

# **Ho Chi Minh Trail Forward Air Controller**

**Extraction from Unpublished Memoir 2001**

**“Warrior, Engineer, Researcher”**

**an autobiography by**

**Lt. Col. Richard E. Pierson  
U.S. Air Force, Retired**

The material herein is based on a personal diary kept by me during the second of my three Vietnam combat assignments September 15, 1966 to June 3, 1967 in Florida, the Philippines, south Vietnam, and Thailand as a Forward Air Controller pilot with missions over Laos and North Vietnam while a Captain and Major in the U.S. Air Force. Therefore, dates, names, and results presented are accurate, even when conflicts with other reports occur. I have added to the bare facts with memory and background information. I start with the Forward Air Controller training before describing the combat missions in detail.

The autobiography that this information was taken from was written for my grandchildren and their descendants, and outside of about 10 copies for my family was not intended to be published. However, in the interest of assisting the Veterans History Project, authorized by the U.S. Congress in October 2000, I am contributing my Vietnam War stories and experience to the project at the Library of Congress. However, I retain the copyright for the written material, not including the photographs which are mostly by others.

Richard E. Pierson  
Lt.Col. USAF retired  
October 31, 2002

# Vietnam War

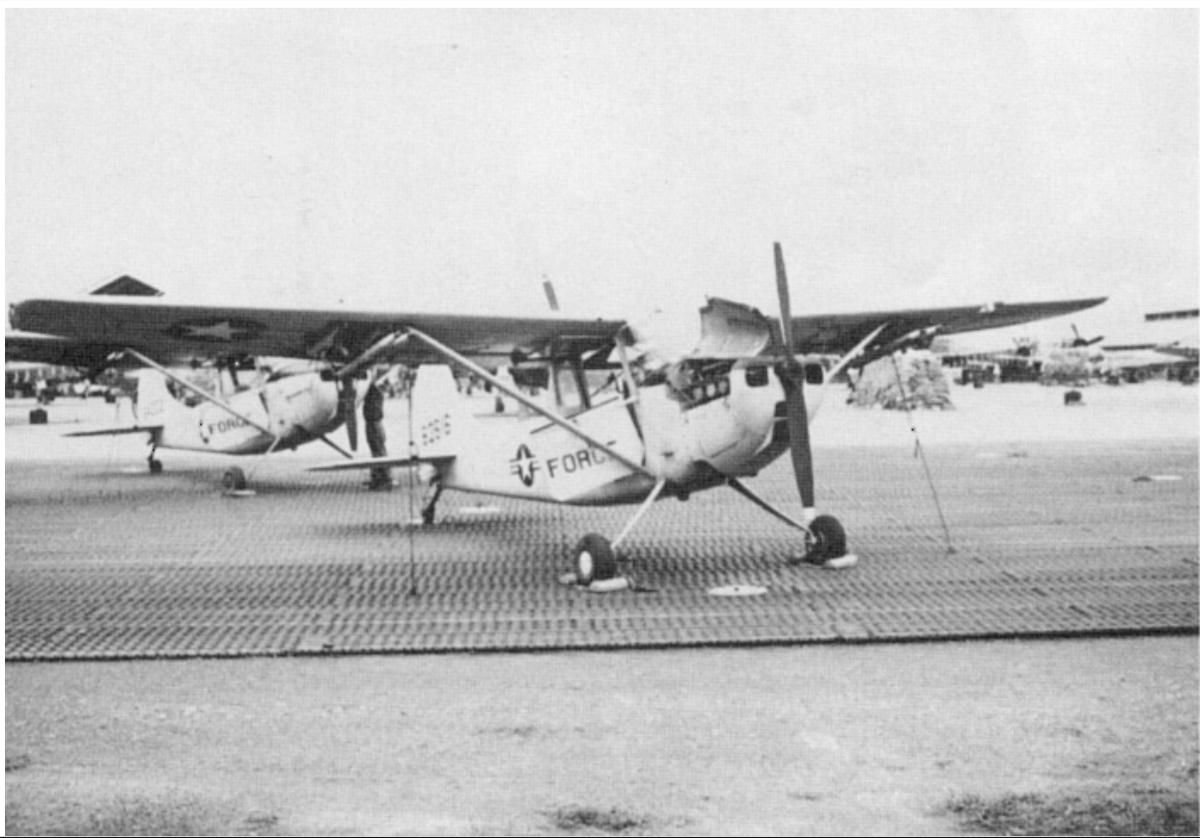
## Ho Chi Minh Trail Forward Air Controller

After I (Capt. Richard E. Pierson) was assigned as a Forward Air Controller (FAC) in the Cessna O-1 Bird Dog aircraft, I was ordered from Dover AFB, Delaware to Hurlburt Field, Florida (also known as Eglin AFB Auxiliary 9) for training with the 4410<sup>th</sup> Combat Crew Training Squadron there in the O-1E aircraft. I departed Dover AFB on September 15, 1966, taking 30 days delay enroute leave in California before reporting to Hurlburt Field.

In California, I left my wife Roberta, and sons Mark, Scott, and Jeff in Carmichael with Roberta's parents for the duration of my combat tour at Roberta's request and with her parents approval. After a 2-week stay in Carmichael, I visited my brother Allen in Orange, my brother Don in Chatsworth, and my father Karl in San Diego (all in California) on the way to Hurlburt Field in Florida. While visiting my brother Don (he is a parachutist and was President of the Los Angeles Sky Diving Club), I talked him into letting me parachute for practice in case I had to bail out in Vietnam. So on October 6, 1966, I made my first parachute jump from 3,000 feet above the ground from a Cessna 195. I cleared the aircraft and pulled my own rip cord. The parachute malfunctioned: the pilot chute wrapped around my head instead of pulling the main chute open, I pushed it off, the main chute opened but had a line over the top (Mae West), was twisted up and started to spin, then the line came off the top. There were several burned holes the size of a fist in the parachute canopy but it was now fully inflated. I didn't know it, but I was descending quite rapidly due to the holes. I practiced steering the parachute and landed 50 feet from the target X, winning a beer bet with Don. He had a hundred parachute jumps logged, but I got closer than him to the target. However, it was a hard landing with both my feet rammed 6 inches into hard ground. I sprained my right ankle (heel bruised and smashed tissue between the bones in my ankle joint). I did not report the injury to the Air Force and it gradually got better.

I arrived at Hurlburt Field, Florida, on October 12, 1966 and processed in on the 16<sup>th</sup>. On Thursday, October 17, 1966, I began the Special Air Warfare Indoctrination Course (SAWIC) for seven work days. After two days of briefings, we had the weekend off, then we began the 5-day Air Ground Operations School (AGOS) which is part of the SAWIC. Here we learned the general procedures that a Forward Air Controller needs to know to direct fighters against ground targets. I completed SAWIC and AGOS on Friday, October 25, 1966.

The following Monday, October 28, 1966, I started the one-month O-1 flight training as a Forward Air Controller at Holly Field, a subsidiary of Hurlburt Field, where I also learned how to fire white phosphorous marking rockets and direct fighters onto targets without getting run over by the fighter. In the unsophisticated O-1 light aircraft, you aim the rocket by marking a spot on the windscreen with a grease pencil. I was still in O-1 flight training when I passed my 32<sup>nd</sup> birthday on November 11. During this training Jim, one of my classmates, was killed on November 25, 1966, when an A-1E prop-driven fighter flew through him and chopped off his wing. He was at 1500 feet altitude when hit. His O-1 spun two turns and hit the ground. He didn't have a chance to parachute. It is a dangerous business and we are expected to direct



**O-1E Bird Dogs on Ramp**

propeller and jet fighters on targets in Vietnam. I finished O-1 Forward Air Controller school on November 29, 1966, after 15 training flights totaling 26 and a half hours flying time.

My port call at Travis AFB in California was December 5<sup>th</sup>, so I had to start driving my car to California the night I graduated from Forward Air Controller school. I arrived in Carmichael at midnight on December 4<sup>th</sup>. Roberta's parents had me celebrate Christmas with my family including opening presents the next morning, December 5<sup>th</sup>. That was nice since I would be in Vietnam on Christmas. I had to get a couple immunization shots and catch the military contract plane at Travis AFB for my port call. I departed at 6 PM on a World Airways 707C. The first stop was Anchorage, Alaska, which took about 4 hours. We were only on the ground for 30 minutes, then on to Yakota AB, Japan, 7 and a half hours enroute. Enroute, the 707 had to shut down number 2 engine due to some kind of emergency, but since it has four jet engines it didn't even slow us down. The crew did not mention this emergency to the passengers, but when we landed at Yakota, we were met by many fire trucks. It took about 6 hours to fix the engine, while the passengers sat in a temporary passenger terminal. The next morning, December 7, at 6 AM, we took off for Clark AFB in the Philippines. That took about 4 hours enroute.

