CHAPTER SIX

WELCOME TO THE RANCH
That morning, looking like a walking wounded case, I finally made my way to Saigon. Hello war!

When I checked in the unit was woefully short of pilots. The Ranch Hands had been pushing themselves to the limit and they wasted no time in introducing me to their world of combat. They had each been flying at least two or more missions every day without a break for three weeks at a clip and then hopefully getting a couple of days off.

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

In my case none of the above was true. I flew two missions the morning I arrived, can't remember clearing into the base and "hot bunked" for the first ten days. Hot bunking is when you sleep in a bed belonging to someone who is off someplace else.

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

Ralph, the Major who was the Commander, took me under his wing to expedite my combat theater checkout. Ralph was the Gengis Khan of Saigon, a really fierce fellow and former college football player from Texas. He had all the credentials to be an Air Commando commander. He had
the rank, but he also had the size and attitude that caused one to hustle just a little harder. He truly led by example and had survived nearly a year in Vietnam combat even though he pressed himself, the crews and his aircraft to the maximum. The Cowboys respected him and trust me they only respected an outstanding commander. All you had to do was hang on to his shirt tail to see how a war was fought.

During the first hectic days after my arrival, I was in and out of airplanes and different seats so fast I wasn't catching the names of the enlisted crewmembers I was flying with, specifically the Flight Engineers. Those souls, God love 'em, rode in the cargo section of the airplane.

The VC bullets passed through the aluminum skin of the airplane back there as if it were paper. To keep our courageous Sergeants alive there was a box made of some sort of composite materials that was "supposedly" bullet proof. When the ground fire began the Flight Engineers could duck into these waist high boxes.

I was flying on my second or third mission, as usual. Ralph the commander was my instructor. I was in the right hand or co-pilot's seat. I hadn't heard actual for real ground fire up to this time, so when Ralph growled, "Get your head down Junior", I got my head down. In fact I got it clear underneath the instrument panel. Now as one Major to another, I really didn't appreciate Ralph calling me "Junior".

However, no matter what he called me I respected his experience in combat and if he felt it was prudent for me to get my head down I was all for it.
This immediately pose a critical problem. It is very difficult for the two Ranch Hand pilots flying the C-123 and working as a team to fly at 100 feet in close formation with the other aircraft. It requires both pilots to pay strict attention to all the details such as airspeed and proximity to the other aircraft. But when one of the pilots puts his head under the instrument panel it significantly compounds the other pilots' problems.

Ralph noticed this problem straightaway. His soft spoken, even tempered reaction went something like this, "What the hell are you doing with your head under the instrument panel you dumb S.O.B? I want Junior, our Flight Engineer, to get his head down, not you stupid!". Ralph had a way of expressing himself, particularly in the middle of a hot combat mission.

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

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

We had five airplanes and eleven pilots when I arrived. Believe me, one extra pilot is considerably short of the recommended pilot-to-aircraft ratio recommended back in the States and explains why I went to work so quickly. By the seventh mission, I had progressed from flying as the co-pilot in the last airplane to the pilot of the number two airplane. Ralph felt every pilot should be able to be the lead pilot in the first plane. Unfortunately, he expected a new guy to pick up his year of experience in one lesson.

We were in the number two aircraft and Ralph was in the right or co-pilot's seat. He was demonstrating his instant combat indoctrination course and explaining in his colorful way the dozen or so things I was doing wrong while puffing ferociously on his cigar. He always had a cigar going but none of us had the courage to tell him it was hazardous to everyone's health to be smoking in an airplane while VC folks were shooting holes in our gas tanks.

There was a lot of ground fire on this target and one uncommonly lucky VC gunner managed to put a .30 caliber rifle bullet right into our cockpit. It smelled the whole plane up with burning cordite. But the smell was nothing compared to the sound that bullet made when it hit Ralph. There was no doubt in my mind that the bullet had taken Ralph's head clean off. Of course I didn't look to see. When the round hit us I had been flying in very tight formation on the leader's wing. I was just hanging in there while the leader was very busy telling the world about some moderate ground fire we were taking. He was also damn near pulling our wings off with a tight turn to go back over the target again!

I was recommended for a medal for hanging onto the leader's wing and making a couple more passes, but to be honest, I didn't dare pull off from the leader's wing since I hadn't the faintest clue as to where in Vietnam we were.

