was to be flying, and the crew flying it disappeared in North Vietnam, and I was again going to replace a casualty, an American Indian pilot, a major, who had gone through Yuma with me and had been lost on his last mission before rotating back to the United States.

The next morning when I caught a ride over the new air group, I thought my orders might be canceled and I would be sent somewhere else. Neither of the two A-4s that they used as controller aircraft were available to fly. One had just disappeared, the other was in Japan for overhaul. There were already two A-4 pilots in the group, both of whom had just arrived there, and more would be unnecessary. None of us was qualified to fly the F4B Phantom that the squadrons in MAG 13 flew and would have to return to MAG 12 to get our mandatory flight time.

I was surprised that they signed me into the group and sent me to maintenance to work with the new computer maintenance system and did not send me elsewhere.

No sooner had I checked into maintenance and I was transferred temporarily to Operations to do the MIA investigation on my predecessor. I was going to learn a lot about his past few weeks and was going to have to try to make a determination on what happened to him and the Navy Doctor who was observing in the back seat, in violation of the Geneva Convention rules, if there are any rules for war. Since I had been told this report was a priority and superseded everything
else I was to do, I got all of the information about the
disappearance and took a C-123 to Dong Ha, where the radio and
radar controller to the flight was located. I was able to
talk to the controller who was talking to the aircraft just
before it disappeared.

They had both visual and radio control of the aircraft
just prior to when it ceased to transmit replies to their
radio calls, though that aircraft was not the only one that
they had contact with. There were several who had heard
rumors or had seen things that may or may not have been
happening in the vicinity of the TA4 as it left North Vietnam,
but their contradictory statements were only confusing and did
not shed any light on the disappearance, one of only two I had
ever known to occur in broad daylight. I finally declared the
plane and its crew MIA, and did not have any idea what
happened to it. With thousands of choppers, ships, and troops
located everywhere for miles every direction from where the
plane was last seen, nearly to Hue off the coast, I thought it
impossible that such an incident could occur, but it had and
two more aircrew were listed as MIA. They remain so to this
day.

The disappearance of the last TA4 left Capt. Cook, who had
been in the same units I had been in since 1964, and Capt.
Butt, who had flown with Major Connor for a month before I had
checked in with no aircraft to fly. No one was going to check
us out in the Phantom, so we had to find our own place to get
flight time.

Captain Cook went back to fly with 211, and I went back
and flew for several weeks with VMA 311, but I felt
uncomfortable flying so rarely, and my skills were
deteriorating. I didn’t want to drop on any friendly forces,
so tried to find another place to get flight time. I was
fortunate that such an opportunity occurred at just that time.

Each Air Group had one C-117, a Navy Version of the C-47
flown in WWII. It had bigger engines, a longer fuselage, and
retractable gear. It flew 50 knots faster, significant when
you are talking about 125 knots cruising speed, but was
propeller driven, a transport, and none of us was qualified in
it, any more than we were qualified to fly the Phantom.

The Hummer, as we called the C-117, was flown on both non
combat missions flying during the day ferrying troops from one
base to another, and on combat missions during the night, when
it was flown for five hours at a time as a flareship over
troops on the ground, carrying forty flares and a crew of 13.
Both uses were common and the planes were flown a lot of
hours.

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Although I had 0 hours in the C-117, there was a constant need for co-pilots, and it was determined that all of the A-4 pilots would be allowed to fly it, both on the day and night missions. Since we would have a qualified pilot in the left seat, we would be able to be taught the intricacies of flying propeller driven aircraft by the pilot who flew them, all of whom had more than a thousand hours in type.

I had actually flown propeller driven aircraft in the distant past, but not of this size, and not multi-engine aircraft.

I took the test and learned enough to start the plane without backfiring the starboard engine and was scheduled for a warmup test and landing qualification, shortly thereafter.

The commanding officer of the squadron that was responsible for air group maintenance, Major House, one of two black commanding officers in the group, took me on my familiarization flight. He was a patient, calm pilot who allowed me to make my own mistakes and correct them myself, rather than take the plane and make me start again.

I got the engines started and taxied to the takeoff position on the south runway. The big fuselage and the tailwheel were things I was not used to and the taxi down the taxiway was slow, deliberate, and wandering.

I taxied into the takeoff position and ran up the engines. I checked everything, the props, the mags, and released the brakes and started rolling.

I was used to taking off in a jet. I got the plane airborne, the gear up and trimmed for flight and looked out. I wasn’t three fourths of the way down the runway and everything was done, the plane trimmed for flight with the gear up and nothing to do until I landed.

