CHAPTER TEN

TOP COVER
What most of the jet top cover folks don't hear is the nerve rattling sound of ground fire. I heard the gun fire every bullet that hit my aircraft. It got to where we could even identify the weapon as a Russian AK-47, a U.S. made M-16 or even .38 pistols. We flew at 100 feet with our windows open to reduce the glass fragments which really splattered around the cockpit when a window was hit.

Our fighter cover usually came in for their protective firing passes from dead behind us and they were flying at a speed of at least 450mph. We never knew when they would come past us at about the same altitude we were flying at and usually started pumping out 20 mm cannon fire just as they reached us.

You talk about a heart stopper! Imagine being a bit tense to begin with and knowing full well there is probably a passel of VC troops below that have shooting you full of holes as their whole days effort. Without warning, picture four 20 mm cannons firing off less than 100 feet from your ear as the fighter goes by. Now you understand a heart stopper!

On one mission we had an over eager fighter type who began dropping his CBU goodies too soon and managed to effectively bomb the daylights out of our three ship formation. I was too young for WW II and the Polesti oil field raids, but the stories saying you could walk on the anti aircraft flak are legend. If you don't believe an F-100 dumping his entire load of CBU anti personnel bomblets onto your flight isn't frightening, then I recommend Polesti.

Out of "C" Flights three ship formation number two
lost a windscreen and one engine. Number three also lost his windscreen and one engine and the lead aircraft was riddled by shrapnel. I was the lead pilot and when the explosions ceased and the shrapnel quit rattling around inside the plane, I lost all interest in continuing that mission. Unbelievably no crewmember was wounded and we limped back to base with over 100 holes in our planes.

That kind of damage would cause Saigon to ask a bunch of dumb questions and possibly do some career harm to the pilot who dropped his ordnance on us. We wrote off the windcreens and the two engines to enemy ground fire. The fighter wing came up with every sheet metal mechanic in Vietnam it seemed like and by 0500am the next morning it was business as usual for the Cowboys and THEY were none the wiser.

Except for the minor incident just noted, our top cover fighters were our salvation. I actually had one F-100 fly UNDER MY WING on a strafing pass and I was at tree top level. Unfortunately, Saigon decided we could get along without fighter escorts.

One of our squadron bosses made an emotional appeal to THEM about this problem and THEY reluctantly decided that a couple of full colonels from 7th Air Force would go along on a Ranch Hand mission to determine if top cover was necessary.

At the time we had a couple of target areas where we could fly and without exception attract more ground fire in one 30 second pass that a lot of combat flyers saw during their entire one year tour.
Naturally, Ralph chose the hottest target to insure our "evaluator" colonels would fully understand our problem. I was the pilot of the number three ship that day and would carry one of the colonels so he could get a good look at the operation from the rear. He was a nice fellow, wrinkled face, grey haired, etc.

Just before we started our engines, Ralph stuck his head in my cockpit and whispered in my ear, "Be very gentle on that colonel you are carrying, he has a heart condition". Great Scott! Just what I needed. Why tell me to take it easy on the old man? It is the VC Ralph should tell. After all they are the ones shooting at us.

We took off and flew to the target area and sure enough just was we start our run all hell breaks loose! Because we have no top cover fighters for ground fire suppression the VC are using tracers to increase their accuracy in hitting our planes. We all know that between each tracer you can see there are five other non-tracer bullets. All of the tracers seemed to going right through Ralph's lead airplane.

All I am trying to do is keep my heart pumping and wondering how do I explain a headquarters colonel having a coronary in my cockpit.

Those VC gunners were good. Admittedly being able to use tracers helped them immensely. They seldom used tracers when we had top cover escort as it gave their gun positions away, the FAC would mark the positions and massive airpower would be unleashed upon them.

The gunners severely shot up Ralph's airplane, but they did not concentrate on or hit the number two or three
aircraft. My grey haired colonel was actually doing better than me aorta-wise and needless to say our top cover fighters were restored to us immediately. No one ever questioned our need for fighter support again during my tour.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE TRADERS
I met a special forces lieutenant in a Saigon bar one night. He had just liberated an air conditioner from a South Vietnamese black marketeer. The black marketeer had accepted $300 in U.S. dollars from the lieutenant for the air conditioner, this in spite of the fact that the air conditioner had "Property of US Gov't" stencilled all over it. I commented he should have shot the black marketeer and taken the air conditioner thus saving $300.

The lieutenant told me how he was assigned to a forward camp far out in the boondocks. He said he had plenty of electric power, but he was living in a tent and he really wanted to air condition his tent very badly. He felt that as commander of the parcel of the jungle he was overseeing that he should set an example for the souls he was protecting.

He convinced me that I should drop him and his air conditioner off at his mini-palace in the jungle. Since I would be flying right over his base on the way back to Danang it wasn't a big deal. Besides I figured in the condition we both were in when we parted that night I had seen the last of him. He must have been made of sturdy stuff, because next morning as I felt my way into the cockpit I had to step around the air conditioner and the sleeping lieutenant in the cargo compartment.

We dropped him off at his camp and pressed on with winning the war. About three weeks later we had to make an unscheduled emergency stop at his little landing strip. We landed so our resourceful flight engineer could try and plug up some unrequested bullet holes which were allowing our engine oil to flow back over the wing instead of lubing
the engine as suggested in the owners manual.

While our sly and cunning flight engineer devised a new way to patch bullet holes in engines, the rest of the crew went over to the lieutenant's tent to partake of a couple of Budweiser 7-ups. Pilots never drink when they are on duty or flying - particularly in combat.

What greeted us when we entered the tent was the lieutenant's prized air conditioner running like a dream. It was mounted on a table dead center in the tightly closed tent pumping cold air out the front and hot air out the back effectively keeping the temperature in the tent about 110 degrees or about 10 degrees warmer than the air outside of the tent. I don't remember any of us advising him that it would be a nifty idea to vent the hot air out of the tent and I believe he spent his entire tour in Vietnam with that air conditioner running full blast right in the middle of the tent.

