CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
MORTAR ATTACK
We had a real zinger of a mortar attack one night. I had never been under fire while on the ground before. The Florida natives had been very friendly and never fired mortars at our Stateside air base, so I was understandably concerned when we heard there had been mortar attacks on bases near ours.

Being concerned about mortar attacks is like being concerned about crashing in an airliner. Everyone knows it will happen to somebody else but never, never to you. We had a large concentration of friendly artillery that had been moved close in to our air base. The first night they began firing out at the VC it was really tough on us flyer types. We just weren't used to big guns firing near to us. It only took a few nights though and we were sleeping soundly once again in spite of the cannon fire.

When the first VC 122mm mortar round hit, we were all sound asleep and even though our own artillery was booming away, I knew what that inbound round was. I hit face down in the dirt of the sandbagged mortar bunker before the debris thrown up by the VC's first round came down on the shelter roof.

What amazed me considering I was never trained in ground war tactics, was that I had leaped out of bed from a sound sleep, in a pitch black room and had an M-16 rifle, a pair of boots and a flashlight in my hands when I hit facedown in the bunker. On a normal morning I would have trouble finding the alarm clock. I consider my grabbing up of the bare essentials as I did while moving at about Mach one in my race to the bunker to be one of the most significant feats of my adult life.
I believe the Russians do so well in the Olympics by having their runners practice with mortar shells landing behind them. It sure does get one moving smartly out of the starting blocks.

Once we got into the bunker there was a lot of huffing and puffing at first, then when the initial spasm abated everyone started flashing their lights around to dispel the creepy feeling that all the other folks in the bunker were VC infiltrators. Once everyone was identified as friendlies there was several moments of squeaky voices and much nervous laughing and joking about mortar attacks. When that pitiful show of bravado was over we all hunkered down with our backs to the sandbag walls and doused our lights to save our batteries.

The bunker had never been used since we had arrived at the base and it had that musky old mine smell to it. It was dead quiet in the bunker with each of us probably getting a deeper appreciation for what the British civilians went through during the WW II air raids. Our heartbeats were just getting down to a reasonable rate when a most frightening thing occurred.

It was a very low voice, no one ever admitted to whose it was, but voice from the bowels of the dark bunker asked, "I wonder if there are any snakes in here?". In a split second twenty or more terrified Cowboys exited that bunker.

I'm not real sure a snake can do you a lot of harm, but I am positive a 122mm rocket can. Yet here we were.
Twenty or so guys who had just vacated a perfectly good bunker designed to withstand 122mm rockets now standing out in the open. Cooler heads prevailed and a young Officer who I felt should have been recommended for the Silver Star went back into the bunker to make a snake search. About that time a mortar round hit near us and we scramble back into the bunker. I did notice that although our newly designated snake control officer assured us the bunker was free of snakes and creepy crawly things, there was a great deal of fierce swatting at imagined things crawling on our near naked bodies.

The mortar attack was over in about fifteen minutes. It became eerily quiet outside and everyone wanted to get out of the bunker. We could see some fierce fires burning on the base so we all climbed on top of the bunker for a better view.

Some small arms fire began at the other end of the base and suddenly one of the base security sergeants raced up to the bunker. He was probably a very nice person in the real world, he may even have had a mother, and he probably had never before really cursed an officer in his entire military career. I suppose he just got all caught up in this war thing since he cussed and threatened the daylights out of the twenty or so of us on top of the bunker. He did it in a superlative manner I might add.

He left no question in our minds that he absolutely, positively and definitely meant for us to "Get off that Goddam bunker roof, get inside that Goddam bunker,
shut up and sit down and don't come out till I say so!". He also made some unflattering comments about our mental processes, specifically, "What kind of dumb bastards would get up on a bunker roof, in the open, when the VC were overrunning the place?"

We held a conference inside the bunker and decided that just as soon as the all clear sounded we would just walk right out of that bunker in spite of that sergeant.

Tet is the Oriental new year and it was a strange thing for us. There was a truce and everyone quit fighting. As long as it was not a combat mission we could fly anywhere and no one would shoot at us. I made several flights during Tet and it seemed as if the war never existed.

There was still a hazard involved in Tet despite the cease fire. It seems the friendly South Vietnamese had huge quantities of ammunition. They also had this great compulsion to shoot their guns into the air in huge volleys to celebrate the Tet new year. The only bad part about this seemingly harmless fun is old Newton's law. You can figure on a good night, the Vietnamese shoot about 200,000 bullets into the air. You can get even odds that 200,000 also come down out of the air. The score at our base alone was one American wounded, four American planes with bullet holes. The only time we ever wore steel helmets and flak vests on the base was during Tet to protect us from falling friendly bullets.
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
GROUND FIRE
Our flight engineers really had a rough job. They stayed hunkered down in a supposedly bullet resistant box in the cargo bay until the ground fire began. Then their job was to stand up and throw smoke grenades out the open doors to mark where the VC gunners were shooting from. It does seem ridiculous to put them in the boxes to protect them, and then have them leap up and throw smoke grenades when the bullets start flying into the aircraft.

We took a lot of hits and we certainly got our share of Purple Hearts. Clyde had an experience that ended up sending him home from the war because he had gotten one too many Purple Hearts. He and another Cowboy were climbing out after making a pass over a relatively quiet target when an armor piercing .50 caliber came up through the cockpit floor. That armor piercing hummer did its job and went through the floor armor like it was cheese.

The bullet did two things. It hurled a piece of boiler plate the size of a silver dollar right into the co-pilots flak vest directly over his heart. The core of the bullet continued on into Clyde's ankle and followed his leg bone right up to his knee. The first indication I had of trouble was Clyde calling over the radio that he was hit and both he and the co-pilot were wounded. I asked for their condition and Clyde said he was hurting pretty bad and the co-pilot was slumped forward with a piece of shrapnel sticking out of his chest.
Pretty soon Clyde's voice started getting weak and that meant we might soon have two unconscious pilots and only the flight engineer to fly the aircraft to an emergency landing. The next voice we heard was the co-pilot. He said he was flying the plane and that Clyde was unconscious. By this time we were near Danang and I had every piece of emergency support equipment in northern half of South Vietnam standing by.