My training was not yet complete for my Vietnam assignment. They had scheduled me for a one-week Jungle Survival Training course at Clark AFB in the Philippines. So after landing at Clark, I went to tent city and checked in there for Jungle Survival school. Tent city had no hot water, no towels, a shortage of lockers, no way to lock up your valuables, and lots of Filipino

thieves. We started the survival school on December 8<sup>th</sup> with one day of class room briefings. The next day, they trucked us 10 miles away from the base to 2,000-foot elevation in heavy jungle. From there, they took us a half mile further into the jungle by H-19 helicopter, 2 at a time, to a small hole cut in the jungle. From the small hole, we walked back into the jungle 300 yards and set up a static camp. They equipped us with a parachute, mosquito net, blanket, back pack, canteens, knives, and C rations. We trained at the static camp for two days learning to make bed hammocks with parachutes, cook potato-like roots to eat, and build bows and arrows from bamboo. The next day, we practiced being picked up by a helicopter using a tree-penetrator and sling. That evening they sent us into the jungle to hide, escape, and evade. An hour later, they sent the Negrittos after us. Their objective was to catch us and get our capture chits. I teamed up with Maj. Gene Main and we were the only ones that didn't get caught. We hid in a thick bamboo thicket. We had mosquitoes, rats, and spiders all over us all night. I knocked at least 12 rats off of me during the night. The next morning, December 12<sup>th</sup>, we got picked up by helicopter and taken back to the base camp where we were trucked back to Clark AFB and picked up our survival school diplomas. There were no quarters available on base (the tents were reserved for survival school), so I stayed in the Gemini Hotel in nearby Angeles.

The next day, December 13, 1966, I departed Clark AFB at 11:30 PM on a Continental 707 (military contract) to Saigon, Vietnam. I arrived at Tan Son Airport at 2 AM the next day, a 2 and a half hour fight. We processed in the next day at Tan Son Nhut, and took the bus to Bien Hoa Air Base where the 504<sup>th</sup> Tactical Air Support Group (TASG) headquarters was for five squadrons of FACs (Forward Air Controllers), one in each of the four Corps of South Vietnam and one in Thailand to target the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos. Maj. Dave Griffin, Lt. Ray Krogman, and I asked the 504<sup>th</sup> TASG for our Squadron assignments and got them. At my request, I was assigned to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS) at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, along with Lt. Ray Krogman. The mission there was classified. But first, we are all to go on temporary duty (TDY) to Binh Thuy Air Base near Can Tho, South Vietnam, for theater orientation.

**Saturday, December 17, 1966.** Maj. Dave Griffin, Lt. Ray Krogman, and I departed Bien Hoa Air Base this morning in a CH-3B helicopter, arriving 15 minutes later at Tan Son Nhut airport

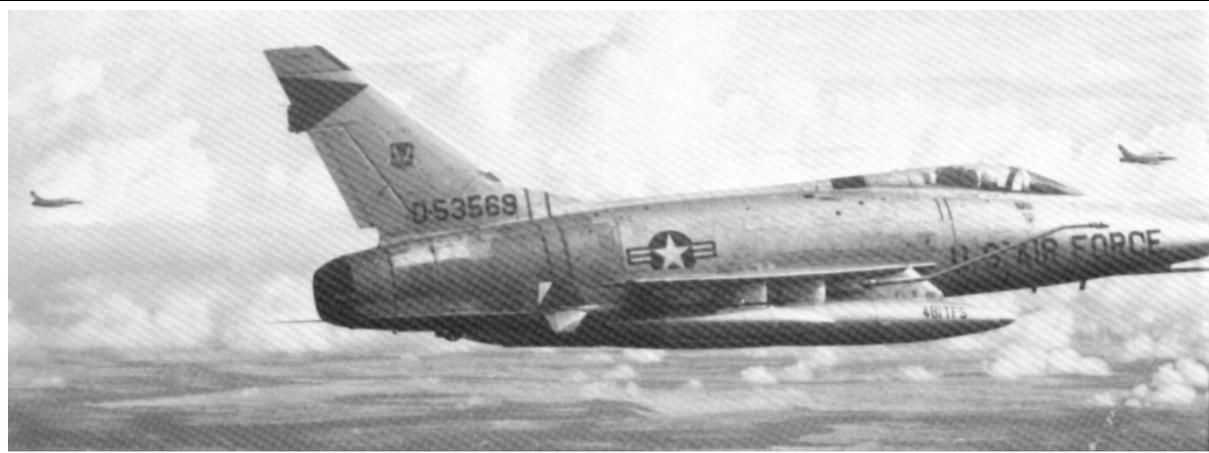


**CH-3 Jolly Green Helicopter**

at Saigon where we caught a ride on a C-123 to Binh Thuy arriving there at 1 PM. The Theater school staff met us and provided transportation, briefed us, fed us, and housed us expeditiously. We live three men to a Jameway hut-tent. My room mates are Carl \_\_\_\_ and Don Kaufman, both Captains. They are already assigned to Army outfits in III Corps as Forward Air Controllers (20<sup>th</sup> TASS). At Binh Thuy, we are only a mile from Can Tho where we went shopping the next day and drank beer at the Can Tho Bar. I was pretty leery of running around much in town as this is pretty heavy Viet Cong (Communist guerrilla) country.

**Monday, December 19, 1966.** Theater school started today at Binh Thuy with 8 hours of classroom instruction including intelligence, weather, and O-1 engineering. At noon, the Air Force Major's promotion list came out, and I was number 5,311 on the list of over 10,000 new Majors. I don't know when the new rank will be effective yet as only the first 1600 on the list pin their new rank on tomorrow. Personnel thinks they will all be effective by June 1967. So myself and 15 other new Majors at Binh Thuy bought all the drinks at the Binh Thuy Officer's Club bar from 5 PM to 10:30 PM. That cost me \$7.70 (drinks are not expensive here and pilots can't drink very many if they are flying or attending school the next day).

**Tuesday, December 20, 1966.** I flew an hour and 45 minutes this morning in the O-1F. It differs from previous O-1s I have flown in that it has a variable pitch propeller (instead of fixed). Tom Morris was the instructor pilot. We landed on the PSP (pierced steel planking) runway at the old Can Tho airport and then practiced landings at Binh Thuy for a total of 14 landings. While in the traffic pattern at Binh Thuy, we almost got hit by two F-100 Super Sabre jets buzzing the field at about 400 knots. I had more academics in the afternoon.



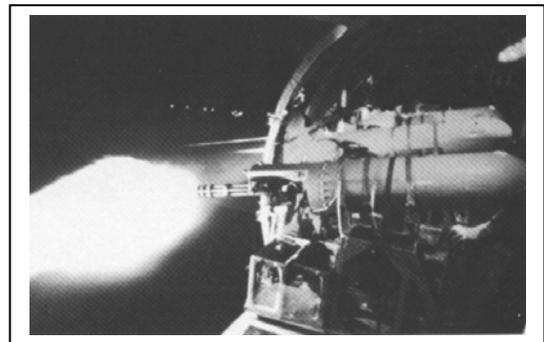
**F-100 Super Sabre Fighters**

**Wednesday, December 21, 1966.** I received my first combat damage of this combat tour today. It was my second theater orientation flight in the O-1 and I was practicing firing rockets and dropping smoke grenades in Viet Cong country. A couple of Viet Cong started firing back with .30 caliber rifles. They fired about 4 shots at us, the first bullet hitting our left landing gear arm (a piece of spring steel) with only minor damage (no operational effect as the landing gear are fixed and always down in the O-1). I had more academics in the afternoon.

**Thursday, December 22, 1966.** I didn't fly today, but this afternoon we finished up the academic training which totaled 30 hours. The afternoon's briefings included a briefing by Tom Morris, who had been there, on Nakhon Phanom operations. Tonight Binh Thuy hosted the Hank Snow USO show and I went to see it. It was excellent western music with one very pretty girl in the troop.

**Friday, December 23, 1966.** This afternoon, I flew my last theater orientation flight in the O-1 with Lt. Gowin. We navigated to Phuoc Vinh, My Tho, Vinh Long, and back to Binh Thuy making landings at each air strip (12 landings total). The smallest air strip was at My Tho: 1300 feet of dirt, 40 feet wide with water on both ends (interesting and challenging landings, but no problem). This completed my theater indoctrination course for a total of 5 flying hours 45 minutes and 30 landings in the 213-horsepower O-1F.