I knew the throttles were being moved by someone other than me, but I just didn't think it wise to look over and see if Ralph still had a head. I already had a classic case of the scared-to-deaths and losing my breakfast wouldn't help. I did ask over the intercom if he was alive. This got me a week's ration of lusty, direct replies from an angry, bleeding Ralph.
The Flight Leader finally decided we had been shot at enough (I later learned the hour and a half we had been over the target was really four minutes) and he pulled off the target and climbed to 3500 feet. I finally got my courage up and looked over at Ralph. There he sat, cigar going a mile a minute and using an honest to God Texas-size Bowie knife to pick shrapnel out of a messy looking arm. That really got my attention. He flew one more mission with me that day before he went over to the medics to get his arm fixed. That's Mr. Tough in my book.

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

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

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

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

The Air Force had a regulation that made it mandatory that crewmembers wear flight suits or fatigues while flying. They also issued us long sleeved, heavy duty, hot regulation fatigues. The temperature on the flight lines in Vietnam often exceeded 120° and everyone hated the Air Force regulation fatigues. The Army, on the other hand, had fought jungle wars before and they had a
nifty set of lightweight fatigues made just for this business and climate. Like a lot of other good Army equipment though, they screwed the fatigues up by putting slanted, baggy pockets on them.

As soon as a Cowboy got settled he would head straightforth to downtown Saigon's World Wide Tailor Shop who had a mysteriously inexhaustible supply of Army lightweight fatigues. After a swift, professional measuring session with the newly acquired fatigues on, the Cowboy would be asked to "Come by next morning, please." Overnight the Army fatigues would be converted into a short sleeved, form fitting snappy outfit. Of course they would have extra pockets on each sleeve for cigarettes, a couple of pencil inserts, a myriad of unit patches, an American flag, name tag and if room was left, "U.S. Air Force" over the left breast pocket. There was considerable latitude attaching the patches of your choice on this uniform and since you drew up your own patch on the spot, some rather racy patches blossomed forth on the new fatigues. It was quite fashionable in the early days to immortalize some Stateside anti-war personality with some obscene graffiti on a patch. I specifically remember a great variety of "Jane Fonda" patches with some interesting suggestions of a sexual nature.

Next, the Cowboy would have a custom ammunition and pistol belt made. Since I had not had the foresight to think I would be allowed to arm myself for combat as I saw fit, I only had the government issue .38 caliber pistol available to me at the time. This changed later, but for the time being I settled for a .38 pistol holster with 50 bullet loops that really looked snazzy. In fact, I was shiny bullets from bellybutton all the way around to bellybutton. Roy Rogers would have been green with envy.

To top off this sartorial scenario, a genuine "Made in Saigon" Australian go-to-hell bush hat with a purple hat band attached and your rank embroidered on the front was necessary. This assured you right off that you would never have an identity problem in any gin mill in Southeast Asia (or downtown Burbank or Timbuktu).

Ranch Hands also had to own a motorcycle of some sort. The few sane Cowboys owned 50cc Hondas - sort of low powered bicycles. The hardier types would acquire Honda 90's. Then there were the true suicidal types. They rode Honda 750's. You could drive one of those hummers straight up the side of the Empire State Building accelerating all the way. Rumor had it Ralph could flatten jeeps and small trucks with his 750.
Ralph was known to tipple on occasion, like sipping two or three bottles of Beefeaters dry before venturing forth on his Honda 750. When he roared into Saigon, cigar firmly clenched, throttle wide open with a ground speed of 70-80 mph, he struck paralyzing fear in the hearts and minds of the few Vietnamese that ever dared joust with him for the right of way.

It was rumored the Saigon traffic safety folks had a bulletin out stating, "If a Vietnamese in any vehicle smaller than an armored personnel carrier sights a cigar-chewing, large-sized American on an over-sized Honda, immediately deposit humble body and vehicle in nearest ditch to prevent premature meeting of honorable ancestors."

Naturally I felt obliged to buy a motorcycle just like everyone else. Well, not quite like everyone else. Everybody else had a Honda. I bought the only U.S. manufactured motorcycle that ever found its way to Vietnam.