The plane with its' wounded crew made a reasonably normal approach to the runway and the last voice we heard calling was Clyde's. I landed right behind Clyde's plane and there were enough emergency vehicles surrounding Clyde's plane to outfit a medium sized nation. The medics seemed to be more concerned with the co-pilot because Clyde was just standing around while they had the co-pilot lying down on a stretcher. I told a flight surgeon Clyde had been hit also. The Doc says, "Clyde's hit too? I've been working on the wrong guy. The co-pilot only has a piece of shrapnel stuck in his flak vest, it never even broke skin". Tough Clyde walked to the ambulance, but that was the last walk he took for many weeks. When he got well enough to get around on crutches he was sent home.

Clyde didn't want to be rotated back to the States. We finally convinced him to go by telling him if he stayed he would only be allowed to fly on very quiet targets or maybe assigned full time to target evaluation. That is the worst thing you can do to a Cowboy so Clyde went back to the States as ordered by the flight surgeon. When he starts telling his war stories to his kids years from now they will think he is as full of crap as a Christmas
they will think he is as full of crap as a Christmas
turkey. Maybe this recounting will give him some
credibility.

The "trash haulers" as we fondly called them were
the C-123 crews that hauled anything and everything around
Vietnam. They were strictly cargo haulers but they sure
did get some strange cargos. Often they were called upon
to transport South Vietnamese civilians to various places.
The cargo haulers told us that when they were going to be
flown somewhere the civilians would run what they called
"Buddha Juice" all over themselves which they claimed
protected them from ground fire, crashing and other serious
calamities while flying.

The Ranch Hands were taking so many hits at this
time that we seriously considered rubbing Buddha Juice all
over ourselves. We actually got some, but it was so vile
smelling we quickly dropped that idea. If we rubbed that
stuff on us we would have been banned in every bar in
Southeast Asia. Erase that thought. We had an image to
maintain.

During this period while we were taking an abnormal
number of hits from ground fire, there was a television
commercial being shown in the States that showed an
aircraft windshield being shot at with a machine gun and
the bullets were just bouncing off the windshiel. The gist
of the commercial was you should use Aerowax because the
windshield on the airplane was made of the stuff that is
in Aerowax.
You guessed it. We must have received twenty cans of Aerowax from concerned friends in the States. We tried it on our windscreens, all over the airplane, on our helmets. I didn't see anyone drinking it but I'm not sure someone didn't try that also. No luck, we kept getting hit hard so we decided we should write the Better Business Bureau and file a complaint about false advertising.

Our first enlisted hero was "Junior" a good old boy. He was a sergeant flight engineer, very quiet and flew a lot of missions. He particularly attracted bullets. Junior was on our first airplane that was shot down. With typical Cowboy bad timing and bad luck the aircraft crashed right in the middle of the VC gunners who shot it down.

Junior was a slow talker, but he sure made some fast moves that day. He untangled himself from the destruction in the back end of the plane, grabbed his M-16 rifle and ran around the wreckage to the front of the plane. The pilot was O.K., but the co-pilot was trapped in his seat and the engine next to him was on fire. While the pilot worked on freeing the co-pilot, Junior ran back into the plane and grabbed a fire extinguisher.

Just as Junior began beating back the flames from the burning engine, the VC gunners opened up on the downed plane and crew. Junior picked up his M-16 and played ground soldier for a spell by shooting back at the VC. Then he picked up the fire extinguisher and played fireman. The VC started shooting again so Junior picked up the co-co-pilot's M-16 and traded some more bullets with the VC.
He then went back to fighting the fire and pulling on the co-pilot to free him from the wreckage. When the VC once more began blazing away Junior grabbed the pilot's M-16 and went back to the ground soldier mode.

Junior's three role playing episode could have gone on for a long time since the VC wouldn't give up and Junior was really getting the hang of this ground combat thing.

Fortunately for the VC a long range reconnaissance team of Marines in a flock of helicopters saw this weird one man war below them. If you know Marines you know they love a good skirmish. They simply set their choppers down all around the crashed plane sort of like the covered wagons circling up. Before the chopper skids hit the ground Marines poured out of the choppers and simply crunched the VC in about the time it takes to say 20,000 rounds.

The Marines handled that incident as if they did those things every day. Maybe they did. Junior got the Silver Star, volunteered for a second tour and promptly got shot down again. He decided he would go back to the States for a breather and everyone gave a sigh of relief. We were all scared to death he would ship over again and we'd get another plane shot down.

When Junior, now known as "magnet-ass" for his ability to draw ground fire, got shot down the second time, his aircraft went right into the jungle and totally disappeared. No fire, no smoke, not even a hole in the thick jungle. It was if they were swallowed up without a
trace. Very spooky. We figured they were goners. Not so, for in just a minute or two the crew came up loud and clear on the survival radio, said no one was hurt, but could we please send a rescue chopper as soon as possible. I asked them if they were concerned about VC nearby and they said no, but we are very concerned about snakes!

The way the rest of us circling around above them felt was that if you can crash into a nearly impenetrable jungle and come up with only scratches you are so lucky that snakes would seem to be a non-problem.

We were naturally ecstatic that our crew was O.K. that as soon as we landed we raced over to the rescue folks place of business to await their return by rescue chopper from the crash site. It was a joyous reunion. We packed everybody into a hastily borrowed G.I. truck and headed for the O-club and a super "shot down and rescued party"

I was riding my sturdy old Harley motorcycle behind the truck with the jubilant Cowboys. The weather was clear, the road was bone dry, it was only 0930am and I was cold sober. I'll never know how I managed it, but when I popped the clutch to whizz away from the stoplight at the main intersection of the air base, the front end of the cycle went straight up in the air, I fell on my butt and the motorcycle came crashing down on top of me doing great harm to my ribs and my pride. The most embarrassing part was when I got the stars out of my eyes while lying on my back, I was looking up at a staff car that had been right behind me at the light and sure enough it had four stars on the license plate and snappy little flag on the fender with
four stars.