**Saturday, December 24, 1966.** At 12:40 AM this morning (the middle of my last night at Binh Thuy), the Viet Cong started dropping mortars onto the flight line. My tent was very close to the flight line. I was out of my tent and into the bomb shelter bunker by the second mortar hit. I was really scared and shaking all over by the time I reached the bunker. Six mortar rounds fell on the base. One mortar round damaged an O-1 on the flight line. A Vietnamese A-1H fighter crashed into the radar shack on take off during the mortar attack and the pilot was killed. After 6 mortar rounds had struck, Spooky, an AC-47 gunship, arrived overhead and sprayed down the Viet Cong mortar position with its three 7.62 mm Gatling guns. The continuous burp of three Gatling guns has a very distinctive sound. There were no more mortar rounds launched after that. I was never so glad to hear a Gooney Bird in my whole life. Because it was pitch black outside, all we could see was the continuous stream of incendiary bullets coming out of the sky.



**AC-47 Spooky Gunship**

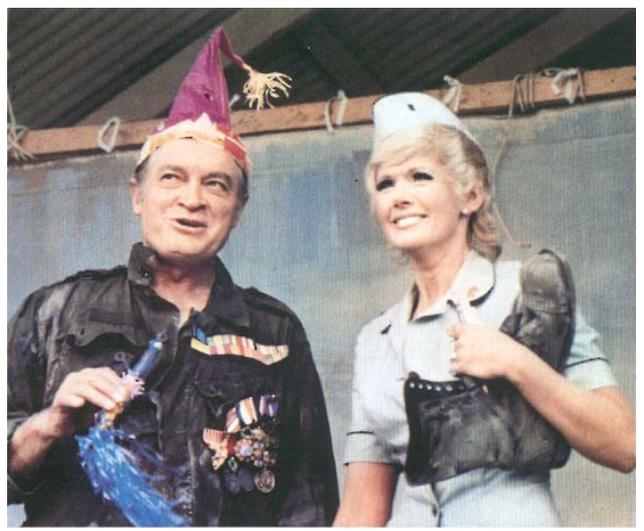
At 2 PM in the afternoon, Ray Krogman and myself caught a flight to Saigon where we picked up our orders to proceed to the 23<sup>rd</sup> TASS at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB (Royal Thai Air Force Base), Thailand. While at Tan Son Nhut Airport, we watched the last half hour of the Bob Hope USO show.

**Christmas, Sunday, December 25, 1966.**

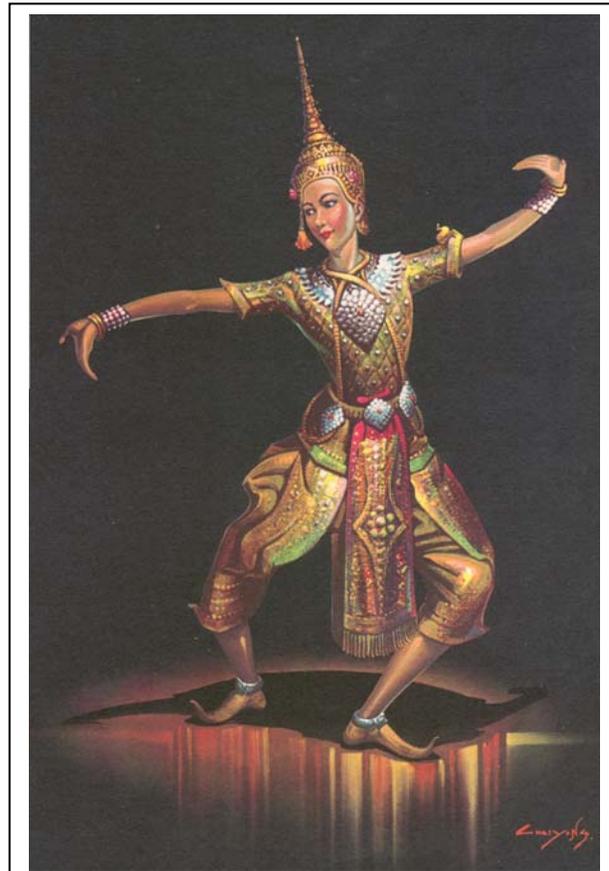
Ray Krogman and I were to proceed to Bangkok by commercial airline from Saigon. We boarded an S.A.T. 727 at 10 AM. It was about an hour and a half flight into Bangkok, Thailand. There, we were to arrange with C-130 Operations at Don Muang Air Base, 20 miles from Bangkok, for transportation to Nakhon Phanom. The earliest booking we could get was next Wednesday, December 28. No quarters were available at Don Muang so we were lodged at the First Hotel in downtown Bangkok. The unit of money in Thailand is the Baht (20 Baht = 1 US dollar). In the evening, Ray and I went to the 99 Club. There the beer came in quarts, 1 dollar per quart. The Club had excellent Thai singers who sang all the favorite American songs in perfect English. We spent 3 hours there drinking beer and watching the entertainment. I spent \$2 the whole evening.

**Monday, December 26, 1966.** I managed to get out of bed by noon today. Ray and I went to the Rama Hotel and had a beer at poolside. Later we went to a hot bath house. In the evening at 7 PM, Ray and I went to the Sala Norasingh for Thai dinner. There, we had to take our shoes off to enter and sat at low tables to eat. Entertainment there was Thai classical dancing. On the way back to the hotel, we stopped at the San Francisco Bar for a beer. They had a teen-age combo band there for entertainment.

**Wednesday, December 28, 1966.** Ray and I caught the bus from Bangkok to Don Muang Air Base arriving at C-130 Operations at 5:30 AM as requested. Our C-130 transportation departed Don Muang at 8:25 AM and made stops at Korat and Ubon before arriving at



**Bob Hope and Connie Stevens at Tan Son Nhut**



**Lakorn Style Classical Thai Dancer**



Southeast Asia depicting the Ho Chi Minh trail

Nakhon Phanom RTAFB at 11:30 AM. A Lieutenant from the 23<sup>rd</sup> TASS met us and took us around the base and got our quarters and personal equipment squared away. The base is in northern Thailand at 561 feet above sea level. It has a 6,000-foot PSP runway, 100 feet wide. The base, called NKP or Naked Fanny, is located 9 miles from the Thai-Laotian border which is marked by the Mekong River. It gets very cool here at night, 40 to 50 degrees F, but reaches 80 to 90 degrees F during the day.

The length of a combat tour now has different rules than the 100 combat missions of 1963. Now Air Force FAC pilots are sent Permanent Change of Station (PCS) to a combat zone for 12 months with no maximum number of combat missions during that time. But to make that fair for pilots that have previous temporary duty combat tours, the PCS length is adjusted by subtracting the length of all previous temporary duty combat tours from the 12 months. So since I had about 5 months of temporary duty combat time in 1963, I now only have about 7 months to serve on this PCS combat tour. The 23<sup>rd</sup> TASS will later determine the exact date that I depart.

**Friday, December 30, 1966.** I got briefed by the Intelligence Officer today for 3 hours on the current situation. Most of it concerned Communist activity in Laos. There, the Communists call themselves the Pathet Lao. However, North Vietnamese (NVN) regular troops are also active in



**Pathet Lao with Russian Armored Vehicle and .50 caliber Machine Gun**

Laos in addition to NVN trained Viet Cong that are passing through Laos and Cambodia to South Vietnam. The Pathet Lao control about half of Laos (northern and eastern parts). The eastern part of Laos contains the Ho Chi Minh Trail which is a series of dirt roads that feed



**Ho Chi Minh Trail with Enemy Truck during Bad Weather**

people, equipment, and supplies from North Vietnam to the Viet Cong Communists in South Vietnam. The sole purpose of NKP personnel is to air attack the Communist troops, equipment, and supplies passing through Laos on a continuous basis. Because the Communists know what we are doing, they do not run their trucks down the trail in broad daylight. Instead, they wait for night or bad weather daytime periods to run the trucks down the dirt roads. Whenever the trucks are operating, the Pathet Lao operate anti-aircraft weapons to protect them (night and bad weather day). The current anti-aircraft weapons are .50 caliber machine guns, 37 mm anti-aircraft guns, and radar-operated 57 mm anti-aircraft guns. All of the guns are Russian-built and it is expected that Russians are present in small quantities to train the NVN and Pathet Lao troops in the use of weapons provided by the USSR.