Through necessity we became great traders up at Danang. I had discarded the idea of acquiring any more Hondas. The last series of phone calls from THEM down in Saigon convinced me it was time to convert to other modes of "operation transportation".

One of my less righteous pilots told me he knew a guy who could provide us with a brand new (expendable) special forces jeep if we could come up with a ten ton jack and a C-123 full of plywood. Now there is something we could do and no one could fault us for it. We'd be helping the war effort. Those poor special forces guys out there
in the boondocks probably couldn't get airlift support from
the regular airlift folks. Well, it would only take a
couple of hours to convert one of our aircraft into an
airlift aircraft. All we had to do was remove a 10,000
gallon tank from the cargo bay etc, etc.

That afternoon we backed (yes the C-123 could back
up) our hastily converted plane up to the loading dock in
Saigon. We took on a load of plywood and a ten ton jack.
An hour later we delivered the booty but they told us our
jeep was out on a run and could we pick it up the next day?
Sure, we would come back the next day. That night we
reinstalled the 10,000 gallon tank etc, etc back in our
plane and flew our normal two missions. As soon as we
landed we converted our plane to an airlift plane by
taking out the 10,000 gallon tank and the pump etc, etc.
And away we went to pick up our jeep.

There were no control towers as such out in the
boondock airstrips so we simply flew in and landed. We
noticed there was a great deal of activity going on about
the camp and there seemed to be a great number of ranking
army officers in clean uniforms poking about. A young
special forces type nearly took his head off on one of
our propellers trying to get to the plane before any of
the army brass came over. He scrambled up into the cockpit
and handed me a very cryptic note. All it said was "There
is an Army Inspector General Team Investigating us, get the
hell out of here, we buried your jeep two hours ago".

All of our trades weren't losers. We did not carry
parachutes since a successful bailout at 100 feet isn't even a remote possibility. We did carry more personal guns, ammunition, bayonettes, knives etc, that any Air Force organization in the history of aviation.

When I first arrived at Saigon the Cowboys had a CONEX container (a huge metal, watertight container the size of a small home). Our CONEX container was stuffed with over 300 weapons for the 12 of us. I personally carried an M-16 automatic rifle with 300 rounds of ammo. I also carried a standard issue .38 caliber pistol with 150 rounds of ammo, a .38 civilian snub nose with 150 rounds of ammo and a .25 hide out civilian automatic with 300 rounds of ammo.

In our CONEX we had our choice of .45 automatics, Thompson sub machine guns, 12 gauge shotguns, carbines, Swedish K sub machine guns, M-1 rifles, 9mm automatics, magnums and others I can't remember. One of our flight engineers had a 40mm grenade launcher in his supposedly bullet proof box in the back of the aircraft. Only one of our downed crews had to fight it out with the VC while waiting to be rescued. That is Junior's story and quite a story it is. I may touch on it a little later.

As if we weren't already carrying enough ammunition some ingenious Cowboy figured that if you taped an inverted M-16 clip to the one you had in the weapon then all you had to do was eject the empty clip, turn it around and reinsert the full end into your gun. It came to pass that we now needed 100 more M-16 ammunition clips. The supply form I filled out for the 100 clips was the only supply form I
ever signed in Vietnam.

You guessed it. A few days later a flatbed Air
Force trailer as long as a quonset hut pulled up. There
was a CONEX container and a forklift on the flatbed. We
watched in stunned silence as we became the owners of a
shiny new CONEX container and 10,000 M-16 ammunition clips.

A CONEX was a highly prized item so we obviously
kept that for secure storage for occasional goodies that
providently fell into our hands. We traded 9,900 extra
M-16 clips to the 3rd Marines for an inexhaustible supply
of beer.

Another good deal we fell into was the steel helmet
swap. Now in all the recruiting posters you have ever seen
of Air Force pilots, did you ever see one with a steel
helmet on? We had them. They were the good kind that
really covered up your head and neck. You couldn't fly
with one on, but they were good helmets.

There was this group of fearless Navy folks who
operated PBRs (Patrol Boat, River in Navy lingo). These
brave souls ran around in unarmored teeny-weeny boats
getting the daylights shot out of themselves and they sure
needed help. They didn't have the nifty helmets we had,
but they did have the world's largest frozen food locker.
It was an entire ship that the Navy just ran up on the
beach at Danang. There were goodies inside the hummer
that would make you salivate for a week. Wearing warm
clothes, a stroll by a gourmet such as I down what seemed
endless rows of frozen food bins was dizzying.
After all the dehydrated, rain soaked mush and C-Rations we had eaten we felt it was definitely our duty and a pleasure to help the war effort by providing our helmets to those poor Navy fellows. When they gave us unrestricted access and shopping privileges on that freezer ship it gave us a "gut feeling" of comraderie.
CHAPTER TWELVE

OPERATIONS OFFICERS
It was policy that while at Danang we had to call THEM every day at 4:00pm. I would explain what the Cowboys did that day and THEY would tell me what we were to do the next day. I learned my lesson early on in regard to making the phone call myself. THEY had a way with words and were most explicit in expressing their feelings to me on the Cowboys conduct of the war. In fact, THEY got downright personal. That All-American butt chewer on the other end of the phone was a real pro.

In order to keep up the high spirit required by me to run "C" Flight and to keep me from having a daily morale decline about 4:00pm, I appointed our most junior ranking Officer to leave the bar and call Saigon at the appointed time. This worked out beautifully. The All-American butt chewer in Saigon knew whatever had gone wrong that day was not kids' fault and that he was chewing on an innocent man. This somewhat tempered the badmouth from THEM.