I am convinced the broad daylight pratt fall off my motorcycle in front of the Commanding General of 7th Air Force triggered the program to get all servicemen in Vietnam off of motorcycles. The General had a pretty good indications from the daily safety and accident briefings his safety officer gave him that the military had more casualties from motorcycle accidents than the war. My fantastic acrobatic trick in full view of the world with the General watching was more than likely all the convincing he needed to determine that motorcycles could be harmful to your health. It is ironic that I probably was the cause of the ban on importing Hondas that got me in so much trouble later on.

There was another Cowboy pilot who also had a magnet ass, remember Junior? He wasn't in my flight, but when I was first checking out we flew in the same formation for three days straight and three days in a row his plane was riddled by groundfire. I wasn't ten feet from him yet my plane never took a hit. For the next three days, after we had our mission briefing, and as we were walking to the planes, he asked me to change planes and flight positions with him. If the briefing called for him to fly as number two aircraft and I was to fly as number three, he would fly as number three and I would fly as number two.

For the next three days I escorted his shot up plane to some mini-airstrip so he could make an emergency landing and get his battle damaged C-123 repaired. I would fly him and his crew back to our main base in my unmarked,
unhit airplane. He got an early rotation to the States after collecting a couple or three Purple Hearts, the last one for a piece of glass from a shot out windscreen the base docs weren't capable of removing.

When we first flew our three ship formation on passes over a new target the VC would shoot at the lead but by not leading the target as you would when shooting ducks, the bullets usually hit the number three plane in the tail section. Since we went back on each target every 90 days, the VC got to practice by the calendar and the more times we went back the better they got.

Initially, if you hadn't had your share of groundfire hits for the week, and the Cowboys were really weird about that, you could fly as number three in the formation, the last ship, and you could up your hit count in a hurry. However, as we continued to return to the same targets those previously inexperienced VC gunners soon became real 9-level pros. They not only could soon learn to lead well enough to not only hit the lead aircraft, but to shoot up the engines and the cockpit. That got our attention.

In the early days at Danang we were the bastard outfit and had no permanent bunks of our own. We were billeted with some really hairy chested heros, the Jolly Green Giant rescue crews. These guys put thier butts on the line constantly day or night to go into enemy territory and pull shot down aircrews out of the jungle while under intense groundfire. Fantastic people.

One night the Jollys all came in laughing and
giggling. Not much of their work was funny we asked what had them all chuckling. They told us they had come to a hover over a downed fighter pilot and had just put their rescuemman down in the jungle on their hoist. This was their most vulnerable time in the rescue. With their man on the ground and their hoist cable far down into the jungle, they had to hover till they recovered their rescuemman and the hoist cable.

It was at this time that a black pajamaed VC raced out of the woods with his AK-47 machine gun. He pointed the automatic weapon at the chopper, then moved the muzzle about 30 yards in front of the hovering chopper. He fired off his entire 30 round clip just ahead of the dead still chopper's cockpit. The door gunner neatly chopped the VC down with a fast burst from his mini-gun. The pararescueman on the ground made a fast search of the VC's body, scarfed up the VC's AK-47 and leaped on the hoist for a quick getaway.

When they were clear of groundfire they read the rice paper drawing the former VC gunner had been carrying. It showed a jolly green helicopter and in clear North Vietnemese it said, "To shoot down this helicopter, aim your weapon 3 planes lengths ahead of it". Somebody in Hanoi forgot to add that the helicopter must be moving for this strategy to work.

The jolly greens were planning to have 10,000 copies made for air drop all over North and South Vietnam. It might just make a few more VC's miss a hovering chopper.
CHAPTER NINETEEN
OTHER GUYS
Sometimes we would fly on missions with guys from other types of flying units. This was purely goofing off on our part. It wasn't particularly bright either since all the ways to get seriously hurt or killed were available to us on any Ranch Hand combat mission.

I was down at Bien Hoa once for a briefing or some other nonessential thing when I met this absolutely crazy Forward Air Controller (FAC) in the O-club bar. Those strange fellows made their war by flying around in teeny weeny airplanes that had zero bullet protection. At least we had some armor plate around the cockpit area. The FACs' mission was to putt putt around a tree top level looking for VC activity. When they found something they then hung around and directed air strikes on the area.

This FAC must have known my weakness because he managed to inveigle me into drinking about three quarts of Seagrams VO while he told me heroic stories about FAC flying. Before I realized it I had volunteered to fly with him the next morning and look for VC and trouble.

As usual, my timing was bad. I was already pretty shaky from night before and his teeny bopper aircraft did not install much confidence in me at all. Sure enough he found seven pajama clad VC out in the open and began his one man war. He was flying an unarmed O-1 spotter plane which is nothing more than a Piper Cub aircraft you see at civilian airports. It is fabric covered and even if you rubbed aerowax on it it would not slow down a bullet.

My fearless FAC chased the seven VC into a bunch of
trees sort of like he was herding cattle. Then he called for all the world to hear that he had seven VC surrounded and who would like to come and exterminate them.

I kept hoping some fighter jocks with wall to wall ordinance would show up to take on the attack role in this scene. No such luck. It seemed everyone was busy making toothpicks or killing monkeys on much more important targets. The FAC continued to circle the VC while we were literally looking into their eyes and down the wrong end of their AK-47 machine guns. This FAC guy was moving his little airplane all over the sky so the VC couldn't get a clean shot at us. I had always believed airplanes were meant to be flown smoothly coordinated and that passenger comfort should be uppermost in the mind of the pilot particularly when I am the hung over passenger.