**Saturday, December 31, 1966.** Today, Capt. Cushing of the 23<sup>rd</sup> TASS briefed me for 3 hours on mission procedures. We have two types of O-1 missions in the 23<sup>rd</sup> TASS, a daylight mission and a nighttime mission. All new FACs started out with daylight missions in order to get familiar with the Ho Chi Minh trail dirt road structure. When you could see a small section of dirt road on the Ho Chi Minh trail and recognize where you were, you were eligible for night missions. This recognition capability took 2 or 3 months to develop. Yes, we work on weekends and holidays. Combat is a 7 day per week business. There was one quirky rule. You were not considered to be in a combat zone for combat pay unless you flew over North Vietnam or South Vietnam. Even though we were attacking targets in Laos and the anti-aircraft guns were shooting back, Laos did not warrant combat pay under the rules (I guess that is political as we were not admitting publicly that we were fighting in Laos). So the procedure was to fly across the border from Laos into North Vietnam once per month and by so doing log "a counter" for combat pay (\$65 per month). Of course it was not safe to take an O-1 into North Vietnam because they had radar-operated surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) there, so one foot across the border for a few seconds sufficed. A few missions did require us to enter North Vietnam, but

those will be discussed later during individual missions. However, counting combat time and the number of combat missions in Laos on our personal flight records was not a problem.

The daylight mission was to fly out to assigned zones over the Ho Chi Minh trail and search for any targets such as damaged trucks along the road, truck tracks leading off the road into the jungle, fuel drums exposed, or anti-aircraft gun positions. We were briefed about earlier findings by Intelligence prior to takeoff and we also had secret teams on the ground reporting to Intelligence the location of Communist troops or supplies. A typical mission was 3 hours long and we maintained radio contact with the “Cricket” airborne command post which was a C-130 orbiting over friendly territory. Most Ho Chi Minh trail assigned zones were about 80 nautical



**C-130 Airborne Command and Control**

miles east of NKP and we proceeded to them at a cruising speed of about 70 knots. We carried 8 white phosphorous rockets under our wings for marking targets for the fighters. When we entered Pathet Lao territory we reported to Cricket that we had crossed the “first fence” heading for certain zones. If we went further into North Vietnam, we reported to Cricket that we had crossed the “second fence.” That way Cricket roughly knew where we were at all times in case air search or air rescue was needed. Cricket sent fighters to us from U.S. Navy aircraft carriers in the South China Sea and also from Air Force fighters flying out of Thailand or target rejects from all fighters due to bad weather in North Vietnam. Often the fighter just needed to get rid of its ordnance so it could land, and we gave it the best target we could find which was often a “suspected truck park” on the trail. We directed all kinds of fighters on targets in Laos including Navy A-4, A-6 (then a new fighter under test), F-4B, and F-8 Crusader jet fighters; Navy A-1 propeller-driven fighters; Air Force F-4C, F-104, and F-105 jet fighters; and Air Force A-1E,

AT-28, and B-26 (night only) propeller-driven aircraft. I also directed Laotian AT-28s on “Cricket West” targets in the daytime.



**U.S. Navy Aircraft Carrier with A-4 and F-4 Fighters**

The nighttime mission was a “hunter-killer” operation which used a dark green AT-28, call sign Zorro, and a black O-1, call sign Nail, that worked together. Both aircraft flew from NKP, but because the O-1 was so slow we rendezvoused over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The O-1 carried a back seater who used a starlight scope to look for “movers” (moving trucks) on the trail. In the beginning these back seaters were O-1 pilots, later they were navigators assigned to the 23<sup>rd</sup> TASS. The O-1 only carried four rockets at night, and additionally carried under the wings four 2-million-candlepower parachuted flares. When the back seater sighted a mover, the O-1 would fly over the truck and drop a parachuted flare and direct the AT-28 to attack the truck. The

AT-28 also carried flares to keep the target lit while it attacked it with napalm, CBU (bomblets), and .50 caliber machine guns. Of course, the anti-aircraft guns were active during these truck operations and weaving in and out among the incendiary rounds from the ground was a challenge without being hit.



**Zorro AT-28 Night Fighters at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB**

It was New Years Eve, so I went into town (Nakhon Phanom) with 16 guys from the Squadron. We had a wonderful Thai dinner, Singha beer, and New Years Eve celebration.

**Sunday, January 1, 1967.** Today I flew my first combat mission over Laos in the O-1F for 2 hours and 50 minutes. It was a visual reconnaissance in area 14 over the Ho Chi Minh trail. I flew in the back seat with an experienced combat pilot logging “instructor pilot” in the front seat. Each Forward Air Controller pilot has his own personal call sign while at NKP. Mine was Nail 69. All 23<sup>rd</sup> TASS call signs began with Nail and ended with a two-digit number. All daytime missions for the O-1 were a flight of two O-1s because we were single-engine aircraft in combat. One O-1 flew “low man” and one flew “high man.” Low man was the flight leader and he directed all air strikes until he ran out of marking rockets at which time he had the option of turning over the air strikes to the high man and swapping places. Usually, low man flew about 6,000 feet above the ground and high man flew a little higher. The minimum altitude was determined by the type of anti-aircraft gun threat. Intelligence kept track of all anti-aircraft firings reported to them and briefed pilots prior to takeoff of the most recent weapons present in each area assigned and their exact position if known. For .50 caliber machine guns, 6,000 feet above the ground was considered its maximum range and these were present in all areas. So this



**O-1F Bird Dog Parked with Variable Pitch Propeller**

was pretty much a minimum operating altitude in the daytime. For 37 mm, the inch and a half diameter rounds exploded at about 11,000 feet slant range from the gun which worked out to be between 8,000 and 9,000 feet above the ground. It was a zone to avoid. But the 37 mm was fired visually and therefore had incendiary rounds every 5<sup>th</sup> round to correct visual sighting. These rounds could be seen floating upward at 2,000 feet per second providing 2 or 3 seconds to out-maneuver the rounds if not in the exploding region. In the area that we flew in, there was one 57 mm radar anti-aircraft gun located in Mu Gia Pass on the NVN border with Laos. While the gun was not usually in operation unless the trucks were running, an O-1 could not escape this gun's 19,000-foot slant range, high accuracy, and large explosive charge. Thus, we drew a 5-mile circle around it and warned all O-1s to stay out of the circle. On this first mission, I observed about 8 rounds of small arms fired at us (saw the muzzle flashes), but there was no hits (we were probably out of range of .30 caliber weapons).



In the remaining missions of interest, I will provide names or call signs of those flying with me when I remembered to enter them in my diary (from which I write this story). I won't cover every mission if some are dull, but I will cover every mission in the beginning to give you a feel

for the variety of events that can occur. Since most combat missions at NKP were not dull, a large number of my 121 combat missions and 360 hours of combat time as a Forward Air Controller will be recorded here. I will include as many photos as I can muster. You will see that a combat pilot is faced with a large number of responsibilities, rules, and knowledge to keep up with in order to stay alive. You have already seen that the training almost never stops. It also helps if God is on your side. Forward Air Controllers are among the elite pilots in the Air Force and they are highly respected by all who come in contact with them. Often, they save lives by their actions, and direct the fury of military fighters on the enemy with extreme accuracy.

**Monday, January 2, 1967.** At 11 AM this morning, Lt. George Menges (Nail 27), was lost and presumably shot down. His lead O-1 did not see him go down, so was not sure where he went down. At 1:05 PM, I took off on a Search and Rescue (SAR) mission in Area 4 over the Ho Chi Minh trail looking for Nail 27. Capt. Bob Hippler (Nail 40) led our formation and I flew front seat in my O-1 with Maj. Ryan in the back seat acting as instructor pilot. Since Area 4 bordered North Vietnam, we also searched the adjacent area in North Vietnam for Nail



27. Thus I logged my first “counter” for January combat pay. This is considered part of my combat checkout at NKP, but we found no sign of Nail 27 after a 3 hour 30 minute flight searching the thick jungle below (he was never found). The loss of Nail 27 was a little unnerving on my second day of combat duty at NKP. But I was to learn that crew member losses happened often here as you shall see.

**Tuesday, January 3, 1967.** I took off at 8:30 AM for a search and rescue mission and will do a little bit of visual reconnaissance (VR) also. Nail 23 led the formation, I flew front seat and Capt. Bob Hippler (Nail 40) flew in my rear seat as instructor pilot. We searched Areas 2 and 15 for Nail 27 that went down yesterday based on the position of flares sighted last night. But we found nothing. We VRed a road, gun emplacements, and truck parks, then returned to NKP with 2 hours 50 minutes flight time to land in a cross wind 90 degrees to the runway at 14 knots with gusts to 22 knots. The landing was not a problem on the PSP runway. I was cleared for solo combat missions starting tomorrow (no more instructor pilots aboard).

