Camouflaged USAF Fairchild Hiller C-123 flies defoliation mission over Viet Cong territory
COWBOY
ZERO ONE

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1966-1967
Written especially for
THE COWBOYS
THEIR TOP COVER
THE AIR COMMANDOS
&
THEM
Chapter one
Chapter two
Chapter three
Chapter four
Chapter five
Chapter six
Chapter seven
Chapter eight
Chapter nine
Chapter ten
Chapter eleven
Chapter twelve
Chapter thirteen
Chapter fourteen
Chapter fifteen
Chapter sixteen
Chapter seventeen
Chapter eighteen
Chapter nineteen
Chapter twenty
Chapter twenty one
Chapter twenty two
Chapter twenty three

INTRODUCTION
ORGANIZATION
VOLUNTEERING
TRAINING
WELCOME TO VIETNAM
WELCOME TO THE RANCH
"C" FLIGHT
DANANG
THE HONDA CAPER
TOP COVER
THE TRADERS
OPERATIONS OFFICERS
BIEN HOA
THE GREAT SHOOTUP
THE SECRET MISSION
HONG KONG
MORTAR ATTACK
GROUND FIRE
OTHER GUYS
ASHUA VALLEY
TAJ MAHAL EAST
ORDERS
GOODBY VIETNAM
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION
I was sitting on my favorite bar stool at an Air Force Officer's Club watering hole not long ago. I noticed a lean, hunched over pilot across the bar staring at me. He had the crow's feet lines around his eyes from looking into the sun for years and his face had a crinkly look. He also had a double martini in one fist and a cigar in the other, all the characteristics of a fighter pilot passing through the base.

I was mildly surprised when he walked over to the part of the bar I was defending from the Viet Cong and non-flyers. Normally, fighter pilots are clannish and tend to mingle with their own. Sometimes they will mingle with ladies rather than talk flying, which is a high tribute to ladies in general.

He slipped onto the bar stool next to me with a practiced smoothness acquired from many night flights in bars throughout the world.

"Aren't you one of those Ranch Hands I flew top cover for in Vietnam?", he asked. I gave him the "here it comes" look and took a long, slow drink of my Seagram's VO and water to avoid answering. He just shook his head and muttered, "You guys were the craziest bunch of bastards I ever flew top cover for".

These encounters are old hat to Ranch Hands. Every guy who was in the flying business in Vietnam has to retell some superinflated war story about how he was in this or that bar in Southeast Asia when this bunch of Ranch Hands did thus and so. Most of these stories are highly exaggerated and only partially true.
It is true that old "Air Commando One", the founder of the Air Commandos and some other Jungle Jim types came up with a weird plan when they dreamed up Operation Ranch Hand, an outfit that was formed, fought and folded up all in the span of a half dozen years during the Southeast Asian war. The unit's mission was combat cropdusting!

The Ranch Hands were to fly unarmed aircraft at 100 feet above the ground and spray defoliants on the enemy trees (which are very hard to distinguish from friendly trees) while the Viet Cong gleefully shot hell out of you and your airplane.

Very few Headquarters folks knew (or wanted to know) anything about the Ranch Hands mission. It was a constant struggle between the Ranch Hands and THEM. THEM or THEY as Headquarters in Saigon was referred to were invisible. THEY were voices over a phone. THEY were letters or teletype messages. THEY never visited us let alone fly with us.

Our type of flying discouraged folks from voluntarily joining us on our twice a day combat missions. We had the dubious distinction of being the most shot at and hit flying unit in Vietnam. It all added up to some of those greatly inflated stories about us bending a few regulations selectively so we could get on with winning the war. And, no one could seriously fault the Ranch Hands if they partied as hard as they flew. It was all very normal considering we were in a combat zone.

The Ranch Hands weren't as crazy as some folks have alleged and the stories circulated about their misconduct and general lack of interest in military conformity are products of Murphy's barroom broadening Law which everyone knows won't hold a Seagram's VO and water. Read on and judge for yourself.
CHAPTER TWO
ORGANIZATION
The unit was formed as Operation Ranch Hand after several other names had been used and their combat call sign was COWBOY. The personnel were referred to as Ranch Hands or Cowboys by all who dealt with them. The operation began as a three ship experimental flight and grew until it became a full sized Air Force Special Operations squadron.

To become a Ranch Hand or Cowboy you had to be a double volunteer. A Ranch Hand had to be a volunteer for Vietnam combat, but also had to re-volunteer for duty as a Ranch Hand. Generally speaking you had to be a little squirrelly to begin with to want in on this operation.

The Cowboys flew the UC-123, a twin engined transport that was originally designed as a glider. It was a versatile and sturdy beast, but the slowest dumpiest looking airplane in the war. The ability of the 123, one twenty three as we called them, to take heavy damage from ground fire and lumber home is legendary. It was a perfect selection for the spray mission. The mating of this ugly elephant-like aircraft with its' Air Force crews, whose sanity was doubtful at best, gave birth to a combat saga which I will only touch on to set the record straight for year I flew with them.