We flew for an hour or two, more than an A-4 could stay airborne, and then returned so I could practice landing.

There is one thing a jet aircraft will do better than any other aircraft. It will come down. Much of its lift comes from the engine and when its power is pulled back, the jet will drop like a rock. Not so the fat wing C-117. When I got ready to land and pulled the power back, the plane floated in the air drifting slowly down on the runway passing below me as I overshot the first time, landing near midfield, bouncing half a dozen times before finally setting it down on the wheels.

Over a period of an hour, I learned to takeoff, land, and fly on one engine. That was enough to qualify me for co-pilot. I found after so qualifying, that I was scheduled the following day for the passenger run to Danang and back in
both the morning and afternoon. I was flying with an all enlisted crew. The pilot was a Sergeant Pilot, one from WWII and would be the plane commander, and I would be his co-pilot. I loved to fly, and flying any new airplane was a challenge I couldn’t wait for. The next day, the 11th of November, the day after the Marine Corps birthday, I was going to have my first flight on the flight deck of the C-117.

Early on the 11th of November, 1968, I went down to my office in the hanger that the group air base squadron used as theirs. We were responsible for the rest of the flight line and the integral parts of the F-4 maintenance. We had been assigned only three aircraft, one of which no longer existed, and the another which was still in Japan for overhaul.

I met the enlisted crew at the C-117 and started the engines, checked them out, and taxied to air freight to pick up our load of passengers for Danang. It was cool and damp, possibly eighty degrees, with 100% humidity.

I taxied up the air freight building in the C-117 looking out the side window, and feeling like I was taxiing a B-17 for takeoff to Germany from England with the 8th Air Force in 1944, the year the plane I was flying had been built, two years after I had been born.

The air freight NCO gave the flight mechanic the manifest. There were two soldiers carrying M-16s and flack vests, and who looked to be thirty years old. They took back seats and threw their rifles and packs on the deck and lay down and went to sleep. The remainder of the passenger manifest was comprised of several floor shows that had entertained the Marines on the night before during the Marine Corps Birthday celebration which was celebrated regardless of where we were when it was time to do so.

The young women, dressed as though they were flying from New York to Boston rather than from the Chu Lai and its sand to Danang and its red dust, sat in the center seats and along the litters that lined the fuselage next to the rows of windows.

The Sergeant pilot glanced at me and shook his head and I started the starboard engine, which backfired but didn’t blow a stack, and he the port. He again nodded and I called ground control and found the wind too strong to takeoff on the main concrete runway.

Thinking we would abort until the wind died down, I called ground and asked to taxi back to the Air Freight building, but the pilot, whose glasses were so thick I wondered if he could see over the nose and to the pilot tube, called and asked if
The crosswind was available. When the tower replied to the affirmative, I was directed to taxi to the crosswind runway, which could not be seen from the mat we were on, was reached by taxiing down the perimeter near the overrun of the concrete runway on a narrow taxiway that could not be seen from the passenger compartment. It lay between two rows of barbed wire that marked the perimeter and a the matting strip, 4000 feet long that was perpendicular to the main runway, but a quarter of a mile from it.

Because the wings were low and moved up and down as we taxied down the taxiway to the crosswind runway, we had wing walkers on the wings picking them up, or stepping down on the concertina on each side of the taxiway. There were sounds coming from the cabin that sounded somewhat like chickens in a coop that had been invaded by a fox.

I reached the crosswind. Had I not been the base duty officer, I would not have even known where it was or how long it was. Having had to check it a number of times, I knew how long it was. It was 4000 feet, about two thousand feet shorter than I would have liked it to be.

The pilot just sat there waiting until I ran up the engines and checked the mags and props. Not knowing what to do after that, I pushed the throttles forward and waited to see what would happen.

We veered, first one way and then another, as I used differential throttle movements to keep the plane in the center of the runway. Half way to the takeoff point, the main gear ran over the catapult and the plane bounced and returned to the runway. I was approaching the end of the runway. I had never had to do anything before when I got to the takeoff point because everything had just happened, but that didn’t appear to be the case now.

With 500 feet to go, I pulled back on the yoke and shouted "gear up."

We flew through the clearing between the trees that had been cleared at the end of the crosswind, and out over the South China sea, less than twenty feet above the water, with the sounds coming from the rear cabin compartment now bordering on the shrieking level.