Next, the young Officer taking the call at the Danang end, because I was writing his efficiency report, would leave out large numbers of the cuss words and references to my origin, etc. that THEY had included in the conversation. This double buffer, so to speak, resulted in my getting the general gist of what Saigon wanted but without the uncomplimentary remarks. Naturally, being in the bar and fortified with several Seagram's and waters when the young man returned, much of the sting of the daily bad news included in all daily calls was reduced.

One day I told the young Officer to be sure THEY knew we had gotten two of our three aircraft badly shot up and would not be able to fly our missions the next day.
I was stunned when the young man returned from making the call and told me THEY had laid on double missions for us the next morning. That really got me mad. I grabbed a phone and called THEM myself. That was one big "GOTCHA" for THEM.

THEY didn't want us to fly double missions the next day. Those crafty devils threw that red herring at me so that I would get all excited and call them personally. THEY made up for all the times they couldn't get me personally on the phone. THEY even went back to comment on some silly things that had happened weeks before. Once I saw through this shabby trick I used the slickest thing that came out of the war. I hung up the phone. The phone service was so bad the party on the other end could never be sure how, why, who or what had cut off the connection.

THEY tried just once to take "C" Flight from me by ordering me to Saigon to become an Operations Officer. The ops officer is the number two man in the unit. I could suppose it was either a compliment to be considered for the job or it may have been a diabolical plot to separate me from "C" Flight. I was well aware that ops officers did not fly very often and spent their nights dreaming up absurd ops plans for aircrews to follow.

I evaded the offer for a while, but THEY were adamant and I went down to Saigon to learn the ops officer trade. Like Skip, the F-104 pilot, I was a swift learner. I quickly learned that ops officers put in 13 to 14 hours a day at a desk, flew very little and got all wrapped around a thousand silly details not at all associated with winning the war.
One of the most overrated things ops officers do is formally brief THEM every day. Ops officers also spend a great deal of time answering questions throughout the day that THEY forgot to ask at the briefing. After one week I could see a Lieutenant could handle this chore, yet I was very surprised to find that all the other briefers were Lt Colonels. I finally realized that there is a whole passle of middle-aged middle managers, mostly Lt. Colonels, who don't fly that emerge during wars. This is a group I recommend with entirely, particularly in war time.

This group is aptly referred to by combat flyers as "seagulls". They just sit around, eat a lot, put out lots of crap, make unnecessary noise and will not fly unless you throw rocks at them. It they do fly it is usually not very well.

I could tell after one week in Saigon that fighting the war from a desk in Saigon was neither glamorous nor adventurous. One positive thing though was that I had gotten a feel for how THEY viewed the manner in which "C" Flight was winning the war. "C" Flight to Saigon was another bunch of statistics on a board on a wall. The name of the game was to win statistically using hundreds of charts. Woe to the chartkeeper whose chart fell below the desired goals.

I personally knew that "C" Flight was made up of some very patriotic souls who laid their lives on the line every day. They were flying their butts off and off fighting magnificently in spite of all the "poor" advice, both target-wise and tactically passed on to us by Saigon. By mutual agreement I was on my way back to Danang and "C"
Flight seven days after leaving.

The ops officer experience did have one benefit. I now had some limited knowledge of how the chart game was played. We now flew our missions the same as ever and more importantly we partyed as hard as ever, the real change was in how we described our routine business of winning the war but with new terminology. This almost got us in the good graces of Saigon.

Our dazzling reports of successes or even failures couched in Saigonese terminology brought great serenity to our chartkeeper. Even the phone calls began to decrease. I had suspected we had a problem communicating with THEM, I just didn't realize you could tell them you screwed up and make it sound reasonable.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BIEN HOA
Our Saigon operations were ordered to move from Tan Son Nhut Air Base to Bien Hoa a nearby air base and "C" Flight went down to help. Any normal military flying unit would have martialed its forces and with little fanfare made an orderly exit from one base to the other base only twenty miles away. Not "C" Flight.

Roy had scrounged up about twenty cases of colored smoke grenades. Through an ingenious wiring program he installed great numbers of them on the three 123's tail booms that "C" Flight would be flying over to Bien Hoa. Next, he ran a trip wire back into the aircraft from each of the smoke grenades.

How he ever talked me into flying with him in the lead aircraft, I'll never know. When it was time for our takeoff, I found he had worked a deal with the control tower to make a low level pass right down the main street of the base.

He took a flight of C-123's in a perfect "V" formation down the center of Tan Son Nhut air base cutting the grass with his props and the number two and three aircraft in the formation having to stack up high on his wings to avoid the cars parked on the side of the road. He called "smoke on" and we became a rainbow of colored smoke roaring in a zero altitude, 180kts. with propellors howling in full pitch. I have never seen a more colorful, well executed or lower pass ever made by a flight of fighters let alone lumbering behemoths like the C-123s down Tan Son Nhut's main street.

Wheeling up, up and away he headed the flight
toward Bien Hoa. Bien Hoa was a fighter base and I'm sure news of a rinky-dink multi-engine flying unit arriving at their base was the least thrilling news they had that week.

As we pulled up out of the grass to a reasonable altitude of 150 feet or so, I noticed my knuckles were pure white. I just knew there was going to be hell to pay for that low level pass over Tan Son Nhut, but at least we were back in the air and how much trouble could get into landing at our new base?

That was my first underestimation of what a little twenty mile transfer could really develop into. Roy made all the proper radio calls to Bien Hoa tower and I was just breathing normally again when he told the tower that "Plan B" was ready. I asked him what the devil that was. "Oh," he said, "I have a little something I worked out with the Bien Hoa tower guys this morning".