No fighters showed up but some bored artillery guys said they wanted some of the action and they started dropping some really heavy stuff right underneath of us. In the meantime I was ready to lose my breakfast from erratic, crazy and violent flying maneuvers we were going through, the VC shooting at us, and now the damn artillery rounds going off under us.

I mentioned to the FAC that there is a law of gravity thing that says them artillery shells are falling from the sky. I also mention that the sky they are falling through is the one and same sky we are presently occupying and I prudently suggest we get the hell out of there. He quoted some vague odds about him, me, the airplane and an artillery shell all being in the same place at the same
time. This does not console me in the slightest since the last statistics course I took prominently mentioned something about the random possibility theory.

The FAC wasn't satisfied that the VC's position was being shelled, he had to make several low passes over them firing his M-16 out the window at them. When he ran out of ammunition he continued to make low passes firing his white smoke marker rockets at them.

After an hour of this ridiculous circus act the FAC headed for home. All he had in mind was to get some gas and more white smoke markers and go back to his war.

He actually expected me to go back with him. I allowed myself one millisecond to consider his offer and made straight for a three quart afternoon at the O-club.

Another day, I flew in a two seat F-100F jet fighter with a six foot five inch pilot named Gene who I am certain had to coil up like a snake to fit into the jet's cockpit. Gene was a good sort, kind of hard to talk to at the bar since you always wound up with a stiff neck from looking up at him. Gene knew I had been strictly a single engine jet pilot until I went to Vietnam so he offered to let me fly on a combat mission with him in his F-100.

Things were going pretty well on the mission. Gene had taxied out with three other F-100s and made the takeoff and climb out. When we leveled at 20,000 feet Gene let me take the control while we were in close formation. Our flight of four fighters were loaded from
wingtip to wingtip with bombs and things. I missed a
hand signal from the leader and managed to get four
F-100s going absolutely ape to keep from running into
each other. Gene noticed right off that I was causing
some concern to the other members of the flight who were
now scattered to the four winds in self protection.

The leader regathered his flock and we pressed on
to the target. Gene did not make an offer to let me fly
his plane anymore that day. I convinced myself that flying
the C-123 for eight months and the different kind of
formation we flew had made me a little rusty and I really
hadn't lost the tender touch of a superb formation flyer.

When we had dropped all but our last two bombs,
we climbed up to 20,000 feet where we were to drop our last
bombs by skyspot (a ground radar station told us when to
drop the bombs) on suspected VC positions. From 20,000
feet straight and level flight, we received the radio tone
that told us to drop our bombs which Gene did. The F-100
lurched slightly as the two 750 pound iron bombs fell away
toward the ground. Gene rolled the F-100 over on its back
and flew up alongside the falling bombs. We were now two
bombs and an F-100 in perfect formation heading for the
ground at whatever speed and angle bombs fall at. A quick
calculation by my trigger like mind told me we were in a
few feet away from 1500 pounds of high explosives and the
bombs were wobbling all over the place. I think when my
high pitched plea to get the hell away from them Goddam
armed bombs became incoherent babbling was when Gene pulled
up and away. He sure had a way of getting my attention.

Another time when I was down at Bien Hoa, Gene,
who had flown some super top cover for the Cowboys, drank about two gallons of Seagram's VO with me and somewhere in our highly intelligent analysis of THEIR war tactics he asked me why we had camouflaged our C-123s. It seemed kind of dumb to him since there was no record of North Vietnamese MIGs attacking Ranch Hand aircraft from 12 o'clock high. Also, he pointed out as he grabbed me by both lapels and getting my attention as fighter jocks are wont to do, "How in the hell was our top cover supposed to find us in the jungle tree tops all camouflaged?". In fact, he went on to say, shaking me a couple of times to be sure I got his point, "How would you like to fly with me on a Ranch Hand top cover mission so he could prove his point?" as I mentioned, he stood about six foot five and he now had a hammer lock on me, I couldn't dispute his point.

The next day he had me riding in the backseat of his F-100F two seat fighter. I had briefed the mission face to face with the F-100 top cover pilots and my own "C" Flight pilots but instead of leading the flight in my C-123 I flew with Gene on his top cover mission over my flight.

Here we were, I am in the backseat of the F-100F, we are circling at 4500 feet, our FAC is somewhere in Southeast Asia, but at least in radio contact with us, the Cowboys are circling at 3500 feet and nobody has seen anybody yet. We milled around for about twenty minutes and finally we are all gathered in the same general area. The old Cowboy radio call of, "Take 'em down Cowboys" was beautiful except the flight of camouflaged C-123s flat
disappeared when they let down on top of the jungle at 150 feet above the trees. Now I could see, or really couldn't see, what the problem was for our top cover fighters. Whoever decided to camouflage the Ranch Hand aircraft in essence effectively hid us from the very folks we wanted to see us.

That night I had a nice wide white stripe painted from wing tip to wing tip across the top of our three planes. We, the fighters and the FACs all thought that was the greatest tactical improvement in warfare to date. The FAC's could see us, the fighters could see us and the VC couldn't see the stripe on the top of the wing. We got superior top cover support that day. It was a really great idea.

It was another one sided conversation with THEM that went something like this, "Dammit, you can't paint a white stripe over that $5,000 camouflage paint job! Now you paint over that stripe right now!". I am a reasonable person and I believe in carrying out orders when they are as direct as that one was. I had the white stripe painted over with bright day glow orange paint and the war went on.

Skip, my ex-F-104 friend, really was unhappy in his ground job and once in a while we would meet at the club in Saigon and have quart or two to review the war. One night Skip was feeling so low I asked if he would like to fly some combat missions with my outfit? Normally, if you asked someone if they would like to fly on a Ranch Hand combat mission you were suddenly talking to an empty bar stool. All Skip asked was where to be at what time.
Skip flew his first Ranch Hand mission sitting on the radio console between myself and the co-pilot. He was a born combatant and a swift learner. He didn't have four months of C-123 checkout, nor 30 days of stateside advanced mission training, nor 10 days of in-country orientation missions. In fact Skip had never been in a C-123 before.