I climbed to one thousand feet and set the props. It was pretty along the coast and the ocean below was blue and peaceful. I flew to within ten miles of Danang when we had to climb into a squall and shoot an approach over the harbor and into Danang. I was operating the radios and the Top (Master Sergeant) was flying the approach. The squall was pouring rain into our cockpit from the escape hatch over the center.
console where the throttles and mixture controls were located.

The first mechanic gave me a poncho to put over the controls, and the rainwater fell on the poncho and drained back into the passenger cabin and presumably went out the back door. I couldn't see it from the co-pilots seat. It was totally silent in back.

We broke out nearly 1500 feet above Danang harbor and the Sergeant Pilot gave me the controls with the plane flying with full flaps and in an attitude I had never seen any plane in before. We were wings level more or less, but dropping straight down.

As I approached the runway, I flared, and did I flare. The next time I touched down, I had six thousand feet of runway left. I pulled up the flaps, and taxied into air freight.

I have often wondered, in an airliner taxied into the passenger terminal in the US and the young women flying in the plane had jumped to the ground hugging each other, with tears in their eyes, and running from the aircraft like it was some monster trying to devour them, if it would have any effect on the next passenger load.

The two soldiers were still asleep, and we had to wake them up to catch their next flight. We reloaded and returned to Chu Lai without any problems. I was now fully qualified in the C-117.

I went on to fly fifty combat hours in the C-117, flaredrops from Danang to the DMZ. It was a forgiving aircraft and was not nearly as tiring to fly as the jet aircraft I had flown. It had a large cockpit where it was possible to get up and move around, it flew slow enough so your mind was not racing all the time from one thing to another to keep ahead of the aircraft and it was not deafening inside the cockpit, something that left you exhausted by itself. The flareship missions were all four to six hour night missions, unless the ground unit requesting the illumination wanted more than one flare at a time. They were not scheduled, but launched of the standby flight schedule. When we flew the flare ship, we flew with nine in the flare crew and four or five in the cockpit. The plane would be loaded before sunset and the crews would be on the standby flight schedule. If we were called for illumination, we would man the aircraft, usually between 2200 hours (10 pm) midnight.

We would climb to 2500 feet or above and fly to the area the illumination was needed and slow to 90 knots. The pilot would fly the plane and the co-pilot would man the three
radios, one to the ground control of the aircraft, one to the flare crew, and one to the ground forces. I would put one earphone on the right ear, one on the left, and one behind my left ear and try to keep the mikes straight as I ran the flare drop.

We carried forty flares. If we dropped on each run, we dropped for 160 minutes, or more than three hours over the unit. There were times when the ground unit below us was under attack, and we could see the tracers, as well as hear some of the radio calls of the action below. It appeared unreal from the altitudes we were orbiting, and it was only possible to catch part of what was going on. It left a sick feeling in my stomach to be so impotent while the combat action was going on. It was not unusual to takeoff at 2200 and not land until dawn, or just before, sleep for two or three hours, and go back to work or flying.

It was a different type of flying. There was time to think before you had to take any action, and not just react according to a preplanned course of action like in a tactical aircraft. It was not nearly as tiring as described before which made it not nearly as difficult to make the decisions that had to be made.

It was hard, however, to let another pilot take command in difficult situations and to tell you what to do when no one had ever done so before.

There were six or more Majors and Lt. Colonels who flew the multi-engine aircraft. They were all plane commanders. The shortage was in qualified co-pilots. There were three of us qualified minimally to fly the plane as co-pilot. I enjoyed the change, but given the opportunity, would have stayed with my first squadron.

Captains Cook, Butt, and myself were somewhat of anomalies in the air group. None of us flew the main type of aircraft they flew, none of us had flown with crews, and we remained somewhat the butt of jokes. The Phantom pilots considered themselves above those of us who flew the "Scooter" much smaller and more maneuverable, but carrying only 3000 pounds of bombs. It was somewhat archaic in the inventory of aircraft, already being declared obsolete and replaced by the US Navy.

Our reply was that we could hit the target.
Nov. 30, 1968

I had to go to Danang on some routine maintenance business. It was always time consuming to do so if the C-117 of our air group or of MAG 12 was not flying because we had to depend on whatever showed up at our air freight and make do with it.

I went over to the Air Freight building at 0630, hoping to get to Danang and back the same day. I was near the top of the manifest. I had a book with me and lay down on the concrete floor and read while others came and signed up for the air traffic that came through to take them where they were going.

I read and slept all morning, but no plane came that was going to Danang. It was nearly noon, so I took my name off of the manifest and went over to our mess hall and got something to eat.