Now leaving the base in a colorful splash is one thing, but checking into a new on in other than the proper military manner is another and can set you back a bunch. Roy had his already tightly tucked in formation tuck it in even closer and here we go again. Three C-123s, wings overlapping wings and down in the grass we go. He was lined up with the base main street which was bordered by the Officers Club and Wing Headquarters. "Smoke on Cowboys" he yells like a kid on Christmas morning and down the main street we go. He has outdone himself on colors on this pass. So many smoke grenades were going off on the tail booms that the street behind us just disappeared in a kaleidoscope of color.
He pulled up in a smooth chandelle climbing turn and put the wingmen in echelon on his right wing. Then he poured on max power and led the three elephant-like C123s down the initial approach to the runway. He made a fighter plane 360 degree overhead pitch out and again, with his seemingly endless supply of smoke grenades he demonstrated quite vividly that the Cowboys flew fighter patterns when they landed.

To my utter amazement not one senior Officer criticized this unorthodox operation. I believe they were in shock. The fighter folks, on the other hand, gave us a real warm welcome right after they found out the Cowboys were sharing all the champagne in the club for our "Welcome to Bien Hoa" party.

Bien Hoa was a fun place. The fighter folks played all kinds of games in the Officer's club that put more folks temporarily out of the war than combat did. They had one trick where you put a chair under one of the big revolving ceiling fans, then you climbed on the chair and stuck your head in the fan.

This trick didn't bother the fighter jocks too much, but our Flight Surgeon, God bless him, tried it one night and got belted about twenty feet across the room with a very nasty cut on his forehead. The fighter guys forgot to tell him you caught the fan blade with your finger. The badly bleeding Doc leaped up off the floor and having consumed just enough scotch to think he could do it, he headed for the dispensary and using a mirror, sewed his own head up! Sure enough, in about a half hour he was back in
the club sporting the world's worst self-stitching job ever performed by a flight surgeon.

Our flight surgeons were pretty special guys. They flew hairy missions with us, partyed with us, stitched us up when we got shot up and let us fly when any sane doctor would have grounded us or put us in the hospital. One or two of them were even allowed to practice on women and children after only a year to two of rehabilitation after they returned to the States.

One time I discovered a strange fungus growing on my right shoulder. It didn't bother me physically, but it kept spreading. The more it spread the more I worried, the more I worried the more it spread. A real vicious circle. I remember my Grandmother telling me that if a poison ivy rash ever completed a full circle around your body you would die!

At this point I was totally rattled over a rash that wasn't giving me any trouble at all physically but I was scared half to death. It had almost completed the fatal full circle.

The flight surgeon who was used to working on really important stuff on Cowboys like Honda rashes and bullets finally got interested in my dumb rash. He gave me some superb medical advice. He told me to change the soap my laundress was doing my clothes in. Two days later it was goodbye rash. It was a shame it was such an easy cure. I was looking forward to being airlifted back to the States, perhaps to the Mayo clinic. I had visions of all the top Docs in the world working madly to cure
this new unexplained disease. I wish I could remember
the name of the soap that gave me the rash so I could
have Ralph Nader get after the manufacturer for scaring
the daylights out of combat consumers.

On the 4th of July we took the afternoon off and
went over to Vung Tau, a beautiful resort beach on the
China sea. It was a warm sun, cool beer party, but it
lost its glamor since we all wore pistols and our M-16
rifles were nearby. Our neighbors on the other end of
the beach sunning themselves were Vietcong troops on
R & R. They stayed at their end of the beach, we stayed
at ours. Very interesting.
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE GREAT SHOOTUP
I've mentioned several times that we flew two missions a day every day for about three weeks then you got a little combat kooky and it was time to go away for awhile.

Beak and Clyde flew together a lot and both were considered "magnet asses" because of the amount of enemy ground fire they attracted into the cockpit of their airplane. When everyone else was taking hits in the tail of their airplanes, good old Beak and Clyde would invariably get hit right through the windshield. Normally, that wasn't the end of the world, but it sure ruined your whole day. A .30 caliber bullet smashing through the windshield caused several million shards of glass to inbed themselves in all unprotected parts of our bodies.

In violation of the regulations, we flew in T-shirts which left our arms bare, but we did have a flak vest and a flight helmet with a clear visor to protect our eyes. When a windshield was shot out, your hands, arms and the lower portion of your face took a real beating from the glass splinters. In a few hours the areas where the glass hit your body would balloon tremendously. Shortly you had Ralph the Gorilla size arms and your face looked like you had a watermelon in each cheek.

The first time Beak and Clyde got a face full of windshield, the sly and cunning devils asked me for five days off so they could go to Tachi and heal up. Five days later Clyde was back and six or seven days after leaving, Beak got back. Beak had a real problem keeping track of time. Anyway, a few days later Beak and Clyde pulled up off a relatively easy target and the longest, luckiest VC shot of the war hit them right in the windshield at 3,500 feet above the ground - impossible!

After we landed, started up a party, sent Beak and Clyde off to the medics and restarted the party, I fully expected to get the "We need to go to Tachi to heal up" story. Wrong. All of a sudden they were both supermen. They wanted to stay at Danang and keep on flying. They were adamant about staying on the flying schedule. OK. So they flew for five days all battered and ugly but healing fast. On the sixth day, at breakfast, Beak spit out his daily quota of glass bits that worked their way out through his cheek and stated, "OK leader, now I want my five days off to heal up."
He told me later in the war that the reason he waited to heal up before
going to Tachi was because the most miserable time he ever spent at Tachi
was the time he went up there all shot up. He said he spent the whole time
explaining his wounds and missed about 50% of valuable drinking time.

I think Beak's greatest contribution to the Ranch was made on another
occasion when he got shot in the head. Now that may sound a bit unkind but
as an objective flight commander, I found that Beak in his own way, really
benefited the Ranch and me threefold with that maneuver.