As I said, Skip was a fast learner, his second mission I put him in the pilot's seat as we came up on the target and he flew it like the professional he was. I hope I made up to him in some small way what to me was a very big deal (flying the F-104) and hopefully lessened some of the sting of a desk job in Saigon.

I received a letter from George "Bud" Day, my closest personal friend and the greatest fighter pilot I have ever flown with. Bud and I had at least 2,000 hours of single engine jet time either flying in the same two seater or in formation with each other. Bud was one of the Air Forces' pilots with the most flying time in the F-100. He would be flying the F-100 from a nearby newly constructed air base. I was really looking forward to having Bud as my fighter top cover. I knew if I came up with any problems on top cover, a phone call to Bud would get instant action to clear up the problem. Bud would take it right to THEM as he was not known for a limp wrist approach to a problem. He told it like it was to whatever echelon in the chain of command it took to get results.

Bud had just left a Stateside Air Guard unit that he was advising and imparting his F-100 expertise to before they were to be called up for Vietnam duty. Bud had only
arrived at his new base a day or two before I could fly up to say hello and welcome to the war. Just by happenstance I was carrying two quarts of Johnny Walker Red label scotch. He was briefing for a flight when I found him and stuck those two bottles of scotch in his hands. Man! What a greeting I received. To this day I will never know if it was me or the scotch he was glad to see. Those fighter pilots at that new base were very short of scotch.

Bud and I were able to get off at the same time to run up to Tachikawa air base near Tokyo for a quart or two now and then. The first time we met up there, I had to get back sooner than he did, but I ran into some trouble down at the passenger terminal. Seems like a war staller had decided you needed official orders to catch a hop from Japan to Vietnam. I didn't have anything remotely official. I also didn't have a prayer of getting official orders to go back since I didn't have any orders sending me up to Tachikawa in the first place.

Bud had a set of official fighter squadron orders that were extremely well written. The reason for his trip to Japan was highly questionable but war stallers never looked at those parts of the orders. His orders had a high priority number and said in essence that the above named personnel would be granted all kinds of special support to insure they got back to Vietnam.

It only took about ten seconds to type my name under his name on his orders and I was on my way back to Danang. Bud really put me on about that. For years he and I had traveled on civilian aircraft going on temporary
duty, delivering airplanes or getting back to our base after an airplane we had been flying malfunctioned and we had to leave it at another base to be repaired. In those days the airline ticket for two military people traveling together would be made out in the name of the ranking officer. Bud outranked me so our airline ticket always read Major George Day "and one other". Damned if I wasn't in the middle of a war and I was still "and one other".

Bud stopped off at my base on his way back from Japan. I couldn't resist taking him out on some Ranch Hand combat missions. Bud flew the C-123 on several missions, earned his purple scarf and more that honorary Ranch Hand membership during his visit.

Like any normal fighter pilot who flew high and fast he wondered why anyone would want to fly low and slow over hot targets and get the daylights shot out of themselves.

His question was prophetic in a way for soon he was having the same problems I had had in trying to win the war against THEM. He opted to leave the conventional fighter bomber role he had been assigned to and organized and was made the squadron commander of a newly formed unit called the Misty Super Facs. These hardy, hairy chested souls job was to fly into North Vietnam and fly their jets low and slow as spotter planes looking for SAM sites and other VC targets for other jets to attack.

That was a real challenge. The last time I saw Bud during my tour we met at Tachikawa to say goodbye since I was rotating to the States. He asked me if I had any
advice for him. My exact words were, "keep quiet and fly more than any other guy in your outfit". I really wish I had had the foresight to add that the more you fly, the greater your exposure to being shot down increases. As usual my Cowboy advice and my timing was bad.

Bud went back to the war, got shot down, captured, escaped, recaptured and spent nearly six years setting a resistance example that POW's in any war will have a hard time equalling. A very brave and courageous man.

When I met Bud in California after his release he did not punch me in the nose, so I guess he would have flown just as hard as he did without my advice.

Bud was awarded the Medal of Honor, the Air Force Cross, the Silver Star and several Purple Hearts. He also earned every combat medal the Air Force awards plus some very high decorations from foreign countries. He is acknowledged to be the most highly decorated Officer in the military. Bud requested that my wife and I be his escorts at his Medal of Honor ceremony, a great honor for us.

If you ever read his gut wrenching book "Return With Honor" NOT the Bosnian shootdown story by Captain O'Grady with the same title..... you will see a full page picture of Bud and I going on a Ranch Hand mission in Vietnam. This picture has nothing to do with his book or his POW experience and I asked him why he included it in the book. His answer was simply, "It's my book and I'll put whoever's picture I want in it". That' a good friend!
CHAPTER TWENTY
ASHUA VALLEY
There were three smaller valleys that ran out out of the Ashua valley and sort of resembled a chicken's foot.

We had good old "C" Flight set up to do our war thing in one of the valleys one morning. We had a red hot flight of B-57s for our top cover. After rendezvousing and a short briefing over the radio we went down on our target. Our intelligence folks had assured us there was no major enemy activity in any of the smaller valleys. However, the VC were really laying in the bushes for us that morning.

I was flying as leader and immediately took a .50 caliber slug right through my left engine nacelle but the engine continued to run just fine despite all kinds of wires and things sticking out of the big hole in the engine nacelle.

Being a superior combat flight commander I analyzed the situation with the speed of light and made a battlefield decision that the valley we were in would be immediately removed as a target for that day. Even though I showed a high degree of intelligence in getting "C" Flight smartly out of that valley, I wasn't ready to call the war off yet. Our top cover guys were having a grand time beating up the valley where the VC shot us up. I asked them to save their ammunition and bombs since I now had deduced that if all the VC were in valley number one, the valley number two would become our target for today.