Initially based in Saigon at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, the Cowboys were stationed right next door to then General Ky's personal South Vietnamese Air Force unit. General Ky was a close friend of the Ranch Hands. He admired small, elite, high esprit de corps flying units.
The Ranch Hands later moved to Bien Hoa Air Base about 20 miles from Saigon and concluded their era at Phan Rang Air Base in central Vietnam. The unit also maintained a detachment of varying size that operated from Danang Air Base in the mountainous region of northern South Vietnam just below the Demilitarized Zone.

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

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

The C-123 lacked hydraulically boosted flight controls and flew with the ease of a Mack truck without power steering. The planners solved that by having the co-pilot in the right cockpit seat operate the throttles while the pilot in the left seat wrestled the plane around and over the trees while maintaining close formation. The two pilots had to act as one man and have the same instincts and reactions as Siamese twins.
I was stationed at a posh Florida air base in late 1964 when the action in Vietnam changed from the small scale category to an acknowledged shooting war. I had been a jet pilot my entire career and cornering a flying job in Florida was a superb pleasure. My greatest quest in life was to fly the F-104 Starfighter, a needle-nosed, Mach two aircraft with razor sharp wings only seven feet long. It was a fighter pilot's dream.

I wasn't flying the F-104, I was flying the T-33 jet trainer, the world's slowest jet. My best flying buddy, George "Bud" Day, would drop in every so often and save my sanity by taking me for a spin in a two seat F-100F Super Sabre jet fighter. I also wangled some back seat rides a the F-105 on a local project that had us dropping a dummy intercontinental missile nose cone on an empty twenty man life raft out in the ocean. Since you can't see anything from the back seat of an F-105 that was about as exciting as kissing your sister.

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

Skip was itching to go to war and fly some fighter combat and he wanted some company. Every night at the club he would lure me into sipping up a quart or so of Seagram's VO and tell me how we were going to be fighter aces. VO is an excellent way to get my attention, but Skip knew the real way to my heart. Skip knew I wouldn't volunteer for Vietnam until I had flown the F-104.

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

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

Except for having to make two passes to make a satisfactory landing, I had done it all. I had flown Mach two, looked down at the earth from higher than I had ever flown and the F-104 was even better than I had dreamed a fighter could be.

Our next move was to beat the rush in volunteering for jet fighters in Vietnam. There was no doubt in our minds that a couple of spectacular jet jockeys like us were a shoo-in for instant combat orders. We figured we'd spend a couple weeks getting primed up on shooting guns and air
to air missiles and we would be shooting down Russian-made MIG jet fighters in a month or so.

We were wrong. My orders were obviously terribly wrong. My orders were for C-123 training, a multi-engine propeller driven cargo plane. Skip's orders were far worse. He was assigned to a desk job in Saigon. Skip submitted his resignation from the Air Force to be effective the day he completed his one year in Vietnam. As bitter as he was he would still go and do his year. He did leave the Air Force at the end of his tour.

The personnel system had struck again costing the war and the Air Force one of the most outstanding fighter pilot I've ever known.

I considered resigning also, but a night on the town comparing the cost of Seagram's VO at civilian watering holes versus Officer clubs convinced me I would have to make a radical adjustment in my life style if I quit the Air Force. I reluctantly prepared for C-123 training, but not without a fight.
I tried everybody and everything I could think of to get the assignment changed. There was no way. I could understand why none of my fighter pilot friends would change assignments with me. At that point in the war, the fighter pilots were fed up with peacetime flying restrictions. They had been chomping for some action since Korea and not one of them would give up his fighter cockpit assignment this early in the war. Later things would change, but not in 1965.

I was unsuccessful in getting the assignment changed, but I made so much noise about wanting to fly fighters that I was offered the opportunity to re-volunteer for "Operation Ranch Hand" the cargo haulers version of fighter flying. I re-volunteered.

The C-123 training school was located at another beachside Florida air base and lasted four months. I took my 1951 Ford hardtop to ease the hardship. Things went better when you had a car, especially when the swinging town near the base had five miles of gin mills scattered along the beach. The car helped me to equitably distribute my money among the natives.

The old '51 Ford hardtop had a bunch of miles on it and a bad case of the rusts. Ocean salt spray had eaten out big chunks of the fenders and body, but what the hell, the tires were in good shape. I had made about a hundred miles toward the training base and was cruising about 70 or 75 when the car's roof simply separated at the top of the windshield and folded back over the trunk. That was quite a shock. My hardtop was now a convertible. The gas station guy didn't make things any better with his running commentary and giggling as we bent the roof forward, drilled holes in the roof and the windshield and then used coat hangers to wire the roof down. The rest of the trip was blessedly uneventful.
Although I was bitterly disappointed and depressed by being selected for C-123's rather than fighters, the sign over the main gate of the training base caught my eye at once. It welcomed me to the home of the Air Commandos. Funny, I had never heard of them, but there was a real mystique and a ring about the name and my mind began racing.