**Wednesday, January 4, 1967.** Nail 41 called me and got me out of bed at 7:30 AM. He told me our take off time was moved up an hour and 15 minutes (they forgot to tell me), and that he was getting briefed and to meet him at the aircraft. When I got to the flight line, I found that Personal Equipment and the crew chiefs were not aware of the schedule change either and I updated them. We got airborne at 8:30 AM in two O-1Fs, Nail 41 was low man and I (Nail 69) was high man. It was a Forward Air Controller (FAC) mission (directing fighters onto targets) in area 2. The assigned target was a bridge and two Navy A-4C jet fighters from an aircraft carrier in the South China Sea were sent to us by Cricket (airborne command post).



**U.S. Navy A-4 Skyhawks**

When the fighters checked in on the radio, the conversation went something like this:

“Nail 41, this is Beefeater with a flight of two A-4Cs, over.” The fighters had already checked in with the Cricket airborne command post and gotten the FAC call sign, radio frequency for contact, and rough FAC location. The O-1 FAC aircraft had three communications radios called FM (frequency modulation below 100 MHz), VHF (very high frequency above 100 MHz), and UHF (ultra high frequency above 200 MHz). Jet fighters typically used UHF, prop fighters VHF, and ground teams and backup command post FM.

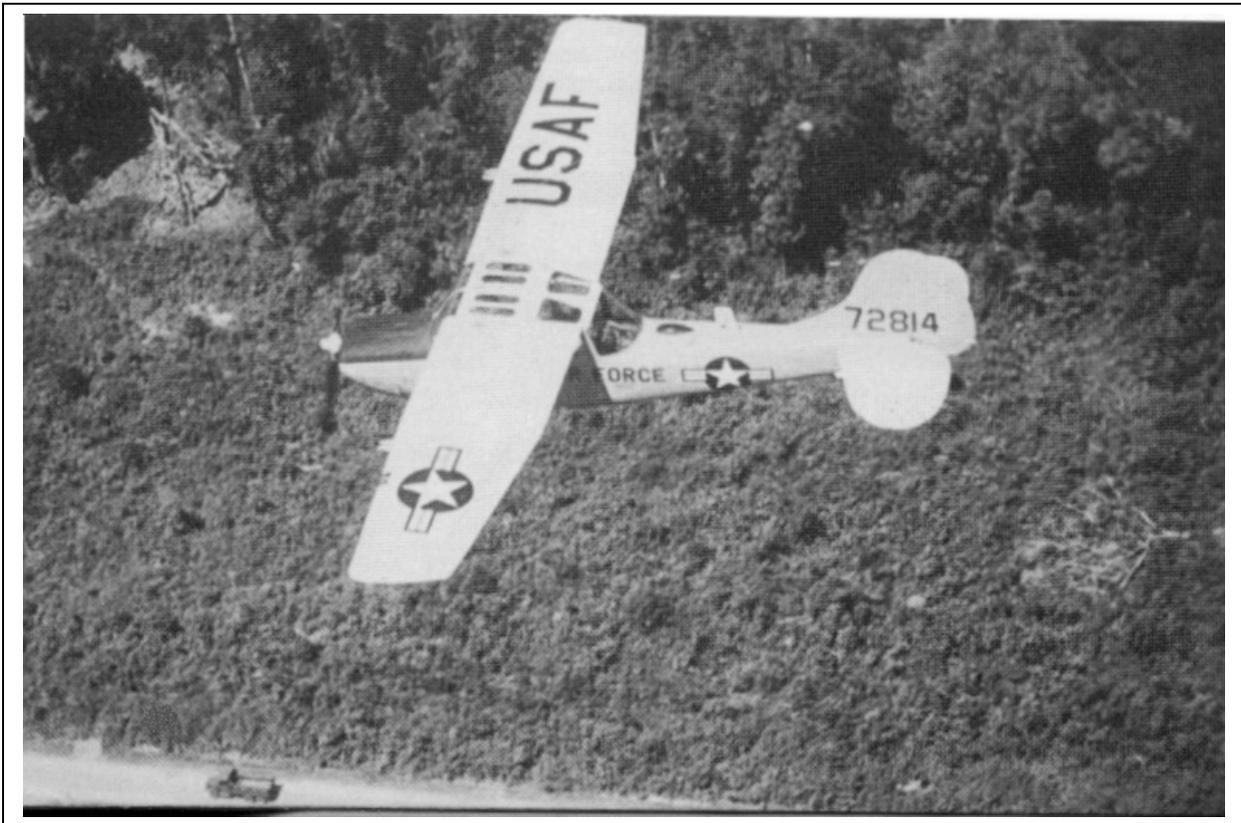
“Beefeater, (this is) Nail 41, come to 090 degrees, 80 miles the NKP tacan and say your ordnance, over.” The O-1 FAC aircraft had no radio navigational aids and navigated by map reading only. However, the radials and distances from several VOR and TACAN radio navigation transmitters were plotted on the FAC’s map, so that he could provide radio navigation

information about the FAC rendezvous coordinates to the fighters who did have VOR and TACAN navigation equipment.

“Nail 41, Beefeater, we have (a total of) twelve 250-pound GP bombs, over.”

“Roger Beefeater, Nail 41. Advise FAC in sight, over.” The fighters would come in usually between 10,000 feet and 20,000 feet altitude looking down for the two FAC aircraft that had bright light gray wings that were easy to see against the dark green jungle background.

“FAC in sight, Beefeater.”



“Roger Beefeater. Your target is a 10 by 30-foot wooden bridge on the dirt road below. Use attack heading 360 (best heading to see target and avoid anti-aircraft hits). Wind is estimated from the east at 30 knots. The FACs will be holding east of the target. We are not receiving any ground fire at the time and the nearest known anti-aircraft weapon is a .50 caliber machine gun about 2 miles east. Expect possible small arms fire from the target area. Best emergency bailout location is 10 miles southeast over karst or over the ocean. There are no known friendlies in the vicinity of the target. Standby for my (target) mark, Nail 41.”

“Roger, Beefeater.” Nail 41 rolled into a dive and fired a white phosphorous rocket at the bridge from 6,000 feet altitude.

“Beefeater, the bridge is 10 meters west of my mark (white smoke from rocket). Do you have the target in sight?, over.”

“Beefeater has the target in sight, over.” The two O-1 aircraft moved to the east of the target to be out of the way of the attacking fighters. Where the FAC said we would hold during the attack allowed for a left hand pattern for the attacking fighters (fighter pilots prefer left hand patterns) unless that was over enemy defenses in which case we either changed the attack heading or the direction of the attack pattern to avoid enemy defenses.

“Beefeater is cleared to attack. The FAC is holding east, Nail 41.” The bombs from the fighters came close to the bridge, but it was still standing.

“Nail 41, Beefeater. All bombs are dropped. Do you need guns?”

“Beefeater, Nail 41. Negative on the guns, no ground fire being received. Your hits were 10 meters left and 20 meters right of the bridge and it is still operational.” A general BDA (bomb damage assessment) was given when possible. Sometimes it was “No visible results due to foliage.”



Before we left this target, Nail 41 let me try to hit it with my marking rockets. I hit the bridge with two white phosphorous rockets and it began to burn, but it was not likely to be burned beyond use. We searched down the road and found a heavily used truck park along the road, but with no fighters available we could only report it to Intelligence. Truck parks are determined by many wheel marks leaving the dirt road and disappearing under the jungle. You actually never saw any trucks as they were hidden either in caves or under jungle canopy. Since we were always above 6,000 feet altitude, I carried 7x35 binoculars to check for targets. We landed at NKP after a 2 hour 30 minute mission. On normal combat missions, there was no one in the

back seat of each O-1, but there were occasions when the back seat was used for combat checkout, a photographer, a starlight scope operator, or a Laotian crew member for special missions in "Cricket West." Cricket West was an area in the western part of Laos that was just west of the dividing line between the friendlies and the Communist Pathet Lao which had Communist patrols constantly entering friendly territory.