I have no idea how the motorcycle got to Vietnam, but it was a 125cc Harley Davidson, vintage long forgotten. It had huge crash bars on the sides and one outstanding advantage over all the other motorcycles in Vietnam. Stealing motorcycles and stripping major parts was a big operation in Vietnam. The folks that owned the Hondas would spend up to $20 a night in downtown Saigon just hiring guys to guard their Hondas while they slipped into a gin mill for a toddy. The more places they stopped at, the more guards they hired and it soon mounted up as a major expense.

My Harley, being the only one of its kind, escaped this problem. Not one part on the Harley would fit the Japanese made cycles. Stealing the whole motorcycle was out of the question. There was no way the thief could camouflage the Harley to look like anything but an old Harley and he would have been caught immediately.

The Harley was a good old machine, plenty of pep and if you got in real trouble, you could lay the old beast down at 30 or 40 mph on its huge crash bars, climb up on top of the gas tank and ride it while it slid down the street, hopefully to an easy stop.

That particular maneuver was especially spectacular at night with a great shower of sparks flying behind the machine sliding down the street.
Although not recommended for a steady pastime, I did have to do just that several times and it saved my body from some severe hurt and pain on more than one occasion.

Don't get me wrong. I took a couple of grand slam headers off the Harley. You may have already figured I'm a firm believer in the old fighter pilot axiom that you have to smoke and drink to have a good time. Another axiom I discovered was that smoking, drinking and riding a Harley simultaneously could be very harmful to your health.

Every American who rode motorcycles in Vietnam suffered from a common injury at one time or another. Because of the high temperatures, we all wore short sleeve shirts, including times when we were riding our cycles. Thus, whenever you fell off your bike or took a spill, you usually skinned yourself up pretty badly which left some ugly rashes to heal up. Because of the predominance of Hondas in Vietnam, these rashes became known as Honda Rash. The first time I fell down, skinning myself quite suitably on many parts of my body, the Cowboys immediately dubbed my injuries a Harley Heart. This was a crude reference to the Purple Heart given for combat wounds. The term stuck, and while the rest of the G.I. motorcycle riders in Vietnam got Honda Rashes from their crashes, I got Harley Hearts.
CHAPTER SEVEN
"C" FLIGHT
With Ralph's inspiring, but most imposing guidance, my ascension up the ladder of the chain of command took one week. In seven days I was a fully qualified lead aircraft commander - because Ralph said I was. Ralph's pronouncements were usually followed by a clap of thunder so no one ever argued with him.

When Ralph said I was fully qualified, the fact that I couldn't find my way home from the target was immaterial, I was qualified. Hell, I had just begun to decipher the taxiway diagram of the air base and was overjoyed on any occasion that I could successfully get the airplane to the correct runway for takeoff. Flying around the country side was another matter. The more experienced pilots recognized the winding rivers at once but they were a hopeless maze for me. The Navigators continued to point out "prominent" land marks but I never saw a thing except monotonously unchanging green delta countryside.

As the newly checked out lead pilot, I continued to lead the other aircraft to the targets. The Navigators with infinite patience kept pointing me toward the target and then pointing me back to the home base after the mission.

On the plus side, I had it figured that if it only took seven days to become the lead aircraft commander, the next step to flight commander should be completed by my tenth day in Vietnam. Extending this lightening climb in my version of unit command philosophy, I deduced I would be the commander of the entire unit by my 20th day in combat.

Unknown to me, the jokers in Personnel back in the States were using the "you are going to be the commander" line on every flying jock they could find. It seems the more folks that found out how much the Ranch Hands were shot at and hit, the more severe the problem of recruiting double volunteers for the Ranch was becoming. Thus, the bait of becoming a combat commander was used on everybody.

I had arrived as the second ranking Officer. I departed as the 19th ranking Officer. Oh well, 18 other guys suffered the same aspiring "commander" deflations that I suffered.

In reflecting on the escapades and personal traits of the Cowboys who eventually flew for me in the Ranch, I'm sort of glad I never became the commander. That motley group of characters managed one way or another to ruin the commander's day - every day. Commanders don't have fun.
Commanders stationed in Saigon had to be fast on their feet. Commanders had to meet THEM on a face-to-face basis every day. Ranch Hand commanders particularly spent a lot of their time trying to explain something "those damn Cowboys" had done. The Ranch Hand commander usually didn't have the complete story or explanation for a particular Cowboy exploit because the Cowboys were not eager to tell Saigon, the commander or THEM anything. The Cowboys never lied, but they were notorious for omitting details not favorable to their version of why this or that happened.