I conjured up visions of smudge faced Tommies with submachine guns and sharp knives. Suddenly I saw myself in a pair of camouflaged fatigues, two ammunition belts bristling with bullets crossing my chest as I stood in a bamboo bar somewhere in the South Pacific. My tommy gun lay still warm and smoking on the bar. I was being congratulated by beautiful native girls for my heroism in singlehandedly saving the tiny native village nestled on the pure white sands of a deep blue lagoon.

Fortunately my brain got back in gear and I realized I was a pilot and what hotshot pilot would run around in the jungle playing foot soldier? As the day dream faded I was still stirred by the name Air Commando and their motto "Anytime, Anywhere".

My fantasies continued as I met more and more Air Commandos during my in-processing. These guys were for real. They wore camouflaged fatigues and flight suits, carried big, sharp knives, wore oversize moustaches and looked to be very proficient at anything they might set their minds to.

My first bar encounter with the Air Commandos came immediately after I had checked into the base and dropped my bags off at the bachelors quarters conveniently next door to the Officer's Club.

It was at the bar that I quickly determined the Air Commandos were all right. They came into the bar wearing anything they cared to wear. It certainly wasn't like my base where the uniform dress code was strictly enforced. Also, they sort of did whatever they felt like doing, be it
rough housing, gambling, breaking glasses or making questionable suggestions to the lovely young waitresses who seemed to enjoy this rowdy atmosphere. A rather uninhibited group to be sure.

Being the FNG, which I later learned meant Frappin' New Guy, I lost my first Seagram's VO and water when two gorillas snatched a baby faced navigator off his bar stool and with one great heave threw him the length of the bar on his belly taking my drink with him. I learned quickly and made it a point to snatch up my drink when a body was about to hurtle down the top of the bar in a blazing belly slide.

I would be introduced to other neat body destroying bar tricks as I became more commandoized. For the time being though, I kind of liked these strange new folks. I even began to believe that being an Air Commando might not be as glorious as being a fighter pilot ace, but what the hell, the company wasn't bad at all. In fact, I had already asked the waitress where I could get a camouflaged flight suit and did she know a tailor who had one day service?
The C-123 training was set up primarily to check out pilots who would fly as cargo carriers. The inglorious title of "trash haulers" was tacked onto this group. Their mission was to carry anything, anywhere, and their loads might be people, live pigs, grain, ammunition, paratroops or whatever. They had to be able to land on some of the shortest and most dangerous runways in the world. Quite a few trash hauler C-123 aircraft wound up as burned out hulks in the many mine fields surrounding these mini-runways when they couldn't get stopped in time.

Even though trash hauling was not the Ranch Hands mission, they received the same initial training the cargo carrier crews received. The Ranch Hands had to learn how to fly the C-123, all the emergency procedures and finally both day and night short field landing techniques. The latter was an exercise in stark terror. The instructors actually had us land an unlighted airplane on a postage stamp dirt strip lighted only by a handful of red flashlight bulbs. Whew!

Three other students and myself were assigned for tactical flight training to "Doc" Weaver. Doc was fresh back from Vietnam. A hardcore combat veteran complete with oversize moustache, Aussie go-to-hell hat, camouflage flight suit and a vocabulary of uncomplimentary Vietnamese terms we would soon learn. He had personally earned more Air Medals than some entire squadrons earned in WWII.

Doc was an anachronism. Under the camouflaged flight suit and go-to-hell hat was one of the top ten water color artists in the country. A poetic, artistic soul who was one hell of a combat flyer and a flamboyant barstooler. Fortunately for us he also had a great sense of humor and a large ration of patience. We were to press his patience level severely during training.
The emergency procedures on multi-engine propeller airplanes amazes me. In a single engine, single seat jet if the engine quit I simply pulled one brightly painted handle which ejected me to float down in my parachute. A simple straightforward procedure.

In the prop jobs there were handles and buttons for mixture controls, propeller controls, throttles, propeller feathering etc, etc. Since there were two engines on the C-123, there were two of everything previously mentioned. I had a lot of trouble establishing a good attitude about emergencies and was particularly deficient in learning what handles to pull in what order and when.

Early in the training, while shooting practice landings at an auxiliary field about 20 miles from our home base, Doc threw his daily dose of simulated emergencies at me. After demonstrating my knack for forgetting which handle to pull when, Doc called for another student riding in the cargo compartment to come up to the cockpit to replace me.

As I settled myself in disgrace in the cargo compartment to study, my replacement was strapping in up front. He was an old time propeller experienced gorilla and he was a big guy. Both points were in his and our favor since just as we got about 50 feet in the air on our takeoff everything went to hell. The right propeller ran away (became uncontrollable) creating a condition that normally prevents continued flight.