I had just missed a C-123. It was taxiing out of air freight onto the runway, and was running up its engines as I left the mess hall and walked back toward the air freight building to put my name on the next manifest.

The C-123 was rolling as I walked across the road. It lifted at midfield and climbed for two or three seconds and the engines started missing, the plane slowed, kept flying for a few more seconds, then dropped a wing, and disappeared, but returned to view when it rolled wing over wing, and settled in a cloud of dust. Smoke rose from the area, near the end of the runway, and having the feeling I did about burning to death, I sensed what was going on in the plane.

I didn't have anything in the way of emotions left about things like that, and put it in the back of my mind to deal with later. A C-7 of the US Army stopped at air freight and I got a ride to Danang in it, flying over the C-123 to the seaward before the fire was out.

I was unable to return the same day, and upon doing so, found out 14 soldiers had burned to death in the C-123, which had been fueled with the wrong fuel by the transient ground crew.

We finally got back the TA4F that had been sent to Japan for overhaul. It was a nearly new plane with everything in it functional and working. We brought it into maintenance for a last check before taking it on a test flight.
Captain Cook and myself took the plane out over the gulf of the South China Sea that was just off the base. We climbed to twenty thousand feet and checked all the controls. The plane flew beautifully and would trim up straight and level, something the older planes we got from the Navy would not. They would fly within varying attitudes depending on their past record of landing and overstress conditions. The TA4 was perfect, but we only got two-thirds of the way through the test hop, when the fuel transfer light came on and we had to land with the emergency fuel selected. After landing, we found the plane had been fueled in some way so as the main tanks were full of sand.

Fueling problems just don't occur. It is the easiest kind of problem to prevent, but two planes had now had fuel contamination of the worst type, and it had happened to two different kinds of aircraft, and they were fueled by two different Marine fueling crews.

Since I was in maintenance and quality control, I had tried to pin down the cause and could not in either aircraft. There was nothing in common between the two, but for some reason unexplained, we now had one aircraft lost and another whose future was in question and both had fueling problems that could not be explained. I didn't have to deal with it for another week. I had missed going on R and R to Hawaii twice and now was going to be able to go. I had gone so long without leaving on R and R that I was at the top of the list for the air group.

I dug around in my sea bag and found the dress uniform that I had taken into country for going on R and R. I had not checked the sea bag for some time and had to throw away most of the things in there because they had mildewed. The uniform was okay and I had it pressed, found some ribbons at the Americal PX and got everything ready to go.

I went to bed in a heavy rainstorm two nights before I was to leave, with everything ready and prepared to catch a flight to Danang and then to Hawaii the next evening and following morning.

At 0600 I was awakened by the sound of incoming. It was hitting close, as there was the sound of explosions, not just the sound of the rockets going over, a sound like a freight train passing.

I rolled out on the concrete floor until the rockets subsided. It was time to get up, so I walked halfway to the shower room when a second rocket attack was launched toward our living area, the impacts less than fifty yards away.

I was in the middle of an open area and ran to the cover
of a sandbagged Quonset hut, but felt a burning on my foot as I got behind the building.

I looked down and saw the ground covered with blood. The wound had been caused by a hot piece of shrapnel or a piece of the metal pallets the rocket had hit. I either had stepped on it or it had hit me before I could get totally in the protection of the sandbagged building.

It was not a serious wound. The skin had been taken off of the bottom of 1/3 of my foot, but other than a burning pain, it was something to be overlooked. Unfortunately, it would not be overlooked when I got on the plane for R and R, my first priority.

I went to the corpsman and had the wound cleaned and bandaged. In this climate, any wound could be deadly if not taken care of. Everything abscessed or got infected if it was left open, so I had the wound well cleaned, then bandaged, so that I could get my dress shoe over it. After I did so and the foot swelled, I couldn’t get the shoe off, but I could walk far enough and not limp to get on and off the plane and not appear to be injured. They didn’t want soldiers, sailors, or marines hobbling down the gangway off the aircraft after they landed at Honolulu airport.

I caught the evening flight to Danang, one of our C-117s and the following evening boarded a Boeing 707 for Hawaii.

R and R

I had put in for R and R in Hawaii twice. Because of illness, I had been unable to go. I decided that I would put in for the 7-day pass to Hawaii on Christmas as it would be nice to be with my wife during the Christmas Holidays.