The Ranch Hand operation was being expanded. The Cowboys were getting more airplanes and crews. The outfit was now big enough to form three flight. Each flight would have three airplanes, seven pilots, a navigator and four flight engineers. I was to be "C" Flight commander.

With very few exceptions the pilots and navigators in the Air Force, and thus in the Ranch Hand, were college graduates. They had been screened by several officer selection boards for things like insanity and had to be relatively well coordinated to become flyers.

One would immediately assume that this assured a reasonably intelligent group of individuals. One might even expect them to be gentlemen, have high standards of conduct and abiding knowledge of military regulations. I had observed most of the Cowboy "selectees" in the classes training behind me and I had not noticed any abnormal or weird trait about them. I quite naturally assumed "C" Flight would be assigned five pilots and one navigator with all the aforementioned attributes. The reason only five
pilots were required was Roy was to be my assistant flight commander and he was already on board.

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

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

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

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

"C" Flight was led by myself and an outstanding young pilot named Roy who was on his second Ranch Hand combat tour. Roy knew every way not in the book to evade Saigon's suggestions and instructions. Flying with us was a large Texan nicknamed "Beak" who also had a previous tour over Vietnam as a KC-135 jet tanker pilot. Beak decided to
switch and fight and double volunteered. He later went on
to fly a third tour in B-57s. Another of our pilots was
"Cal" who could sweet talk a set of dice into providing an
extra thousand a month. I never met anyone else who could
track a dozen of his bets on each roll and never lose track
of them. We also had "Ike" a straightforward young man I
suspect of German heritage. None of us thought much about
using checklists and other items recommended for safe
flying and the way we flew depended on how we felt that
day, except when you flew with Ike. Ike flew by the book
and he made it seem right.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Come to think of it, I don't know of any flying types, military or civilian, who do low flying mountain work. I am also dead certain that THEY had no one in the Saigon targeting office with an map reading ability. The mountain targets they usually selected were one way in, no way out beauties!
CHAPTER EIGHT
DANANG
Whoever was in charge up at Danang carried the title of Detachment Commander. In itself that meant very little, but the big blessing was that as detachment commander you had a big chunk of the unit working for you and wonder of wonders, you were many miles away from Saigon and THEM. The detachment commander had about as much leeway in running his war as he had guts enough to take and that fit my idea of how wars should be fought.

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

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

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

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

At the Danang Officer's Club the dining hall and the bar adjoined. Most of the normal people assigned to Danang would just be having their breakfast when the Cowboy's began their not-so-graceful thing at the bar. I met one young supply Officer who thought we partied all night and were still there each morning. He still thought that when he rotated back to the States.
The Officer's Club at Danang had an ominous sign out front. The sign read DOOM Club. It took me a minute to realize this was not a macabre joke, but the regulation Air Force identification of the Club. The sign stood for Danang Officer's Open Mess.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Obviously I was lucky I didn't shoot myself in the butt which would have been very inglorious. Second, facing a tent full of hostile, scared comrades who have bolted upright and are now pointing loaded weapons at you is no way to promote a friendly atmosphere. Finally, it was only pure luck I didn't hit someone in my tent, naturally the bullet whistled through four more tents, hitting no one, however, it did stir up a bunch of epithets about my ancestry. I wrote a quick note home for a six pack of rat poison.
The above fiasco and a few other minor incidents during the first days helped us establish our presence at Danang to the base brass. We had no identity problem with the fighter wing commander, the director of operations or the base commander, but we did have a credibility problem.

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

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

One evening while the "Tap Dance and Dirty Ditty Singers" were entertaining our fighter pilot friends, Ike turned up the juke box so the infamous dancers could better hear the music over the clatter of their beer can-studded feet. I vaguely remember a sign posted on the juke box that warned there were flight crews sleeping nearby and to please not turn the juke up late in the evening. Ike was not being nasty, he was just carried away by the latest dance routine Roy had come up with.
Within minutes after the juke box went to maximum loud, three bird colonels came storming into the club. It was obvious someone had rousted them from bed because they were so ridiculously dressed. Each had on only (hopefully) under clothes, shower clogs, a hat and a raincoat. Their bare legs protruding from their raincoats made it difficult to generate the respect I'm sure they expected.