First, for some reason or another (I believe it was to repair a case
of bullet holes in an engine), we had been short one plane that day and
Beak had missed out on flying his customary two missions. With his typical
cunning, he cornered me in the bar and poured a gallon or two of Seagrams
VO into me. He pointed out that I was now 30 missions ahead of him and that
it was undemocratic of me to get that far ahead of him. I should point out
here that if we were short an airplane for a day's missions, you could bet
the old flight leader wasn't sitting it out for the day. The younger guys
could work out who didn't fly, but my democratic philosophy was after I got
an airplane, then the rest of the flight came next.

Beak ultimately convinced me to give up my seat on a mission for the
first time. He really wanted that mission.

The next morning, on the first pass over the target, a VC who must have
placated all the devils he worshipped, managed to put a .30 caliber slug
through Beak's windshield, through Beak's helmet visor, through his helmet
and into Beak's head. The bullet lodged just under the skin having
fortunately nearly spent itself before stopping in Beak's head.

Of course, Beak was flying with Clyde. Beak only got shot when he
was flying with Clyde. Animal was the navigator on this mission. Clyde and
Animal got the usual arms and face full of glass. Clyde calmly asked Beak,
"to kindly pull the goddam airplane up" since they were now clipping the
tree tops. Beak told Clyde just as calmly that he, Beak, "had been shot."
Clyde did not perceive this as the greatest revelation of his life. With
the plane taking more decisive bites out of the tree tops, Clyde replied
that, "he, Animal and the airplane had all been shot, but that since nearly
everytime he flew with Beak, this happened, would Beak please pull the
goddam airplane up!"
Beak, being the forthright fellow he was, took umbrage at this. He reached up under his bloody helmet and pulled the rifle slug out from under his skin. Peevishly, Beak shoved the bullet under Clydes nose and said, "see, I told you I was shot" and promptly collapsed over the control column which pushed the plane even further into the tree tops.

Animal, the navigator, pulled Beak off the control column and Clyde pulled the airplane up from the trees.

That was the first nice thing that Beak did for me and "C" flight that day. He got shot in the head instead of me - that's really protecting your leader - a very fine trait in young Officers.

While Beak was laid out on the floor, the wounded navigator climbed into the pilots seat and Clyde was flying the plane from the copilots seat. Clyde no longer believed Beak was just clowning around to get another five day pass to Tachi. Clyde was pretty busy flying the airplane and talking quite vociferously for him on several radio channels trying to get some help.

He really picked the right guys to help Beak. A Marine medical evacuation helicopter offered to meet the battered 123 on the end of the jet runway and airlift Beak to some superb Marine medics (they claimed) that were near Danang. Clyde and Animal managed to jointly squash the plane down on the end of the runway and Beak was winged away to the Marine medical station.

After a couple of false starts, Clyde and Animal slowly weaved the battered 123 all the way down the runway to the Cowboy parking area. By this time, the wing commander had been called on his walkie-talkie and told, "those damn Ranch Hands had landed on his beautiful two mile long runway, stopped in the middle of it, let off a passenger and then lazily taxied down the whole two miles". At least six flights of returning jet fighters had to make low approaches and go around for another landing. That is a good way to anger pilots returning from missions. It also raises the ire of the wing commander who worries about details of that nature.

The wing commander and I arrived simultaneously at the Cowboy parking ramp. He had just emerged from his shiny blue staff car as I fell off my Honda which flipped out from under me when I hit the oil pouring onto the ramp from the bullet holes in the right engine. While I untangled myself from the Honda the wing commander was mumbling some
off color remarks about making optimum use of runway taxi time and some
downright nasty comments on Majors who rode Hondas on the flight line and
fell down.

Before I could really get in gear (stand up) the wing commander climbed
up to the cockpit. Before he got to the top of the steps he met Animal
emerging all bloody from the pilot's seat. "Are you the pilot", he asked.
"Nope. I'm the navigator" was Animal's reply as he shoved past the Colonel.
This caused a funny little tic to start on the Colonel's cheek. He then
tried Clyde in the copilot's seat. "Are you the Pilot," a little more
hopefully this time. Clyde gave him a long, cool New England look, wiped
some blood off his face and said, "Nope." The Colonel really had a glazed
look by this time. Just then, Beak's helmet rolled out of the cockpit.
There was a bullet hole right through the visor, blood all over it, the
earpiece was shot out and Clyde, as impeccably cool as a New England
preacher, pointed to the helmet and said, "There's the pilot."

Score two for Beak. That bird Colonel wing commander suddenly had
acquired an entirely new insight in Ranch Hand operations. The next
morning the Cowboys were issued a brand new jeep, we received unlimited
support for the rest of the tour and I made a friend for the rest of my
career in the wing commander. Top cover that was formerly hard to come
by was now available anytime, anywhere in overwhelming numbers. How many
fighters would I like today, when, where and how much fire power would I
like loaded on them? Good grief! I could even schedule their bomb and
ammo loads. Support-wise it was the ultimate turn around for the Cowboys.

Beak still had one more score to ring up for the Cowboys this day.
He had been airlifted to one of those places where they take care of front
line Marine injuries. We rushed to a telephone to see if our wounded
warrior was going to live or go to wherever crafty Texans go when they
pack it in. The Marine reply to our phone call was a terse, "send some
wheels over here for him - he's all yours."

Great. Beak was apparently
up and about and probably fretting that he was late for his party.

Ike raced off to pick up Beak while our flight surgeon converted the
bar into a mini emergency ward while he doctored up Clyde and Animal
between drinks. When Beak arrived we were introduced to front line
Marine medical support. He triumphantly entered the O-Club with a bandage
wrapped haphazardly around his head - the spitting image of the Spirit of
'76. He was still bleeding profusely from the wound. We unanimously agreed
the Marine front line treatment book probably reads, "To treat a head wound, pour on sulfa, wrap the head with a sloppy bandage and declare the patient ready for duty!"