There were perhaps two hundred soldiers, sailors, and Marines that met to go on the Boing 707 at Danang. We flew to Anderson Air Force Base on Guam and had a two hour layover, then flew on to Hawaii. It was good to be clean, on our way to somewhere other than someplace in Vietnam, and relaxed and rested.

I felt like an old man with the enlisted men on the plane. I had a wife and two children and was 26 years old, one-third older than most of them.

We flew all night across the Pacific. Halfway to Hawaii, we watched the recovery of a manned space capsule by the US Navy. It reentered the atmosphere and was picked up by an aircraft carrier that was over the horizon from where we were flying.
We landed at Honolulu and found out there were few rooms for us because the civilians had rented most of them for the Christmas holidays, leaving few for the daily R and R flights from Vietnam.

This had been made known to the population of the Oahu, apparently over radio. Private homes were made available to those of us who did not have accommodations and everyone was quartered during the week.

My wife did not meet me at the airport, as it was not known for sure when I would arrive. I took a taxi, with a soldier and his wife, to the private home they were going to stay at, and then went out to Black Point where my wife had a cousin who we were going to stay with. I had been up nearly two days.

I had a short conversation with my wife, but had to sleep during the first few hours.

It was more like dating someone new than meeting my wife. I had been gone for so long and had changed so much that it was taking most of the time to get reacquainted rather than doing things together as though we were picking up where we left off.

It was a pleasant week and went too fast. We saw all the sights of the island and looked for restaurants away from the main crowds.

We were able to have a family Christmas dinner and went to a party given by local Honolulu families.

Except for the trip to the Punchbowl, a military cemetery in a volcano crater in the center of Honolulu, the sights were pleasant. At the Punchbowl, they were burying casualties from Vietnam that had occurred just as I had left. On the last night, when my plane left at 0100, we went out to a floor show in one of the big hotels on Waikiki Beach. Many of the persons on my flight were there, and we were all in uniform since we would leave the hotel and go straight back to the airport and Vietnam. Most looked too young to be in the military at all. Their wives looked like children to me.

At the intermission, the entertainer, Tommy Sands, asked all those in uniform to stand and tell their unit. I listened to them. Most were from combat units in I Corps and many were seeing this lifestyle for the last time.

It was not easy to return to Vietnam. I got on the plane, went to sleep, and woke up 16 hours later as we approached the landing pattern of the massive Danang Air Station. I got off the plane in my dress uniform, which wilted immediately, and returned to Chu Lai and the war.
Airborne Search

I no sooner had returned, and I found out a friend of my wife and I and a pilot, who had gone through flight school with me, had been shot down over Laos some two days before.

I researched the situation. Captain Kent had been on a night mission. The pilots both appeared to have vertigo in the target area, west of Khe Sanh and in Laos near Tchepone.

There had been no organized search by Red Crown because the area was so heavily manned by NVA guns and the possibility of getting a pilot out was determined to be nearly impossible.

On occasion, there had been crewmen found by individual flights in areas where they had been thought to have disappeared permanently, but later had shown up when another aircraft of helicopter had seen them. It was unlikely here, but I worked that sector before and thought I might have a chance to spot the chutes, hear radio calls, or see the impact point of the aircraft as was known within a few miles.

I got as much information as possible and set up a grid search on a map of the area, hoping that I would see the impact point of the plane.

I was unable to get a co-pilot to go along to the Khe Sanh area and set up a grid and searched for nearly an hour. The jungle was so thick and high that no hole could have been seen. I did see enemy movement within a mile, and the movement of the troops in the area was right through the middle of where the plane had been shot down. Only a few enemy were seen, but their actions indicated no critical situation was occurring in the area. I had no luck whatsoever in finding a location.

When I got low on fuel, I flew down the Ho Chi Minh trail. The F4B of Capt. Kent had been shot down within a few miles of the A4E of Roy Schmidt and a few miles from the F-10 of Aerial Cross, both of whom had been in my flight class of May 9, 1966 in Meridian, Mississippi.

The Ho Chi Minh trail was obviously heavily used, but during daylight, there were no vehicles in sight.

The next month went as the previous one had. We made daily attempts to fly the TA4F, but could not resolve the fuel problems. It was not always possible to get someone as a pilot so that I could spot and not fly. I started taking the flight line personnel who were responsible for the airplane. When put in the back seat, they would fly erratically enough so that no enemy guns could track us in North Vietnam where we were now flying to keep track of the North Vietnamese activity.
there during the bombing halt.