We lumbered into valley number two and shortly discovered that all the VC who missed the turn into valley number one were in valley number two. This group were an even superior group of gunners than the valley number one group. Their first burst of groundfire hit two of our
three aircraft. One bullet did the weird thing that bullets do and neatly clipped the HF (high frequency) radio antenna wire right off at the connection just above the cockpit. This wire is stretched above the aircraft from the cockpit to the very top of the tail. With the front connection shot away the antenna wire now streamed behind the aircraft since it was still connected to the tail.

We were flying in close trail formation and as I looked back at the planes behind me it looked as if the number two aircraft who had his antenna trailing behind was towing the number three airplane. I'll bet the VC are still telling that story to this day about how the Cowboys and their planes were so tough that even after you shot their planes up they would throw a tow line to the shot up plane and tow it back over the target.

After the first pass and the increased and more accurate ground fire in valley number two I scratched it as a target for today. Finally, I figured the odds on all three valleys being full of VC were minimal. After all our intelligence folks had told us there was no major VC activity in the area. Well, we had already discovered more VC in valleys one and two than were estimated to be in all of South Vietnam. Therefore valley number three had to be relatively safe.

Wrong again. We made one heart stopping pass through valley number three which contained not only more VC than in valleys one and two, but these guys were real 9 level expert marksmen. The VC in valley three were wide awake since we had made a lot of noise in valleys one and two. These folks had extra ammo stacked up all around
their positions so they could reload their guns faster.

I headed the "C" Flight for home. This was not our
day. We had a swinging "this is not our day" party at the
club. Our top cover pilots added a great deal of color and
champagne to our party when they joined us later. They had
had a superb morning with three valleys full of VC to beat
up on.

It always amazed me how happy we made our top cover
pilots by trolling along low and slow attracting VC ground
fire. After the VC would shoot at us and expose their
positions then the fighters would put guns, bombs, rockets
and CBU's on their positions. That always made a top cover
pilot's day and we made a lot of top cover pilots happy.

During one period I went 68 missions in a row
without me or my aircraft taking a hit. I mentioned
earlier the Cowboys were weird about keeping their hit
count up. I began scheduling tougher and tougher targets.
This resulted in greater numbers of volleys of ground fire
being directed at "C" Flight. All that resulted in was the
rest of the flight was getting the daylights shot out of
them while I remained unscathed.

Soon I began to find it difficult to get anyone to
fly with me. I tried swapping aircraft positions at the
last minute, even swapping seats with other pilots while
walking out the aircraft. Nothing worked. No self
respecting Cowboy wanted to fly with a guy who didn't take
hits.

This was bad, I was getting an unwanted reputation
of no hits. This is not good for a Cowboy's image. I even considered shooting some holes in my own aircraft on the way back from a mission to get my morale up. I dropped that idea when I realized that with my luck I would probably hit the only vital spot in the plane.

I could only find one flight engineer to fly with me on a regular basis. He had seven kids at home and the other flight engineers made him fly with me. They had seen pictures of the kids and told him he owed it to the kids. No one ever mentioned their families. It was very spooky in that regard.

Because our crews had to think exactly the same when the two of them were flying one plane simultaneously I left the matching up of the crews to the individuals. Thus, when my string of no hits mounted to the ridiculous point, the pilots began drawing straws to see who had to pass up getting hit and fly with me.

Finally in desperation, I scheduled a mission into the Ashau valley. Now there was a target. If we had an engine shot out, which was an all too common experience, we could not get out of the valley since the mountains around the valley were so high our planes could not climb over them with one engine out. Although there were three small airfields in the valley, they were all mined. The VC totally controlled the area.

Our emergency plan was to fly around the valley on one engine until a large rescue force could fly in. We would then make a controlled crash landing in the twelve
foot high elephant grass with rescue forces overhead. In any case, that target solved my no hit problems and after getting thoroughly shot up, things got back to normal for "C" Flight.
CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

TAJ MAHAL EAST
Late in my one year tour after hot bunking in other flying units quarters or living in damp grumpy tents, it was decided that the Ranch Hands should have a place of their own.

Although it beat tents, the barracks they offered us were less than plush. Actually what THEY gave us was the former stables the Foreign Legionnaires had built for their horses many years before. I saw Pierre loves Fifi carved on one of the two posts that held up the roof. The barracks (?) were wooden, completely louver sided and the latrine was down the street. I've seen dirty barns but even a musk ox would have turned that hovel down.

The walls were louvered so the tropical breezes could waft through. What that really resulted in was the monsoon rains blowing through unhindered and the rats had easy access to our belongings and our toes and fingers.

As soon as it was official that we could occupy the open bay, wooden structure, I made an immediate inspection and came up with some quick calculations. With the space available and the number of Cowboys to be billeted there it came out each guy could have an area of his own exactly eight feet by six feet.

The first thing I did was move everyone's cot down three inches on one side of the open bay. Cumulatively, this gave me 114 inches by 96 inches or nine feet six inches by eight feet for my personal space. With my added space assured, I began to build what became known as TAJ MAHAL EAST. This entailed a few midnight requisitions from base supply and other sources to get enough materials to
enclose my little corner of the open bay.

After walling off my area with plywood I soon was able to add a door and acquired a large amount of electrical wire. Next came a lock and wonder of wonders a full sized wall locker. The really good beds like a new one, medium sized with a brand new, fat mattress on it were hard to come by. A six pack of New York cut steaks to the base bedding supply sergeant produced the bed.