Doc looked like Arthur Fiedler conducting the Pops in a lively chorus of the Sabre Dance. His hands were flying everywhere, pulling this, pushing that to no avail, while the whole time the big guy was holding the C-123 out of the trees with brute strength (if I had been in the seat we would have crashed long ago).
We never got more than 50 feet in the air. The bad engine had pulled us in a complete circle just above the tree tops. We actually circled the control tower—looking up at it all the way—finally keplunking the faltering 123 back down exactly where we took off from.

Since we were some 20 miles from home base we would have to leave the plane to be fixed and catch a ride home in a GI truck. I decided before we left to give the folks who fix airplanes something to talk about. I always felt people who fix airplanes needed something to brighten their days. I grabbed a bunch of shrubs, twigs and tree limbs and stuffed them in all the places I could find, like the landing gear, the pitot boom sticking out in front of the airplane and even under the windshield wipers of the plane.

A nosy Safety Officer saw my handiwork and decided we really had been blindly flying along crashing through the tops of the federally-protected nearby pine forest. His phone call to the home base sure got Doc a whole bunch of grief from his superiors. They were not greatly amused, nor were they ever really sure that Doc's version of the incident was the way it happened. Anyway, it didn't really matter since a big wind came up that night and blew the plane over on its side because it wasn't tied down correctly (Doc got blamed for that too). The wind caused one heck of a lot more damage than flying through the pine trees would have done.

Later the same night, I was in the O-Club surrounding a quart of VO and telling one of Doc's combat buddies what I had done and much trouble Doc was in. I knew this guy had spent a year in Vietnam with Doc and I figured a good buddy like that would want to help him. Sure enough, he
jumped right up saying he'd make a phone call that would fix old Doc right up.

About an hour later Doc came into the bar looking like he had the world on his shoulders. He handed us a telegram that said the Headquarters staff in Washington, D.C. had heard all about Doc's day and they were considering what disciplinary action to take against him. It was signed by a 3 star general.

Now I really felt bad. I'd done in my own instructor, probably ruined his career. I re-read the telegram several times and suddenly it came to me. The telegram had been sent an hour ago and it had been sent from Florida not from Washington. Now I knew what the phone call was that Doc's buddy had made.

I slipped off the barstool, grabbed a sweet young waitress and headed for the club manager's office. I jotted out a short message, convinced the waitress she could imitate a Western Union ladies voice very easily and then called the club telephone paging number. When Doc's buddy answered his page, the waitress did a superior job of reading a "telegram" advising him of his immediate reassignment to a non-flying desk job with a Navy unit stationed on a womanless, remote arctic island.

After watching Doc's buddy run from the club screaming obscenities at all personnel officers in general, I rejoined Doc at the bar. Once I had explained to Doc that the telegram he had received was fake and that I had retaliated in kind for him we had a couple of laughs and a couple of hundred drinks. Doc even let up on me a little on emergency procedure training after that episode.
If I didn't mention it before, I had completed parachute jump training before I volunteered for Vietnam. Very few pilots were parachute jump qualified in those days. Some said it was because flight pay was higher than jump pay and you could only draw one not both. Others said pilots disliked jumping because it indicated you had lost your airplane sort of like the ship captain syndrome. This also may have inferred you had been shot down by a better enemy pilot. I personally felt most pilots abhorred jumping because they feared injuring themselves in a bad landing and perhaps mess up a good flying career.

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

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

On the morning of the jump, instead of Doc the real pilot in command briefing the flight crew and the Army jumpers, he let me do it. By regulation the aircraft commander must brief on emergency procedures and when jumpers are on board the jump order signals must be covered in specific detail. I was very specific in my briefing to the Army jumpers specifying that under no circumstances were they to jump out until the aircraft commander told them they could go. I repeated this several times.
We took off with Doc and I in the cockpit and another student pilot and the jumpers back in the cargo compartment. We headed straight for the drop zone. The drop zone was a tiny dirt landing strip and some plowed ground carved out of a heavily wooded area. If you didn't go out exactly on target you would wind up in the trees.

As soon as the gear was up I wiggled into my two chutes and the other student pilot lowered the rear loading ramp which the jumpers used as a jump platform. When we hit the drop zone, without any warning, I came barrelling out of the cockpit, ran past the startled berets and bailed out. I was really getting the hang of this Air Commando thing now.

On the way down I checked around the sky and there were chutes all over the sky and berets still pouring out of Doc's plane. Of course they were well out of the drop zone and all heading for the trees. Looking at it strictly from a regulation point of view the aircraft commander had not told them to jump so it must be assumed they took it upon themselves to jump out making it difficult for them to criticize the Air Force for putting them in the trees - right?