**Thursday, January 5, 1967.** We got airborne at 7:05 AM for a FAC mission in areas 2 and 8 along the trail. Nail 30 was low man and I was high man. We found a truck park along the road from which we were receiving small arms fire. Cricket sent us two flights of four Air Force F-105 fighters (nicknamed Thuds because of their landing characteristics) with each aircraft



**U.S. Air Force F-105 "Thud" Fighter dropping six 750-pound bombs**

carrying six 750-pound bombs. All 48 bombs hit the target, there was no more ground fire, and the road was cut in 5 places by 30-foot craters. About 200 meters of road was so tore up you couldn't find the road. We went a little further down the road and found another truck park and got a flight of two F-105s for this target. They were carrying six 500-pound bombs each, but all 12 bombs missed the target. When the number two F-105 pulled off the target run, he climbed at a 45-degree angle out of sight. He advised over the radio that he was stuck in afterburner. He got the afterburner off somewhere above 20,000 feet altitude. We landed at NKP with 3 hours 15 minutes flight time.

**Friday, January 6, 1967.** Today I flew high man on a FAC (put fighters on targets), VR (visual reconnaissance), and SAR (search and rescue) mission. In Area 2, low man put three flights of fighters on a bridge on one of the (Ho Chi Minh) trail roads. The first flight was two A-1 prop aircraft. The second flight was two more A-1 prop aircraft. The third flight was two Air Force F-105s (Thuds). After all three flights had attacked the target, the small wooden bridge was still standing. I swore that if I had been in one of those 6 fighters, the bridge would not be standing (I was frustrated with this fighter performance). When the Thuds attacked the bridge, we received small arms fire from near there. So low man directed the Thuds to use their 20 mm cannons on



**A-1E with Ordnance**

the small arms firing area which stopped all small arms firing. There were probably enemy personnel killed, but we could not see them due to jungle cover. Then we VRed north through Area 8 to Area 4 where we began searching again for Nail 27 that went down 4 days ago. We also searched the adjacent area in North Vietnam for him. Fighters (who had anti-aircraft radar detectors on board) reported "Firecan" radar signals at our search location just before and just after we were there. The O-1 FAC aircraft did not have radar detection systems for anti-aircraft radar and surface-to-air missiles. So we had to depend on nearby fighters for that information. We returned to NKP with 3 hours 25 minutes flight time.

**Saturday, January 7, 1967.** Today, I led the formation of FACs for the first time. High man was Nails 29 (Hull front seat) and Nail 45 (Keith back seat). It was for a FAC mission in Area 6. Cricket (the airborne command post) sent me two flights of Navy A-4s. The first flight was two Navy A-4s. The target was two wooden bridges along a Trail dirt road. The fighters missed the first bridge with their first bombs but created so much dust that the bridge could not be seen, so I moved them to the second bridge for the remainder of their bombs which they also missed. The second flight of fighters was four Navy A-4s and I directed them onto the second bridge. All of their bombs hit the bridge area. The bridge was destroyed, the canal it crossed was closed at one point and it overflowed to the side forming a new lake that flooded part of the road area. The dirt road was cut in 3 places and 100 meters of the road and its bypass were completely obliterated. Both before and after the attack, we received small arms fire from the target area (whenever the FAC was overhead without fighters). Just as we were leaving, we received a long burst of twin barreled .50 caliber machine gun fire from 50 meters away from the destroyed bridge. The enemy gun was shooting at my high man when I saw it. However, we had no

fighters to hit him with and so we departed without attacking the gun. The gun was probably a Russian ZPU-2 (14.2 mm). We returned to NKP after a 3 hour 20 minute flight.

Each of these combat missions has an intelligence briefing an hour before takeoff and an intelligence debriefing after landing where we report any visual reconnaissance sightings, gun positions, and bomb damage assessment including number and type of aircraft directed onto targets. We also reported any changes in weather or any thing else that could affect future combat missions. Therefore, a good 6 hours of pilot effort was needed for each mission altogether.

In addition to carrying 8 white phosphorous rockets under the wings of the O-1F, the pilots wore their survival vests with emergency radio and pistol. We also carried an M-16 rifle in the cockpit in case of a forced landing where it would be very useful protection against the enemy. Since the O-1 side windows could be opened in flight and snapped up against the bottom of the wing, it was possible to fire a rifle from the aircraft in flight. We were warned not to do that as they said they did not want to see any bullet holes in the wing struts where the bullets entered the struts from the cockpit side. We were also given flak vests to wear since the O-1 aircraft had no armor. But the O-1 also had no cockpit air conditioning and was very hot at low altitude. Thus, many pilots sat on their flak vest instead of wearing it. I wore mine to get maximum protection.

**Sunday, January 8, 1967.** Today I flew a FAC mission in Areas Cricket West and 11. I went to Cricket West first for prebriefed targets there. But I was unable to get any fighters for these targets. Cricket West was restricted to using only Laotian AT-28s or Air Commando American propeller type fighters because of the friendlies present on the ground there and the need for special information before attacking. The special fighters were not available at the moment. So I went on to Area 11. In Area 11, Cricket sent me six flights of fighters: four different flights of two Navy A-4s, one flight of three Navy A-4s, and a flight of three Air Force F-4 Phantoms from



**U.S. Air Force F-4 Phantoms**

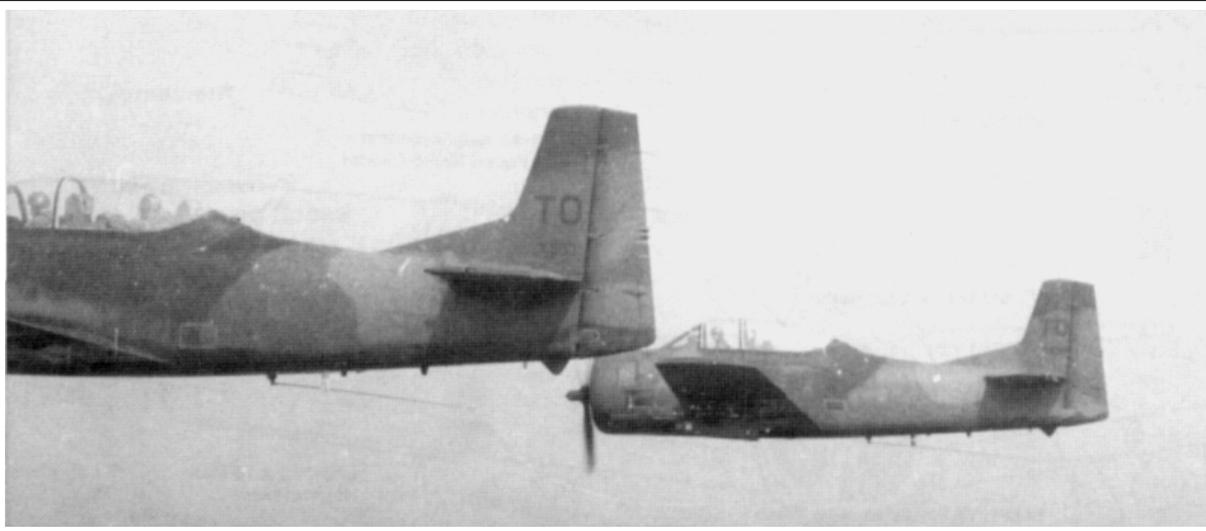
aircraft carriers in the South China Sea and a base in Thailand. I had a target area from Intelligence for an enemy storage area and training camp with a 100 Viet Cong in it. The 14 fighters did a good job. They cut the hidden road into it in four places, caved in a cave entrance, caved in a 25 meter by 50 meter area of karst into the cave, and started a fire in the cave area that was burning 45 minutes later with a column of smoke 500 feet high. But otherwise, results were not visible due to karst (vertical rock formation frequently with caves) and jungle. We returned to NKP with 3 hours flying time.

**Monday, January 9, 1967.** Today was the first time I flew two combat missions in one day at NKP. I flew low man on a FAC mission to Area 2 for 3 hours 10 minutes and the fighters took out a Russian ZPU-2 14.2 mm twin barreled gun. Then I flew high man on a FAC mission to Area 8 for another 2 hours 35 minutes flying time.

**Tuesday, January 10, 1967.** Today I led a visual reconnaissance mission to Area 4 (where Nail 27 went down). Lt. Col. Shopen, the 23<sup>rd</sup> TASS Operations Officer, was high man. I carried an Air Force enlisted man in the back seat who took photos. We also flew over the adjacent area of North Vietnam and took photos. There was hope that perhaps the camera could find what no one could see with their naked eye, a trace of Nail 27's downed aircraft. We returned to NKP with 3 hours flying time, and the photos showed nothing.