The battle ship had moved south and was positioned off of the coast of Chu Lai. It was shooting over the base and into the mountains beyond the west of the base. This was harassing fire, but it was harassing me, too. The shells sounded like a dozen freight trains flying over the air station and continued for twenty-four hours at a time. Additionally, B-52s would arclight (324 500# bombs dropped in a single line) the same area, and it would create a sensation like an earthquake throwing you around in your bed or hut, or making the ground jump, if you were outside.

The naval gunfire going over, the artillery going out, rockets coming in, and Phantoms taking off in afterburner all sounded nearly the same. I never quite got them differentiated enough to keep from rolling onto the floor each time the sounds occurred, keeping me constantly awake during the times the shooting and incoming was occurring.

With all the problems going on, I was transferred to Danang to learn how to use the complex computer sheets and maintenance records I was now getting. My interest in these records was waning because I could not understand them and was losing the desire to learn. It rained the entire time I was at Danang, so hard, few planes flew.

We finished the maintenance course and three of us were put first on the manifest to go back to Chu Lai. It rained so hard, no planes left though planes came in, leaving off troops to go elsewhere.

For three days we sat, gathering personnel at the MAG 11 living area, many of whom were key officers in units elsewhere. Finally, it was decided to bring a Ch-46A to the Wing pad and take as many of us south as could be carried.

It was pouring rain when the helo landed at the Wing pad. The chopper looked like it had been in the war since the first day. It had all the windows out, and was beat up from the cockpit to the ramp. The pilot, a major, looked like he hadn’t slept in a week. There were two .50 machine guns in the front windows with two gunners there.

The crew chief loaded about twenty five persons on the chopper and said they would try to get airborne.

The Ch-46 was started and the pilot engaged the rotors and tried to lift out of ground effect. The chopper started to shudder and shake, and he set it back down and kicked off five persons and tried again. I would have gladly been one of them. The Ch-46AA had been modified, but their reputation of
falling in two pieces out of the sky did not give me any confidence regardless of how much they had been modified.

We got to ten or fifteen feet and the pilot lowered the nose and we began accelerating along the perimeter of the west side of Danang, gaining no altitude, but gaining airspeed. When we approached the river south of Danang, we turned down it at less than a dozen feet and began accelerating so we could get over the bridge. After doing so, we stayed right on the water until we went out over the ocean, then stayed at five hundred feet, in the rain showers, as we flew down the coast.

Helicopters don't fly straight. The rain came through the side windows like BBs hitting the skin and clothes. It wasn't possible to avoid them.

Apparently, Chu Lai was under instrument conditions because we climbed into the clouds, getting beaten and soaked while we flew an instrument approach to the south runway.

I was fully fed up. Even when I flew the C-117, the occupants were dry, even if uncomfortable with my flying. I was both miserable and disenchanted.

We finally broke out. We had never needed to go into the clouds in the first place. Everyone was relaxing when I noticed we were going into a hover. I wondered what was going on until I looked out the open window and saw a Phantom below us, on fire, with the crew in the cockpit and loaded with 750 pound bombs.

I got up out of my seat and screamed as loud as I could to get the hell out of there before we all went up in the same explosion. The crew would never get out with us holding the canopy down with the downblast from the rotors.

There was no way he could hear, but either mental telepathy or his realization of what could happen caused him to start flying down the taxiway to our flight line. Just as we got there, the Phantom blew, less than a mile behind us.

The crew had escaped.

I walked over the VMA 311, as a new transient line had been constructed near their flight line.

I found that the TA4 we had been flying had been put on a ship and sent to Japan. We had tried to clean the fuel tanks unsuccessfully a number of times. We still had not located the problem with fueling the plane.

We now had no planes to fly as reconnaissance aircraft, but three pilots attached to the air group to fly them. I wanted to return to VMA 311 and fly with the squadron, as did Capt. Cook. Captain Butt had too little time remaining to be transferred and would be remaining at MAG 13. We were given
a going away party and orders to Danang, with less than three months to go in country. While we were at the party, with our bags packed, I was joking with Capt. Cook when I noticed, and had noticed for some time, he was not the same as before. He seemed unlike his previous self, and I had known him for four years, had flown with him, been in squadrons with him, and OCS with him. It was then I found out that he had made the same change I had seen in others. He had been shot down over the South China Sea while I had been on one of my trips away and had changed, having the same look I had seen in other pilots who had experienced the reality of a crisis, rather than seeing it happen to others.

Without any desire to do so, Capt. Cook and myself boarded a plane for Danang the next day, the 10th of February, 1969.