Doc wheeled the old C-123 around and made a magnificent short field landing on the dirt strip. While he wheeled the plane around for a takeoff I threw my chute and myself onto the loading ramp and we departed in great haste before the irate green berets could climb down from the trees. We drank up all the V0 in the club that night.
The '51 Ford hardtop was running fine, but the door on the driver's side became so badly rusted it fell off in the busiest intersection in town one night. Most of the other motorists were quite polite while I retrieved the door and hefted it into the back seat. Later, down the road I thought of a real good reply to the wise acre who made some really smart-ass remarks while I was loading the door into the car. An understanding mechanic at the all night gas station only made a few disparaging remarks as he welded the door back on (in the permanently closed position) and I don't think he really giggled too much when I crawled in through the window and drove away.

About a week later I was on my favorite barstool in the O-Club and two young lieutenants were buying me VO and waters at a great rate. I suspected they were figuring on working for me someday when I made General and they wanted to get their brownie points in early. It wasn't my potential rise to fame they were interested in, but rather, they wanted to borrow the '51 Ford. Reluctantly I let them buy me a dozen or so more VO's and water and gave them the keys.

They promised they would have it in front of the Bachelor's Quarters in time for me to make an early flight the next morning. They did and it was. Only now I had a completely camouflaged '51 Ford.

This was no greasy kid stuff job, this was the real $5,000 a copy, bonafide paint job. It had been run through the C-123 aircraft paint shop line and was perfect in every detail. Fantastic. The grey, brown, green and sand colored camouflage paint job gave the old Ford a real Air Commando look.
Down at the flight line, after my flight, I just pushed my way through the admiring throng looking over the Ford, climbed in the window and headed out for a shower and change of clothes.

I left through the main gate that afternoon on my way to my reserved barstool at a beachside ginmill. I watched the Security Policeman in my rear view mirror after I went through the base gate. He had given me a very funny look and I wasn't at all surprised to see him grab his telephone. I soaked up an extra quart of Seagram's VO that afternoon and into the evening debating what would happen to me when I tried to get back through the base gate.

Finally I just had to go back to the base. I drove right up to main gate gate rather gallantly I thought, but dreading the encounter with the Security Police who were very, very strict.

As I approached the gate an amazing thing happened. The Security Policeman who had watched me approach simply turned his back and gazed off into space as if he never saw me. The car was so well camouflaged that, for the next two months, not one Security Policeman ever acknowledged my entrance or departure from the base. They were beautiful guys!

I tried to quizz the Lieutenants about the paint job which must have been very difficult and risky to arrange, but they mumbled something about going through a funny car wash that night, but certainly not an aircraft paint line. I had a feeling there were some mighty resourceful Lieutenants in the Air Commandos.

The owner of my favorite gin mill offered me a staggering sum for the Ford, but it had become Commandoized like me and I felt it should stay with the Corps. The gin mill owner let me park the Ford on the grass in front of his place though, since he figured no one could see it anyway.
I thought that was great since parking places were hard to come by. He was an understanding gin mill owner.

The waitresses were sporty about it too. If a guy came in and asked for me the waitress would ask him if he saw my car out front. If he saw it they'd tell him I wasn't there and if he didn't see it I was there. This confused hell out of the rational folks who didn't play the game.

I gave the car to the Commando class in training behind me when I finished the course. I got a letter not too long after telling me that one of the guys got some bad ice in his drinks and made a wrong turn with the Ford while leaving a beach side gin mill. He wound up driving on the grass median strip in the center of the four lane highway leading to the base. He could have made it easily since no could see the camouflaged car, but unfortunately, he hit the "Welcome to Our City" sign and knocked the left front fender completely off. He continued on without retrieving the fender - probably the bad ice again.

The next morning, according to the letter writer, a bunch of the Commandos were having a get well beer breakfast when a State Highway patrolman drove up right next to the fenderless Ford, grabbed the missing fender from the trunk of the patrol car, dumped it next to the Ford and drove away! That's my kind of law enforcer.

Our next phase of training, at an Air Base in Virginia, was to take 30 days and supposedly closely simulate our combat mission. When we finished this phase we would be real Air Commandos and combat ready! There was a ring to those words. Combat ready. We were ready all right, name a bar within twenty miles and we'd been there.
Our thirty day training course only took two weeks to complete. The weather was beautifully cooperative and we also suspected our instructors were most happy to send us on our way a bit early as well. The training, expected to be highly challenging, was not difficult at all. We flew over table top flat marshland. Our airplanes were lightly loaded and we were able to make high sweeping turns at the end of our simulated target runs. What a piece of cake.

We were later to be completely stunned in Vietnam to discover that in combat we would actually fly the 123 overloaded by 10,000 pounds more than the book allows. Those beautiful high sweeping turns were a dream too. They were a real no-no! If we pulled up at the end of the target pass we made an excellent target for the VC gunners.