**Wednesday, January 11, 1967.** Today, I flew high man on a FAC mission to Area 14. Low man put one flight of two Navy A-4s on a truck park. There was no visible results due to jungle. We returned to NKP with 3 hours 10 minutes flying time.

**Thursday, January 12, 1967.** I flew two combat missions today. On the first one, I flew high man on a FAC mission to Area 4, but low man had radio troubles so we landed early with 2 hours 10 minutes flying time. On the second one, I flew low man on a FAC mission to Area 4. I don't remember what the target was, but Cricket sent me two flights of fighters. They were both AT-28 prop fighters, call sign Zorro, from NKP. The first flight of AT-28s was led by Capt.



Zorro AT-28s

George Deken whom I had flown with in AT-28s in South Vietnam in 1963. I recognized his

voice and checked who it was on the radio. The AT-28s were accurate and hit all of the targets that I gave them. This was the first AT-28s I had worked with as a FAC. We returned to NKP with 3 hours 15 minutes flying time.

**Friday, January 13, 1967.** I flew low man today on a FAC mission to Area 2. Cricket gave me one flight of four Navy A-4s. I put their bombs on a truck park and their guns on a personnel and automatic weapon position. They were accurate with a 100 percent target coverage, but there was no visible results due to jungle. As soon as the fighters left, an enemy truck pulled out onto the dirt road from the truck park we had struck and started driving south in broad daylight (very unusual). Cricket did not have any more fighters for me, so I followed the truck for 30 minutes recording truck parks as I went. Then I opened the O-1 window and fired 20 rounds from my M-16 rifle into the moving truck, being careful not to shoot my own wing strut. That didn't stop the truck. It was time to go home, so I fired my last marking rocket at the truck which missed. I directed my high man to fire some of his white phosphorous rockets at the truck before we left for NKP. He fired 4 rockets at the truck, the last one hitting the truck which immediately turned off the road into the jungle and I could not see the results of the hit. We landed at NKP with 3 hours flight time. I am real confident in working air strikes now. I don't make procedural mistakes anymore.

At this point, you can see how the schedule goes, so I will now skip telling you about days with dull combat missions.

**Sunday, January 15, 1967.** I flew twice today. The first flight I flew low man on a FAC mission to Area 2. Here, I put three flights of fighters on targets. The third flight of fighters was two Air Force F-105s, each carrying two Bullpups. The target for the Thuds was a bridge. The



F-105s, the white missiles are AGM-12 Bullpup guided missiles

Bullpups they carried were flying 1000-pound bombs with a television camera aboard. A crew member in the F-105 tried to steer the bomb with radio commands by viewing a television screen in his aircraft to see where it was going. They needed a lot of target marking to be aware of the target location. I ran out of marking rockets and had my high man take over. Then he ran out of marking rockets and we ended up throwing smoke grenades out the window of the O-1 to mark the target. The Thuds missed the bridge on all four attempts with the Bullpups. We returned to NKP with 3 hours 35 minutes flying time.

**Tuesday, January 17, 1967.** I now have more flying time this month (58 hours 50 minutes) than anyone in the squadron. I will get more flying time this month than I did in the last six months.

This morning, my roommate, Lt. Ray Krogman, was shot down. He was my best friend here. He was high man and said over the radio "I'm hit." Those were his last words. He was at 4,000 feet just under overcast clouds when the wing of his O-1 was torn off by .50 caliber machine gun bullets. He went straight into the ground and burned. No parachute was observed. Low man was Lt. Horning, who had tracers all around him but he got away. A Zorro AT-28 went down low to look at the O-1 crash site and got hit in the wing by the same machine gun. The wing exploded and he crashed with no parachute. The AT-28 pilot was Capt. Bill Cogsdale (married, age 28, of Greentown, Indiana). Rescue attempts have been called off and the two pilots are presumed dead, but will be listed as missing temporarily. Two days later, Ray Krogman's O-1 had been removed from the crash site by the enemy and 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Ray Krogman (single, age 25, of Worland, Wyoming) was declared killed in action on that date.



**Friday, January 20, 1967.** I was flying as high man on a visual reconnaissance mission to Area 6. We had not crossed the first fence into enemy territory in Laos when I heard the sound of pop corn around my O-1F aircraft at 6,000 feet above the ground. Simultaneously, the engine began to run rough. The pop corn sound was bullets breaking the speed of sound. The rough engine was a probable hit. I had to reduce power because of heavy engine vibration and make a 180-degree turn to return to NKP. A Pathet Lao patrol in friendly territory had just fired a machine gun at me. This was near the same location where Ray Krogman and Bill Cogsdale had been shot down 3 days ago. I hoped that I had enough altitude and power to get back to NKP. Of

course, low man accompanied me on this mission abort. He had not been hit. I made a forced landing pattern at NKP, and was able to taxi. Inspection revealed that a .50 caliber bullet had hit the aluminum propeller taking a half-inch chunk out of it, leaving it out of balance. The hole was big enough that it couldn't be balanced by filing on the opposite prop, so a propeller change was necessary. That was my first combat damage at NKP, but the second hit of this combat tour.

**Saturday, January 21, 1967.** With my high flying time in the squadron and after the combat damage yesterday, the squadron put me on four days of CTO (crew time off) instead of scheduling me to fly. I spent the morning writing up a Distinguished Flying Cross recommendation for Ray Krogman to be awarded posthumously.

At noon, Jim Hull came home from a flight with no right brake. He needed a place to land with no crosswind. So I jumped into our radio jeep and opened the dirt runway at the far end of the field for him. He did a marvelous job landing the O-1. The aircraft didn't turn until it reached taxi speed and both Jim and the aircraft were unhurt. I was elated.

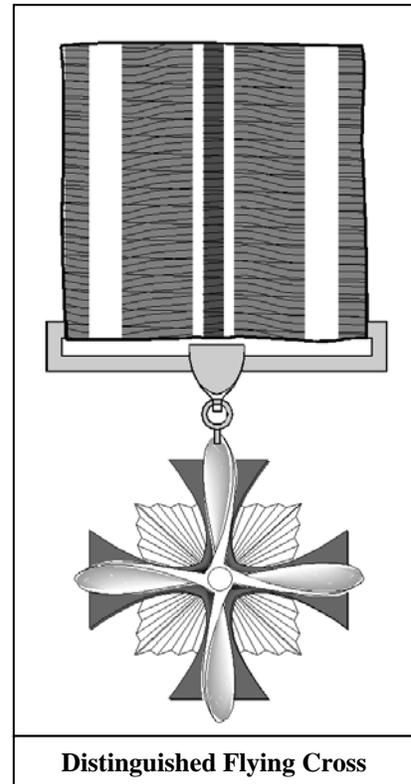
This afternoon, I helped Jim Hull go through some of Ray Krogman's things to get them ready to send home to his parents. Ray was not married, but he was engaged to be married and I wrote a letter to his fiancée.

**Sunday, January 22, 1967.** I didn't have to fly today, so wore civilian clothes and attended evening church service. I really look forward to evening church service on Sundays.

**Monday, January 23, 1967.** I moved into new air conditioned quarters today, two to a room. Jim Hull is my new room mate. Before I moved, Ray Krogman was my room mate until he was shot down.

**Wednesday, January 25, 1967.** I went back to work today, but I didn't fly. They scheduled me as RSO (Runway Supervisory Officer) this afternoon from 1 PM to 6 PM. But the cross-winds did not get high enough to use the dirt strip.

**Thursday, January 26, 1967.** I was back in the air today as high man on a FAC mission to Area 15 for 3 hours. I relate this primarily to identify the Navy call signs and ordnance capability of the Navy A-4 jet fighters. We worked two flights of fighters. The first flight was four A-4Cs, call sign Beefeater. Each fighter carried six 250-pound GP (general purpose) bombs. The second flight was three A-4Cs, call sign Chippy. Each fighter carried four 500-pound GP bombs and had 80 rounds each for their 20 mm cannons. Both flights were deadly accurate and provided 100 percent target coverage for some storage areas and caves.



**Friday, January 27, 1967.** I flew high man on a FAC mission to Cricket West with visual reconnaissance to Areas 11 and 15. Low man put three flights of Laotian AT-28 prop-driven fighters on a Pathet Lao concentration just 20 miles from NKP in Cricket West. They delivered 18 x 500-pound bombs and about 900 rounds of .50 caliber altogether. They put it all on target with 100 percent target coverage, but no results were visible due to jungle cover. I mention this as a record of Laotian Air Force capability. We landed at NKP after 2 hours 20 minutes.