Next a hole appeared in my wall that coincidentally had the same dimensions as my air conditioner. I had mailed myself a small air conditioner along with my other personal stuff when I was assigned to Vietnam. I still thank that old combat commando who advised my to do that before I left the States. I had to mark the air conditioner "professional books" since there was a perennial shortage of electricity and THEY had outlawed personal air conditioners. Professional books were OK but personal air conditioners were out. Of course all Colonels and other wheels had air conditioned trailers to live in. I did not meet a lot of professional book readers in Vietnam, but I sure met a lot of troops who would have sold their souls for an air conditioner.

I had over a hundred feet of heavy duty electrical wire and it only took me an hour to bury the cable in the soft sand between my hut and the Officer's club back wall. I cut a door knob size hole in the club wall behind the juke box outlet and plugged my line in. The base engineers monitored all the electrical power boxes on the base except the O-club to catch electricity cheaters. Further, no one
would pull the plug behind the juke box since you couldn't
tell where or what it went to. Masterful!

I traded about half of our outfits supply of metal
work benches to the base carpenter's shop for some finished
interior wood paneling. Finished wood panelin was in short
supply in Vietnam outside of THEIR offices but at Bien Hoa
metal work benches were in shorter supply.

Over at Saigon someone backed a C-123 up to the
loading ramp and made off with a half a plane load of
acoustical ceiling decorator tile. The unidentified
airplane that snatched the tiles unloaded them near the
Cowboy ramp area. The new Ranch Hand squadron commander
had asked only the day before if there might be some
acoustical tile for his office. It seemed the continual
noise of aircraft activity at the base made it difficult
for him to work. It also made it difficult for us to
sleep. It was probably a coincidence, the tile appearing
like that, but there were a lot of coincidences like that
in air commando units.

Our new commander was pleased with his new tile,
but surprised to find there was not enough to do his entire
office. I was very pleased with my acoustical tile which
was enough to do my entire room, walls and ceiling and
effectively sound proofing my TAJ MAHAL.

After a quick trip to Tachikawa I had a large
mirror, a pretty rug, a stand up lamp, an overstuffed
east chair and some beautiful Japanese tapestries for the
walls. Meantime, my favorite Stateside female had
airmailed me some striped sheets with matching pillow
I was now settled into my TAJ MAHAL EAST and living better that most of the colonels on the base. Alas, my fellow flight members couldn't stand this orgiastic display of opulence and with all too much frequency they would drop a smoke grenade into my air conditioner. In a small, tightly enclosed room this immediately gave one a supreme case of the smoke filled roomitis.

Since the effect of the smoke grenade was to color everything the smoke touched, they scouted far and wide for colors becoming my cubicle. In one week's time I had a red, orange, blue, green and white room at different times. However, since purple was our squadron color I could only compliment them on their ingenuity in combining several smoke grenades to give me a purple room. I know we could shorten our wars considerably by reducing the number of THEM, throwing out most regulations for the duration and just turn the inventive youngsters loose.

One night my flight must have run out of smoke grenades to drop in my air conditioner because the next morning after an uneventful night I found my motorcycle on top of the mortar bunker. I figured asking any dumb questions about how a heavy Honda motorcycle got way up on that bunker would be a waste of time.

Several possible explanations surfaced at the bar that night. One theory was that I had a female Honda and a male Honda from one of the fighter squadrons was seen chasing it up there. It stayed up there a couple of days because I couldn't figure out how to get it down. If we could divert the energy, initiative and manpower those young
tigers devoted to getting the cycle up there into the war effort we would have won the war in a week.

When I originally wrote back to the States that I was beginning construction on my TAJ MAJAL EAST I soon received a goodie package that had a mini tool kit, a Snoopy book and a coin taker bank. I put the tools to good use improving the TAJ and reading my Snoopy book was the only funny thing I did that week.

The coin taker bank was one of those tricky gimmicks where if you put a coin on the top of the bank a little hand comes out of a trap door and pulls the coin into the bank. It reminded me it was a great deal like the combat pay system. I never figured it out but my Air Force pay declined the whole year I was in Vietnam. I would never have made it as a mercenary.
CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

ORDERS
We began to hear rumors that the war had progressed to the point THEY were contemplating spit and polish, discipline and maybe even Saturday parades and inspections would be initiated. One of THEM actually told me it was possible THEY were even considering giving flight checks to combat aircrews. Good grief! If the Cowboys wouldn't use checklists and I couldn't criticize them as their leader, can you imagine what they would do to a non-combatant check pilot that made any derogatory remark about their flying ability?

We did not see any of that during my year, but THEY did come up and inspect Danang. THEY told the Danang commander he would have to clean up the base and get it spiffy looking even if the VC mortared it frequently. And so began the "area beautification program". At first the Cowboys did their best to avoid this nuisance project. We even volunteered our crew and planes to the Air Search and Rescue folks. We didn't know what we were looking for, but we searched the South China Sea with great diligence. Finally the base commander felt we had ignored his edicts long enough and he made it clear we were to get on with the "area beautification program".

One thing you can say about Cowboys is that even if a chore was stupid and or distasteful to them, if they decided to do it, it would be done with a flair. In a matter of days our area looked like a Stateside showcase. I thought it looked rather cozy, particularly the white picket fence, the large Ranch Hand sign and of course the curtains in the windows.
The classic touch was the Cowboy who waited at the base gate for a cement truck. He commandeered a truckload of cement intended for one of the wing commander's pet projects. Our cement steps and patio were the envy of the base. I did think the circular cement Honda motorcycle parking area was a little too much. Did I forget the full sidewalks around our area so we wouldn't have to walk in the mud?

I made up my mind if I ever went to war again I would wait until the area beautification programs were completed. A person sort of loses the commando spirit while sewing curtains and painting white picket fences.

If I thought giving up our go-to-hell hats and nasty patches, gun belts, and the attempt to take our scarves away plus area beautification programs wasn't enough of an indication that the war was going to hell, the real blow came on the the 18th of April. Mark that date well as it ranks ahead of the Ides of March or even the attack on Pearl Harbor.