In the real world of combat we kept as close to the trees as possible. We made tight, level turns with our wings perpendicular to the ground. The tight, perpendicular turns were OK, but if you are only 100 feet off the ground to begin with and your wings are 70 feet long, it helps to pull up a bit - but not too much.

Another item they neglected in our Stateside training was cropdusting in mountainous terrain. We had trained over uninterrupted, smooth as glass Virginia countryside. In Vietnam, particularly around Danang, we flew in mountains that went straight up and out of sight. They were real heartgrabbers.

Meanwhile, before we could rush off to Saigon and display our newly acquired talents, THEY suddenly decided that all combat flyers would have to go through additional training at the Air Force Basic Survival School near Reno, Nevada then more training at the Jungle Survival School in the Phillipines.
Like many others, I had been stationed for the previous three years in a nice sunny part of Florida. Our four months of flying training was designed to indoctrinate us to a hot jungle environment. It was a chilling experience to report into Stead Air Force Base, deep in the Sierra Nevada Mountains on the second day of January. The temperature was fifteen degrees below zero! The snow was four feet deep and the wind cut right to your bone marrow.

It was a lovely school to prepare us for jungle warfare. None of us had the foresight to buy arctic underwear and other cold weather goodies since the world almanac clearly stated that Saigon was "hot, muggy and junglelike". Now I'm not saying the Air Force didn't issue us arctic gear for the training, but when you look down at your instructor's feet and see that he is wearing high quality civilian snow boots while you freeze your feet off in G.I. boots, you realize THEY did it again. A quick trip downtown and $40 or so later, you are wearing the same brand name boot your instructor wears. Although I never wore those boots since survival school, they were the most intelligent purchase I ever made.

They had some dandy instruction guaranteed to make you a self-reliant individual. You quickly became meaner than a rattlesnake and tougher than a mountain goat. We learned all the good Commando tricks like twenty ways to swiftly and silently do away with folks.

The primary emphasis was on learning how to defend yourself, keep your head in emergencies and specifically how to survive under any condition. We learned a lot about ourselves.

I consider myself a bit of a sophisticate when it comes to gourmet dining. You can't live or visit in 42 foreign countries without acquiring some measure of appreciation for interesting foods. However, nowhere in
world had I ever had the desire or courage to order a rattlesnake meat blue plate special. However, if I ever get as hungry as I did on the trek, look out rattlesnakes because I liked the small portion the instructor let us taste. In fact, I found a significant number of foods I previously distained suddenly weren't so bad after all. And that was only after no food for six days.

Other things we learned were how to escape and evade and how to make our way through hostile areas and situations. They had a dandy final exam. We were issued a half a nylon parachute and a pair of snowshoes, loaded on busses and taken to the end of the road in some remote spot in the mountains. We were told to snowshoe out to the finish line. I think we had six days to make it in. Someone told me later that it was about 20 miles in a straight line from start to finish. I slogged up and down vertical hills for 20 miles the first day only to discover I had actually traversed one mile on the map. At that rate it would be spring before I finished training.

Part of my problem was that I had never been on snowshoes before. I was a fast learner and on the sixth and final day I actually strode over fifteen feet before I tripped myself and fell down. I figure just another week or so and I would have really got the hang of snowshoeing.

To make this 6 day trek more realistic, we were to make it with only of one other student for company. and that was in case one you broke a leg, the other could go for help. Big deal, it took us six days to ever see another soul. Of course, no food was allowed. Actually food was allowed if you could catch it. Anyone who has the slightest knowledge of U.S. geography knows that even the hardiest grizzly bear won't expose himself to a week at the 9,000 foot level in the Sierra Nevadas with a January blizzard raging. Therefore, you can be sure that if the grizzly bears
wouldn't go out up there, then no other animals were out either - so much for the food we could catch. And, to really make our expedition more fun, we could not light a fire since THEY would be watching. If we lit a fire THEY would make us return to the starting point and begin again. By now you can see the problem. Snowshoes, no fires, no food and a raging blizzard.

This confidence building program offered us an exceptional opportunity to get not only uncommonly cold and miserable but also exquisitely hungry. I managed to do all of the above. I singlehandedly came to the conclusion that when you are mentally and physically prepared for jungle operations you really should stick to the plan. THEY had done it to me again. I was certain there was a war plan somewhere in the bowels of the Pentagon to invade the North Pole and THEY had managed to get the plan mixed up with mine - which was simply to go to hot, muggy Vietnam and win the war.

With the memory of the Survival School cold soaked into my head, feet, hands and body, I arrived at Clark AFB in the Phillipines to undergo five days of jungle training. Clark AFB is only one hour's flying time away from Saigon and the war and no one could really expect an Air Commando to pass up five days of real war for five days of simulated war and thus delay his destiny to become the world's greatest combat flyer.