This obviously called for a celebration unparalleled in "C" flight lore. We had gotten a late start - it was 1030 in the morning. The first thing I did was call off flying for the next day in order that we could have a spectacular bash. Somehow, I forgot to tell Saigon, our fighter cover, our Forward Air Controller and the VC that I had cancelled flying and the next day the fighters and FAC's all flew around in big circles sans Cowboys. That got me another call from THEM.

Each morning we were given an intelligence briefing on the enemy in our target area. This also included an estimate of the ground fire we could expect. The morning of Beak's infamous shot in the head we had been briefed that it would be, "a milk run, really easy since there were no VC reported in the area and no reports of ground fire."

About 10 o'clock that night the party was really getting up a head of steam and several cowboys were dancing a polka on the champagne soaked dance floor. If you thought it strange that two hairy chested, six foot plus, 225 pound Cowboys would dance together, I suggest you reserve your comments. At this time our vaunted intelligence briefing Officer sauntered into the bar. Now this is how those inflated stories about the Cowboys got started.

Every fighter jockey, FAC, Cowboy and anyone I forgot that was in the bar knows that Beak broke the intelligence Officer's arm in two places as a result of the champagne making the floor slippery. The whole combat world knew Beak was a peachy polka dancer and it had to be an accident that while dancing with the intelligence briefer, Beak wouldn't have deliberately thrown him 20 yards into a cement wall.

Score three for Beak. It was amazing how our intelligence briefings suddenly disclosed whole hordes of anti-aircraft guns and lots of bad folks in our target areas who would shoot at you. We had known this all along but we couldn't convince the briefers. As of that night that problem was resolved forever.
Just so you don't think that was the end of the evening for Beak, he racked up one more conversation item before turning in. He was already a mess. The "revolutionary war" Marine medical treatment had left the left side of his head a mess. His arms and the bottom half of his face were already swelling noticeably. In fact, the only part of him that showed that was remotely normal was the upper right side of his face. But not for long.

Beak leaped on a Honda to head for the tent and a well-earned rest. Being Beak, he missed the turn at the corner, hit the Air Police guard shack a mighty lick and naturally banged up the upper right side of his head. Five days later he asked for a little leave up at Tachi and damned if I didn't let him go.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN
THE SECRET MISSION
THEY told us we had a headline making mission coming up but it was super secret. It was so secret we considered shooting the courier and burning the message before we read it. It was getting harder for THEM to rattle us up anymore, so we read the message. When we found out what our secret target was, we unanimously agreed to get ourselves mentally prepared. In other words we went to the Club and had a secret party.

It really was a big deal since THEY ordered the rest of the Ranch Hands in Saigon to put together six extra planes and about sixty people to support us on the mission which was to be run out of Danang.

Our extra Cowboy support folks were told they would be leaving Saigon at once. These folks sat near their planes at Saigon for five hours in the 100 plus ramp temperatures before they were told the mission was called off. Before they could unpack THEY told them to launch their people and planes immediately for Danang. The extra Cowboys were to arrive at Danang, perform a quick refueling and off to the target we all would go.

After the Saigon group arrived, we hurriedly refueled their aircraft and all of us spent the next seven hours sitting on the hot ramp until the mission was finally called off due to bad weather. That was a very long day for a lot of Cowboys.

The weather stayed rotten for the next eleven days because of a monster typhoon in the China Sea. By now our "secret" mission had attracted between forty and fifty news media people from four countries. They knew more about our mission than I did - so much for the secret portion. The world of the Ranch Hands for that eleven day period as we waited out the typhoon consisted of hordes of bored reporters, TV cameramen and radio commentators crawling all over us.

They were so hard up for news copy to send to the States that if a Cowboy went to the john there was bound to be a guy with a microphone right at his side. They didn't film us in the john, but they did take enough film of us eighteen hours a day to have recorded World War Two in its entirety.

We had Canadian and French television people, ABC, NBC, CBS, some others I've forgotten and the BBC. Oh yes, even the Christian Science Monitor folks were there. Some of these folks were acting like they were actually going to fly on the mission with us. I attributed this
absurd pipedream to the ever increasing amount of booze that was being consumed during the foul weather period that cancelled flying day after day. I was stunned when a reporter I had a lot of faith in told me straight out that THEY had informed the press that the Cowboys were in fact going to take civilian newsmen on the mission.

The best Air Force Information Officer in the world was Lieutent Colonel John Whiteside. John was down in Saigon fighting the war and the brass in his special world of news media madness. I had been stationed with John before and he had gotten me more national coverage than some movie stars get. When John set out to get some publicity for someone he could really turn the tap on. At one point in my career he had me featured nationally in so many papers, TV and radio segments and magazines that I actually began receiving fan (and kooky) letters.

I really believed in John. He and I had shared a thousand or so drinks in variety of gin mills. He was no shrinking violet, but a rather feisty bar partner, never letting size influence his decision to attack a disagreeable problem (or gin mill patron).

John understood my problem and commiserated as best he could, however, he couldn't help. The decision had been made so far up the line that only God was left to appeal to. I didn't know God personally, but I sure knew some of THEM that were trying to play the part in Saigon so I reluctantly called THEM.

I dramatically emphasized the point that I did not want, nor did I need any civilians on our planes on an obviously hot target. THEY replied that, "yes, the Cowboys would fly civilians", but they showed some smarts by acquiescing to my plea to limit the number to one reporter and one cameraman.

THEY concluded the phone call with one of the bigger THEMs telling me "Don't get any of the civilians hurt on this mission - it would be bad for publicity." My reply, one of the few I ever made to a Saigon pronouncement was, "Great Scott, don't tell me, tell the VC, they're the ones who are shooting at the airplanes!"
"C" Flight was selected to make the first run over the DMZ and the national news reporter from CBS would be John Hart. I assume John drew the short straw or whatever reporters do to get a red hot story. He was as pleased as a puppy with a big bone that he was going on the mission. I figured the relentless monsoon rains had addled his brain.