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

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

It seemed like the proper leadership role to assume. After all how could I not admit to being a party to this since I was the only other person in the bar with a purple scarf on?
I made a blustery suggestion that the Colonels should discuss this problem with me since I was the leader and that I would then take the matter up with my flight - all in the military manner of course. Wow! Did those Colonels take me up on that offer. They were taking turns chewing on me. When they began to repeat themselves and their estimation of our behavior, I just couldn't resist making a wisecrack about how ridiculous they looked.

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

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

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

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

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

I can't overlook a few retaliations that the fighter pilots made on my behalf. That evening, an enterprising group of them spent two hours tying ropes to every G.I. garbage can along the road in the Colonel's quarters. They then connected the whole thing to the guys car that did
most chewing on me. One of them faked a call to him telling him to rush to the flight line. Everyone at the Club was outside and waiting when he raced off in his staff car with 20 G.I. trash cans clanking along behind.

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

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

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

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

The Cowboys refused to take off their scarves, though they did abandon the other tabu items. I got my first and last invitation to the Danang Commander's meeting he frequently had with the unit commanders about a week after our arrival. The commander's first order of business was to
order me to "take off that goddamn purple scarf". Politely refusing only seemed to upset him, but I knew I had right on my side. After all, I was a Ranch Hand and all Ranch Hands wore purple scarves. Hell, it was the best barroom protection in the world - nobody hit a purple scarved Ranch Hand in a gin mill because everybody knew he was shot at and hit enough when he was flying. Anything a Cowboy did in a bar was forgiven.

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

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

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

In spite of this revelation, I used the can opener on my dog tag chain exclusively the year I spent in Vietnam. A quick estimate would show that I probably opened more than a hundred cases of rations with that can opener. I got so enamoured with the thing that I wrote home at least 20 times extolling its virtues and telling how indispensable it was. I even wrote a request that for my first birthday present back home I wanted it gold-plated. When I finally got back to the States, not one soul would even bring up C-ration can openers in the conversation. Well, I still think it's a good idea, so I had it gold plated myself.
At Danang it never rained for just one day, when it rained it rained relentlessly for a week or more. Tents, bedding, clothes and everything else got clammy damp the first day it rained and stayed that way until the sun came out days later.

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

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

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

A Dining-In is normally a very formal military dining ceremony. You wear your formal dress uniform or a tuxedo with black tie and the table settings are ultra fancy. There is a head table for the distinquished guests and the chairman. The Chaplain is always invited because a benediction is a must.
A military Dining-In is so regimented and truly formal and boring that many folks don't enjoy attending them. Smoking is not allowed! However, they do have one redeeming factor. Once the hour or so of formal dining and speeches get over with, there is one heck of a party. No one I knew had ever heard of a Dining-In being attempted in a combat zone before and for sure not in muddy Danang.

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

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

They were only gone two days and when they returned they were the proverbial chesire cats, smug and secretive, and not giving out any clues to their flight commander about what they had been up to or where they had been.
The ebullient conspiratorial Cowboys had roped off a section of the O-Club dining room with a red velvet rope draped through chromed stanchions. Behind the head table was a resplendent silk Ranch Hand flag complete with gold plated staff and spear point-like ornament on top. There were a half dozen cases of Portuguese Mateus Rose wine and each place setting had a beautiful dinner wine glass of the highest quality (the kind that when you ran a wet finger around the rim would make a pretty sound). On all the roped off tables were pure white silk tablecloths and 3 foot high solid brass candelabras with huge candles burning brightly. Would you believe the candles were scented? That dingy old gin mill never smelled better.

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

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

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

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

The Cowboys remained dignified through a truly formal opening and the benediction and even managed to act in a gentlemanly fashion for another five minutes. Then it went to hell and they were good old "C" flight, RanchHand once more. Animal had gnawed up most of his 2 pound steak in
world record time and with a characteristic grunt he threw the remainder across the table hitting Clyde in the forehead. This encouraged the others to clean their area of leftovers in a similar manner and soon everyone was wearing some portion or another of some else's meal.