On the 18th of April the Officer's club posted the new bar prices. Just plain old bar whiskey rocketed to twenty five cents a drink. Scotch, the common variety at that, went out of sight at thirty cents drink. My beloved Seagram's VO ballooned to an all time high of forty cents a drink. I could no longer afford the luxury of being a combat Air Commando. It was a terribly black day for the Cowboys. It was time to call off the war and go home.

As I neared the end of my tour the Personnel Division asked me to fill out about two dozen forms stating my preference for reassignment back to the States.
Naturally, being a double combat volunteer, I had no doubt
I would get exactly what I requested. You may have guessed
I asked to back to Florida and fly fighters.

One day while patiently awaiting orders back to the
States, a Cowboy who was due to rotate home about two
months after me, received his orders sending him to the
base I had requested. Right off I knew something was very
wrong if a fellow two months behind me had his orders and I
didn't it could mean big trouble.

With my usual cool approach to a crisis I ran the
one-half mile to the personnel office and threw a
spectacular tantrum right on top of the personnel weenie's
desk. Personnel weenies never, never recieve complaints
since everyone knows the Air Force always sends combat vets
to the assignments they have requested. He said he was
surprised at my attitude. He proceeded to explain to me
that because of my tremendous experience level attained
while performing as an Air Commando, I was being considered
for a very special assignment that would be of great
benefit to the Air Force and to my career.

Straight away I told him the only benefit I wanted
was exactly what I wrote on my assignment preference
statement and that specifically requested a quiet, peaceful
tour in Florida. He just went right on extolling the great
effort the Air Force had put into finding the right people
for the right job and I should be proud that I was being
considered as "Mr. Right" by the Air Force.

I tried the combat veteran routine and explained
that people who fight wars should get special privileges
like being assigned where they request to go, just like the
recruiting posters say.

I tried another tack and reminded him that in one of my early letters back to my favorite female I mentioned I might have trouble finding things of interest to write about. I pointed out to the personnel officer that the letter I wrote had obviously been written before THEY had given me. I think custody is appropriate, of "C" Flight. I told him I had not once complained to my congressman when the dropped six whacky bastards on me all at once. The personnel guy did not seem impressed. I tried a different approach.

I refreshed his memory of some of the hardships I endured with out complaining. For example, I told him how I had kept requesting my favorite female to send me boxes of those little return address stickers for my envelopes. I made this same request at least twenty times. Each time it was dutifully carried out, but that wasn't my gripe. It seemed THEY always changed my unit designation or my address before the address labels got to me.

I never got to use on damn printed return address sticker I recieved. They still work pretty well taping down the corners of the Christmas presents I wrap each year.

I had the feeling he was not paying much attention to my pleading since he continued to pick his nose and stare at the playmate centerfolds under the glass on his desk top. I headed for the O-club where a couple of quarts of Seagram's VO might ward off the sinking feeling I felt coming on.
The Seagram's VO helped, but the assignment I got the next day was an absolute disaster. I had been "selected" to be assigned to Washington, D.C. to an unspecified job. In short, from its' location I knew I was headed for the high rent district, unbelievable traffic jams, and unrealistic hours in a windowless world. I had no idea what my specific job would be. All I wanted was a little old flying job at a little old Florida air base like for the rest of my career. To hell with career progression. I thought only West Pointers and regulars went Headquarters.

I wrote and called every former friend I ever had and sought maximum help in getting this obvious malassignment cancelled. All I got was a very few cryptic replies from now ex-friends who did not hold Headquarters bound people in very high esteem. I had become a weenie. I was marked. I would be considered one of THEM by all who used to be my friends.

My next problem was to find out what my job would be up there in the head shed. That was my first indoctrination in Headquarters mumbo-jumbo. As a Headquarters weenie you must learn never to say or write what you really mean. I never was able to decipher the job description personnel gave me. It was 150 words long, but so broadly worded I decided I was either the commander or the janitor. I never quite made either position during my Headquarters tour.
As my tour wound down to the final days, I was in the habit of saying I'm going to burn everything when I leave this place. Lots of combat people make figurative statements like that, however, you are not encouraged to make them in front of fighter pilots.

My last night in the O-club was spent telling every top cover mother in there what a wonderful job they had done and in the meanwhile I was paying for all the drinks in the club that night. Was I ever popular! The club also had the first round-eyed American girl singer I'd seen in my whole years tour.

About the time the girl singer was getting into her repertoire I was suddenly aware that about 30 single engine hired killers had me surrounded. Before you could say Gypsy Rose Lee, I was handed my wrist watch, my shoes and my wallet and allowed to stand in the front row as every stitch of clothing I used to have on burned brightly on the dance floor. It was a pretty liberal club, the gal singer sang to the ceiling and the club officer didn't put out the fire till it burned through the floor.

I heard later that my totally nude departure with wallet, shoes and watch in hand was done with grace and finesse. It also allowed the girl singer to stop singing to the ceiling and thus averted her having a stiff neck the next day.

The next morning I put on my Stateside uniform and packed a very small bag since the majority of my clothing went up in flames at the O-club the night before. I slipped down to the flight line and emulating great Ranch Hand leaders before me, I climbed into a lumbering Cowboy
airplane and flew my last Ranch Hand combat mission. The Cowboys who let me ride the console on the day I was leaving had their necks out a bunch, but hell that was what it was all about.

Instead of recovering their aircraft at Bien Hoa with the other aircraft in their flight, they landed at Tan Son Nhut in Saigon. Really great guys, they taxied right up to the civilian 707 airliner that was to fly me back to the States.

I climbed the boarding steps of the 707 with my purple scarf around my neck and the jet soon lifter off.

Crossing the Pacific I reflected how this one group of seven combat fliers had viewed the war differently than most. I've often thought was stories the other Ranch Hand flights could tell and what about the five more years that rebellious outfit existed?

There is probably more than enough material in Ranch Hand lore to write a book.