We were pleasantly surprised to find that John Hart really knew his business and it was a pleasure working with a professional like him. We could get very little done during the monsoon which in one day poured eleven inches of rain upon us. When I lived in Albuquerque the entire ration of rain was only nine inches.

John Hart set out to get his back up film and commentary completed early. With his back up film in the can so to speak all he needed was the actual combat mission footage and he could press on to report the rest of the war. Although the weather was too unfavorable to actually fly our combat mission, there were short periods during which we could taxi, takeoff and land if we stayed close to the field.

For five days John Hart had us go through the simulated mission including wake up, breakfast, mission briefing, aircraft preflight, start, taxi, takeoff and landing. All of this was superbly performed by "C" Flight since it was boring as hell otherwise to sit around and watch it rain.

There were two serious drawbacks to all this uninvited international publicity. First and paramount to the Cowboys, the VC would not only know we were coming
but also where and when. The Air Force and Navy had about twenty five fighters dedicated to this mission, the Navy had a battleship off the coast and there were at least four rescue helicopters plus three FACs assigned to cover us. We still wanted all the surprise we could get, but that was slipping away from us.

Once, earlier in the war, THEY had directed that a psychological warfare aircraft fly over the target just ahead of us and tell the VC through the aircraft's loud speakers not to shoot at us. THEY thought it was a keen plan. All it accomplished was to provide the now wide awake VC gunners plenty of time to stack up additional ammunition clips for their guns. We scrubbed that idea in short order since the VC shot us up quite severely and even shot up the psychological warfare aircraft.

The other drawback to the publicity was that I quickly noticed I no longer had control of "C" Flight. I was now leading John Wayne, Sidney Portier, Kirk Douglas and Burt Lancaster. With a microphone and a camera on them for eleven days my "C" Flight had gone Hollywood. They wore their go-to-hell commando hats at rakish angles, swaggers replaced normal walking and speech patterns mimiced all of the above named movie stars. They were actually telling the cameramen how to film them at the bar.

The film crews filmed a Cowboy Dining-in, but that portion of the film was providently left on the cutting room floor. That party was so full of zany hollywood wannabees that had Saigon seen the film all of "C" Flight would have been sent back Stateside in straight jackets.
The monsoon finally went somewhere else to rain on other people and the skies cleared up beautifully. We got our three ship formation off the ground with John Hart with me in the lead aircraft. His cameraman was in the last or number three aircraft. Sort of like having the President and Vice President fly in different aircraft so that if one plane crashes and the other makes it they still have something left.

We strongly anticipated that with all the world fanfare of the previous eleven days that the VC would have a massive number of anti-aircraft guns concentrated in the DMZ. I was stunned to find the DMZ absolutely barren. There was no place to hide. B-52's and artillery had leveled everything. Only bomb and shell holes remained. There was not one stick of brush or tree that our mission would do anything to.

I was, however, pleasantly surprised twice on the target run. We had gotten about three minutes into our four minute run before we encountered any ground fire. I must admit it was actually a relief for once to hear ground fire. I just knew with the whole world watching our "super shot and hit" image would be completely destroyed if we had a "no hit" mission. With all the suppression forces above us I knew they were salivating at a chance to find some VC out the open of the barren, treeless DMZ.

Meanwhile, John Hart was doing his commentary into his tape recorder standing up in the flight engineers box as we flew over the target. The box only came up to your waist if you were standing up. When the ground fire started I heard two quick hits somewhere behind me in the
cargo section of the plane. I could tell they were near the center of the cargo compartment where John was doing his on-scene combat mission report.

I was concerned for John's well being for two reasons. One, I liked him and didn't want him hurt or killed. Two, if John got hurt you can bet Saigon would see that I got hurt as well. I called to the flight engineer on the intercom to how they were faring with the bullets coming through the plane. My always unflappable flight engineer had an admiring tone to his voice when he told me we had taken two .30 caliber slugs through the fuselage both of which hit just two inches from John Hart's head and then ricocheted off to wherever ricochets go. He said John kept right on talking into his microphone and slowly lowered himself down into the box without batting an eye.

Several months after I had rotated to the States John had CBS graciously provide me with a copy of the six minute Walter Cronkite news segment that John did on the Cowboys. I can vouch that John's voice never waivered when those bullets nearly took his head off. I could hear them hit the plane on the tape. John was beautiful! That was our kind of combat reporter! Most reporters we met didn't want to leave Saigon and get out in the boonies with the troops where the action was.

One thing though, John did overdo the buildup he gave me on camera particularly making it sound like I was the commander of the whole cotton-picking war. I guess that explains the chilly atmosphere in the Saigon phone calls from THEM for the rest of my tour. Thanks John.
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HONG KONG
There was a Rest and Recreation (R & R) program for the military personnel serving in Southeast Asia. This program authorized servicemen to take up to a five day leave from the war zone, and with free air provided, they could elect to go to Bangkok, Australia, Hawaii, Hong Kong or other destinations. I chose Hong Kong.

The R & R was designed to be a morale builder and to help you get your head straight about half way through the one year combat tour. A serviceman could spend a month or two looking forward to his R & R, enjoy the time spent on leave, and have pleasant memories of it for several months after. It sounded awfully good to me.

Most combat personnel were in pretty bad mental and physical shape when their turn for R & R came up. We were only authorized one of these leaves during our tour in Southeast Asia.

I arrived at the R & R center on schedule physically drained, mentally exhausted and a prime candidate for the advertised relaxation program. It was 10am when I checked in. The orders were very specific about when you had to be there. There were about one hundred of us and promptly as 10am we were lined up to wait for over an hour in the 100 degree sunshine. No shade was authorized at the R & R center.