I had been a reasonable, obliging career Officer prior to the Stead Air Base Survival School experience, but that training which stressed the individual's ability to cope with nonstandard situations had me convinced that I was a superslick military weapon and keeping me out of Vietnam would only prolong the war. Some of the regulations I once regarded as sacrosanct suddenly seemed less important as I neared "the front" so to speak.
CHAPTER FIVE
WELCOME TO VIETNAM
My first combat decision was to invest a dime in the pay phone at the Clark Air Base passenger terminal and call the Administrative section of the Jungle School. I asked the sign in clerk when he expected me and if I had arrived yet - of course I didn't tell him I was me. I thought a little test of the system might be a good move before I went over and signed in. The clerk managed to give me all of 15 seconds of his time telling me, he"didn't have the slightest clue as to who the hell was there, and besides, there wasn't a record on the whole damn island to tell who had been there".

I thanked the empty line he left me on and booked myself on a flight leaving for Saigon forty five minutes later. After all, if you are going to win a war you should have the full 365 days to do it in. There was no real sense in taking a five day delay to mess around with snakes and alligators or whatever. At a jungle school where even the clerks were pushy, can you imagine what the instructors would be like? It was in the best interest of the service I told myself as the Air Force transport lifted off. I had made a good decision by avoiding a hostile confrontation between myself and those overworked instructors. On to Saigon.
Most adventurers nearing the front for the first time probably reflect on home and family but I was completely engrossed in studying my traveling companions. No one spoke to each other, but it wasn't difficult to tell the new guys from the old timers in the war. The new guys had on unscuffed, shiny dress shoes and very new looking uniforms that were badly wrinkled from the long trip over the Pacific. They were trying very hard to look nonchalent but it wasn't working.

The old timers had scuffed combat boots and well worn combat fatigues. They also had all the symptoms of suffering from classic hangovers after visiting some of the seedier "boys town" gin mills near Manila. I was really glad an old Air Commando had advised me to have my favorite female wash and bleach my new fatigues about a dozen times before I ever put them on. This gave my fatigues a faded look and kept me from looking like a new guy. I was later to learn that the Vietnamese women who did our fatigues and other laundry usually used four times the amount of soap and bleach required and after beating hell out your clothes on a rock with another rock, they could reduce shiny new fatigues to old timers in just two washings.

I concentrated my study of the travelers on the old timers. I wanted to acquire their mannerisms as quickly as possible. There was one Green Beret who had little "v" devices pinned all around the hatband of his beret. I just knew each little metal "v" represented a Viet Cong he had personally done in. Another Green Beret had on a necklace of hand grenade pins. I really liked that. I made a mental note to make one of those as a great conversation necklace for my favorite female to wear. Somehow I never followed through on that idea though.

The strangest guy on board was the civilian. He was relaxed to the point of appearing bored, but he was very keen of eye. It took me bit to realize he was wearing $100 shoes, a real silk shirt and an obviously expensive watch. The watch was the kind that tells you the time, latitude, altitude and probably had chimes in it. On his other wrist he had a gold bracelet that must have weighed five pounds. For all his effort to look like your standard, regular issue American civilian he sure wasn't.

Somehow I couldn't picture him looking down a transit as a civil engineer. Down a silenced gun barrel - yes. Nor could I picture him pouring over governmental procurement contracts. Hit contracts - yes. Whatever or whoever he was, I was glad he was on our side.
The C-130 Hercules Transport plane took a little over an hour to reach Vietnam. The approach to the airfield was steep and fast followed by a short field landing and rapid taxi to the unloading area. We were exhorted by the crew to get our bodies and baggage off the airplane as soon as possible which made an incredibly swift departure for the friendlier climes of the Phillipines. That particular airlift flight crew really believed in minimum exposure to possible mortar attacks. After retrieving our personal gear that had been blown all over the ramp by the prop wash from the plane's record setting departure, we got our first lesson in combat geography. We had landed not at the promised Tan Son Nhut Air Base on the edge of the city of Saigon, but at Bien Hoa Air Base some twenty miles outside the city.

Being a pilot myself, I always made it a point to land where I was supposed to. Twenty miles from the right airfield is ridiculous. I guess for some transport pilots twenty miles away is close enough for combat work, after all it's only a couple of minutes by air. But, trying to travel twenty miles on the ground in Vietnam could be a major undertaking. I never found out why we didn't land at Tan Son Nhut as advertised.

The passenger terminal was barely more than an open-sided lean-to on the side of the ramp, but it had a telephone. I got a real combat tingle when I saw my first sand bag bunkers for use in case of a mortar attack. However, I was a little disappointed that they hadn't advanced the state of the art very much since these looked just like the ones I saw in the movie "All Quiet on the Western Front".

I decided some quick action on my part was required to rectify the geographical error the transport pilot had made. How could I possibly start winning the war when my unit was twenty miles away and they didn't even know I was in Vietnam?