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

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

Our Dining-ins were such a success that we had them for any occasion, even inviting our Saigon counterparts up to Danang for them. Unfortunately, we were piquing hell out of the less fortunate souls at Danang with our lavish spreads. One night, we discovered just before T-time, the time to troop into the mess hall, that a newly assigned Lieutenant had taken over as O-club manager. This joker was in his words, "Not going to put up with the chilling wine and setting fancy tables for some rinky-dinky unit".
It was Ike or Clyde who suggested we have a "reverse" Dining-in. Instead of a lavish meal, we would give the appearance that the O-club couldn't feed us in a satisfactory manner. Ike jumped in the jeep and went to our quonset hut and picked up three cases of C-rations. Clyde got three cases of beer and Pete, our instructor navigator who was visiting, with Ranch Hand flag held high led us into the dining room. Pete got things off to a flying start, and everybody's attention, when he hurled the Ranch Hand flag at the far wall where it impaled gold point first. We all sat down and proceeded to sing songs which quite frankly questioned the ancestry and parentage of the new club officer, and in general cast more than a few nasty remarks about everyone in the chain of command.

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

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

We had one old French Army truck that some early days Air Commandos had liberated. The truck ran on airplane starting unit gas and used airplane sparkplugs that had been ingeniously attached to the engine by an
inventive flight engineer. What a Rube Goldberg that was! It ran and it was our only transport, so we made do.

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

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

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

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

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

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

To luxuriate in this pleasant atmosphere though, I had to put up with one unpleasant facet associated with being a Cowboy. I was forced to listen to all the vacationing top cover pilots tell me over and over again what an extreme pleasure it was for them to have an organization such as the Ranch Hands fly around as bait. They felt it was "extremely sporty" that we would troll around hostile countrysides attracting ground fire sources for them. After the Cowboys had "found" the enemy, the fighter pilots instead of dropping bombs on "potential" targets which usually only killed monkeys and made toothpicks of trees, would have a bonafide target full of bad guys.
A great number of frustrated fighter and bomber pilots spent their entire year in Vietnam dumping thousands of pounds of bombs on 300' high, triple canopied forests, based on a suspicion there may be VC there, never seeing the target, and worse, never knowing if they had ever damaged the VC war effort. Not so with the top cover guys who covered Ranch Hand missions. They always knew they were hitting the bad guys hard and that produced a lot of personal satisfaction for them, but better yet, one hell of a lot of protection for the Cowboys.

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

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

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

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

I must have antagonized one of the patron saints of combat folks since one of the engines suddenly went amiss. In fact it quit and we were too far out to return to Tokyo. Worse luck, we were close enough to Kadena Air Base on Okinawa to go there rather than to press on to Saigon.
Despite this setback I was still in relatively good shape. All they had to do was fix the engine and we would hop off to Saigon with no one the wiser. No such luck. THEY decided the original flight crew would be out of duty time before the mission would be completed. A new flight crew was assigned. There went my understanding crew chief and flight engineer.

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

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

Guess who this new aircraft commander was. Yes sir, it was Dick Tracy. Jack Armstrong, George Washington and Benedict Arnold all wrapped up in an Air Force uniform. This guy did not swerve from his duty. He had the OSI, the
Air Force's Office of Special Investigations, people surrounding the plane in the blink of an eye.

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

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

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

Here's where I got my first break. A $50.00 friendly Okinawan civilian employee helped me pack both Hondas in a G.I. packing crate. A $20.00 friendly night transportation sergeant gave me a speed course on how to type up a cargo manifest and what symbols are used to get what cargo where. Then he added the forklift to place it on the right shipping pallet. Of course it was just a
coincidence that the pallet he selected was destined for a C-130 aircraft leaving in one hour for Saigon.

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

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

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

I was willing to forgive and forget the whole Honda incident but some senior war staller must have been piqued and insisted on continuing the senseless harrassment of a lowly combat flight commander who was only trying to get some badly needed transportation for his crews.
The Lt. Colonel who flew down from 315th headquarters in Taiwan with the seven court martial charges against me looked a little harried when he finally found me. "C" Flight had had this guy chasing his tail all over the base for two days of wild goose chases. He finally cornered me at a preflight mission briefing he knew I would be at.

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

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