After filling out a veritable mountain of paperwork, we were subjected to enough briefings to qualify us for associate professorships in Eastern culture. We were intensely briefed on what we couldn't do. It would have been easier and quicker to brief us on what we could do. That certainly would have been the shorter of the two
lists. The R & R center was called "Camp Alpha". It was so bad they never built a "Camp Bravo".

By mid-afternoon my interest in going on R & R was waning rapidly. Fortunately they finally loaded us on a chartered civilian jetliner and the most beautiful American round eyed flight attendant handed me the first glass of cold, real milk I'd had in six months. I felt there just might be a chance this was going to be a worthwhile trip. Again, I had underestimated THEM and the R & R planners.

It was quite evident that not one of the Saigon planners, organizers or administrators had ever gone through the programmed R & R procedures themselves. As we deplaned in Hong Kong there was a raging thunderstorm in progress. It was a long soaking run to cover where they packed us into a cramped briefing room. Soaked to our skin they made us listen to the same damn briefings we had listened to in Saigon.

We were wet, tired, hungry and bored. My patience level was way below zero and my physical state was nearing complete paralysis. I was mentally composing some fancy forms of assassination for every noncombatant briefer I had had to listen to that day and night. It was now after 8pm in the evening when THEY finally turned us loose. We were so fatigued and hungry by then that any thought of a night out on the town was out of the question. I believe that first day had been deliberately and diabolically planned to ruin our first night out of the combat zone.

I decided to have supper at the hotel, sack out early and get a fresh jump on the shopping and sightseeing in the morning. The dining room Maitre'd coldly informed
me that I could not be served unless I wore a coat. I had several nice civilian coats back in the States, but I had not found them required for combat so I hadn't brought any to Vietnam. He offered to rent me a jacket. I rented the jacket. I also ordered Lobster Newburg for supper. When I paid for my supper and the rented jacket I found I could have eaten at New York's Club 21 for a lot less and I would have gotten Lobster Newburg. I hadn't recognized what it was they served me but it sure as heck wasn't Lobster Newburg.

I collapsed into bed with one day and one night gone on my five day R & R. So far I hadn't left the hotel had had a lousy meal and was in worse shape than I had been back in the combat zone.

The next morning I took stock of my situation. I had exactly three days and two nights left on my R & R. It is very clever the way THEY counted a five day R & R. The day of travel to and the day of travel from your R & R come out of your five days. By my count it comes out to a three day R & R.

Fortified with a breakfast of six or seven bloody marys I strode forth for the short trip to "the place" to buy my goodies. Everyone in Vietnam knew someone who had been to Hong Kong and could tell you where the fantastic bargains were. My budget had been planned by experts who had made the Hong Kong trip previously. I went to "the place", mentioned my expert planners names and within 45 minutes of entering "the place" I had been measured and handed a bill for #385 U.S. money.

The major flaw with my planners estimates was that
their budget was off just a tad. Where they said I would get three tailored suits, I got two. Instead of four pairs of hand made shoes I had three. They had not factored in the astronomical inflation rate the G.I.s were fueling by visiting Hong Kong. Cowboys always were bad on their timing.

My next disappointment was learning I could only send home $50 worth of presents a day. That meant only $200 during my R & R and that at only $50 a day. With the combat tour a year long and only four days to shop in the $200 limit was ridiculous. The first beaded blouse I looked at cost more than $200. That would have shot my entire legal shopping limit and I would have to cut it up into four pieces to send it home legally.

Another bothersome detail I discovered long after I had left Hong Kong was the problem of female sizes. I found this out in exactly the amount of time it takes to send a package from Hong Kong to get to the States, have my favorite female try it on and her highly ticked off letter get back to me in Vietnam asking me, "Who in the devil were you buying those miniature clothes for?". If your favorite females size is 32 and you send her an oriental size 32 you had best hope she has a very tiny little sister she can give your gift to.

That R & R was just one good deal after another. It was about this time that the questionable Lobster Newburg from the night before hit me. I contracted the most terrible case of food poisoning ever. I had diarrhea, fever, chills and cramps.

Many pilots have hemorhoids and I am no exception.
On top of everything else the diarrhea had my hemorrhoids hanging out about a yard. Leaving the hotel room was out of the question. That was the worst case of the miserable I ever had. On the fifth and final day of my R & R I was barely able to crawl from my bed and board the aircraft to fly us back to Saigon. I was literally dying to get back to the war where I would remain relatively healthy, much wealthier and definitely safer from food poisoning. No one ever got food poisoning from C-rations. This had been a very forgettable first and last R & R.

One of the first things I did when I got well was to write back to Hong Kong Chamber of Commerce requesting some of their tourist brochures. I wanted to see what I had missed.

Later, just before Christmas, I took my second short break in three months a caught a flight to Tachikawa. It was on my second day of my crusade to totally deplete the Tachi O-club of Seagram's VO that I walked into the wrong room while heading for the men's room. I had walked into the photographer's tiny shop. This was a small concession operated by a local Japanese photographer. He did a thriving business taking pictures of transient combat vacationers who wanted to send home handsome color portraits of themselves.

I must have been on my sixth or seventh Seagram's that night because if there is one thing I do well it is finding the men's room. What the heck, I was already in the photographer's shop so I figured I would have some snazzy portraits made for the Stateside folks. Being three quarters smashed, I was certain it was a great time
to send portraits of a seasoned combat Air Commando home for Christmas instead of money or presents.

I had become very sly, cunning and wily when dealing with local tradesmen by this time. I first pinned down the price and then extracted from the photographer the absolute specific date I could expect the portraits. He swore on Buddha's belly that I would have them in six days so I could send them off for Christmas. He was so convincing that I ordered a half dozen more copies just in case other Stateside folks saw this splendid Air Commando's portrait and I would be inundated with requests for more copies. Nobody wrote.

I finally received the portraits on the 31st of March. Cowboys had a bad thing with timing.