Most Officers are a little spoiled by the rank system and I was no different. Because I was an Air Commando and an Officer all I would have to do is pick up the telephone and call for a staff car to drive me to Saigon. What transpired was a two-fold education for me.

First, and mark this well, you just didn't pick up a telephone in Vietnam and call a motor pool only twenty miles away. I've placed overseas phone calls from God-awful places to God-awful places half-way around the world easier than the twenty miles to Saigon.
It was first necessary to establish contact with the female Vietnamese operators. That was the easiest part since it only entailed an infinite amount of patience. You had to be wary of the old trick of the operator opening the line, you could hear her breathing, you knew she was there, but not a word came from her. What she was doing was tying up the line while taking a breather, nothing more.

Sooner or later, though, you were able to make contact and from there on it was a race against time. It was necessary to immediately establish the fact that your call was of the highest priority. You did this by injecting a note of urgency in your voice that would have won you an Oscar nomination stateside. You also had to keep up a rapid fire conversation even if you had nothing to say.

A second or two of silence on either end of the phone and your line would be instantly taken by another operator who had been convinced by another actor that his call was so vitally urgent the war might be lost if it didn't go through. I learned all of the foregoing in a series of attempts to get that call through. Being an Air Commando, I learned fast and after only twenty or thirty failures I finally reached the Saigon motor pool office.

My second highly educational experience was my first and last phone call to the Saigon motor pool. My request for a staff car and driver to bring me from Bien Hoa to Saigon gave the motor pool dispatch Sergeant his first good belly laugh of the week.

Between guffaws he informed, "Nobody drives a staff car between Bien Hoa and Saigon unless they are escorted by an armored convoy". If that wasn't enough, he had to get in one more zinger like, "Didn't I know there weren't enough staff cars for THEM, let alone filling silly requests for combat folks to ask for a ride in a hostile countryside"?

I was holding an empty phone line again.

It must have been the phone service over there, I decided. It seemed every time a Sergeant was given a dumb request, he would explain only once why it couldn't be done and the phone would go dead. It definitely had to be the phone system since everyone knows Sergeants are polite and patient and never slam down telephones on Officers.

I resolved to catch a flight to Saigon. There were at least 40 ways to catch a plane hop in Vietnam, but on that first day I didn't know any of them.
I found out there was a scheduled helicopter flight each morning and I could get to Saigon if I showed up at base operations at 8 o'clock. I decided I would check into the transient Officer's quarters, get cleaned up, have a dozen or so drinks at the O-club and go to war tomorrow all refreshed from the long trip across the Pacific.

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

The transient quarters turned out to be World War II open bay tents packed wall to wall, three tiers high with World War I metal bunks. I know the bunks were of World War I vintage because I saw my father's initials scratched on one just beneath the 1916 manufacturer's date.

Rank meant absolutely nothing in that tent. You found a bunk and climbed into it. After you stopped sinking which, if you were in a lower, when your butt hit the floor, you stayed there. If you left, you more than likely would lose your bunk to a newly arrived transient. Since rank meant nothing, brute strength and size became the decisive and determining factors. I was not ready to
test my newly acquired Commando skills by jousting with any of the gorillas in the tent. It was painfully obvious that all personnel selected for Vietnam early in the war were direct descendants of King Kong. Being no relation to the gorilla, I was at a distinct disadvantage.

The G.I. tent would have delighted a commercial mold grower. It consistently maintained an environment of 100° temperature and 100% humidity. This discomfort was minor since the end of the world was to come with my introduction to Vietnamese mosquitoes. Having vacationed in earlier years on the Jersey shore I can expertly describe mosquitoes. The Vietnamese variety were slightly smaller than a fighter plane, had the bite of a medium sized alligator and drained blood faster than a maximum sized vampire. I estimated that just over 500 mosquitoes were vying to gnaw on each square inch of my skin inside the tent, the count jumped inestimably when I walked outside.

With sleep out of the question, I headed for the john. It was about two blocks away and right out of the French Foreign Legion. Actually it had really been built by Legionnaires about the same time the bunks in the tent were manufactured.

I spent the rest of the night in the john. It had the only lighted bulb for miles around since everything else was blacked out. I suspect it was lighted to offer the VC a convenient target. Hell, if they hit it it would have been an insignificant loss to our side and what self respecting gunner would lay claim to the destruction of a latrine?

I wrote a rambling doleful letter about all the experiences I have previously mentioned since arriving in combat. If my eyes hadn't swollen shut from the mosquito bites I probably would have completed the world's most enlightening article on what to expect when arriving in a war zone too early in the war.

If I go to war again, I'm waiting until the engineers finish building air conditioned Officer's Clubs and swimming pools. That old Air Commando axiom "First in, First to Fight" is OK - just once, but it doesn't turn me on like it used to. I think "Late in, lavish facilities and let's discuss this fighting business" would make a swell motto.