**Saturday, January 28, 1967.** I flew a 3-hour FAC mission as low man to Area 14. I first put a flight of two Navy A-4Es on a road interdiction point. Using twelve 500-pound bombs, they blew up a bridge and half the road at one point. I moved their remaining 150 rounds of 20 mm cannons to some nearby enemy gun positions where we got heavy automatic weapons fire in return. Cricket next sent me a flight of four Air Force F-105s with eight 3000-pound bombs. I put those bombs on another road interdiction point where they put a land slide across 30 feet of the road. Next Cricket sent me a flight of four Navy A-4Es with sixteen 500-pound bombs and 300 rounds for their 20 mm cannons. I took them to the enemy automatic weapons position and they knocked out one ZPU-2 and about 12 other machine guns. Following that, we got ground fire from another enemy position, but didn't get any more fighters to put on them. So we returned to NKP.



**U.S. Navy F-8 Crusader**

**Monday, January 30, 1967.** I mention this mission because of the F-8 fighters and route 912 road into North Vietnam. I flew a 3-hour FAC mission as low man to Area 12. Cricket sent me two flights of fighters for a road interdiction of Route 912. The first flight of fighters was two Navy F-8 Crusaders (the first time I worked with them) and the second flight was four Navy

A-4s. They closed route 912 with four 50-foot land slides, one large tree across the road, and four 30-foot craters in the road for a total of 9 road cuts in 500 yards distance. Route 912 is one of two major roads leading out of North Vietnam and down the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos. We flew reconnaissance over North Vietnam after the air strikes making the fifth counter during January.

**Tuesday, January 31, 1967.** I flew low man on a visual reconnaissance mission to Area 14 today. Bad weather prevented us from working a whole bunch of fighters. So landed at NKP after 2 hours 40 minutes.



**Navy A-4 Skyhawks**

My total combat flying time for January was 88 hours 5 minutes. On this combat tour in the O-1 FAC aircraft, I now have 33 combat missions totaling 93 hours 50 minutes combat flying time of which 5 missions flew over North Vietnam.

**Wednesday, February 1, 1967.** I flew two missions today. On the first mission, I flew low man on a FAC mission to Area 2. I put a flight of fighters on a truck park, then put another flight of four Air Force F-105s on a truck park-bivouac area but saved their rockets for a nearby cave storage target. After delivering their rockets and strafing the cave storage target, a nearby automatic weapons and rifles position started shooting from 50 yards away from the last target. These Thuds were out of ordnance, so Cricket sent me four more Air Force F-105s. These F-105s did a great job of wiping out the gun positions and only one rifle was firing when they got done. Then Cricket sent me a flight of four A-1 prop-driven fighters which I had attack another truck park where we saw campfire smoke an hour before. There was no visible results due to jungle, but Cricket sent another flight of two Navy F-8 Crusaders which I put on the same target and they got two secondary explosions. We returned to NKP with 3 hours 20 minutes flying time (not too bad since I had directed 5 flights of fighters). I flew high man on the second mission which was a FAC mission to Area 8. Low man worked a total of five A-4s, three F-4s, and eight F-105s on a truck park and two road closures for 3 hours 30 minutes flying time. Thus for both missions, I had been part of strikes by 32 aircraft during almost 7 hours flying time.



**Air Force F-105 "Thud"**



**A-1E with Ordnance**

**Thursday, February 2, 1967.** I flew low man on a FAC mission to Cricket West. High man was Nail 42 (Combs). I was briefed by Intelligence to contact ground team B-1 by radio for

information. When I contacted the ground team, they said they were in contact with a company of Viet Cong/Pathet Lao (about a 100 men) and needed some close air support help. I relayed this to Cricket, who scrambled a flight of three Laotian AT-28s for me. The Communists had the small ground team pinned down with about 300 yards between them. The AT-28s had napalm, rockets, and .50 caliber guns and I directed all of these onto the enemy position. When the AT-28s were out of ordnance, the ground team advised that they were still pinned down by the enemy and that more help was needed. I could see some of the enemy in trenches and they were shooting at me with machine guns. The AT-28 ordnance had not been delivered very accurately, so I asked Cricket for American fighters. They approved this request for prop-driven fighters only. But since they had to generate this mission, it took an hour and a half for the fighters to arrive (better late than never). The flight of fighters was two A-1Es from the Air Force Air Commandos in Thailand. They only had six 250-pound bombs, 4 rocket pods of rockets, and 2,000 rounds for their 20 mm cannons total for the two aircraft. I was disappointed with the small ordnance load, as these aircraft have 15 ordnance stations each and most were empty. However, they more than made up for the short ordnance load with their delivery skill. The ground team helped with a white phosphorous mortar round dropped on the Communist position to mark it and the Air Commandos put their six bombs right on the enemy. I then had them fire their rockets into a nearby cave where tire tracks entered and they hit the enemy's ammo storage getting a big explosion which smoked for over 30 minutes. Each A-1E had four 20 mm cannons with a thousand rounds for each aircraft and I had them clean up on the company of Viet Cong/Pathet Lao with strafing (and they were deadly accurate). There were no friendlies injured in the attack and the ground team said they could clean up the enemy now that we had cut them down to their size. We were out of fuel and had to land at NKP immediately with 3 hours 40 minutes flying time.



**Laotian AT-28 Trojan**



**U.S. Air Force Air Commando A-1E Fighter**

After the ground team cleaned up after us, they sent a report of our close air support effort to Intelligence who relayed it to us. They said they counted 40 enemy killed by air and 17 enemy wounded, plus ammo storage destroyed. On March 10, 1967, the Awards and Decorations Committee of the 23<sup>rd</sup> TASS voted to award me and my high man, Combs, the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) for this close air support mission of February 2, 1967. And that recommendation was later approved by higher headquarters.

**Friday, February 3, 1967.** I flew high man on a FAC mission to Area 14A. Low man was Mike Bell. We were fragged (a frag order is part of an operational plan) to put a flight of two Air Force F-105s, call sign Tamale, on a road interdiction point. But the weather was bad there so



we put them on the same road 5 miles further south. They dropped twelve 750-pound bombs on target with two time-delay bombs on the road. Some of their bombs accidentally hit a petroleum storage area about 20 feet off the road which was probably a truck refueling point. This caused four secondary explosions about 3 or 4 minutes apart

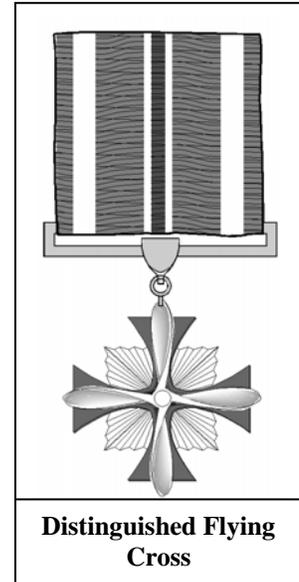
for 15 minutes. The flames were rising over a 100 feet for the next 20 minutes and very black smoke was rising into the cloud base 4,000 feet above the ground. We called Cricket for more fighters, but couldn't get any. Twenty minutes later, the weather closed in and we had to return to base at NKP with 2 hours 50 minutes flying time.



**Saturday, February 4, 1967.** I flew low man on a visual reconnaissance mission to Areas 12 and 8. High man was Jack Little. We located three truck parks, 12 petroleum drums, and six trucks. No fighters were available from Cricket, so I ordered us FACs to attack the 6 trucks with our 8 marking rockets. I hit one truck and it burned! We returned to NKP with 3 hours 20 minutes flying time.

**Monday, February 6, 1967.** I flew high man on a visual reconnaissance mission to Areas 1, 3, and 5 today. Low man was Bill Miller. While we were airborne, we heard on the radio that Nail 65 (Lamar Heiskell) was shot down across the second fence (in North Vietnam).

According to his high man, Lamar had seen a truck convoy of about 20 trucks sitting on the road in Mu Gia Pass in broad daylight poised to come into Laos during the coming night. Even



though Lamar had been briefed on the 57 mm radar gun there and had a no-fly circle around it on his map, he deemed the target worth attacking. So Lamar asked Cricket for fighters for the truck convoy target and headed into the anti-aircraft no-fly circle to get a closer look at the trucks and prepare to put fighters on them. Lamar was probably flying near the O-1 service ceiling of 10,000 feet altitude, but that wasn't beyond the anti-aircraft gun's 19,000-foot range, and the gun was active because trucks were present. When Lamar approached Mu Gia Pass, the 57 mm radar gun began firing at him and blew the tail off Lamar's O-1 aircraft. The O-1 was not flyable and Lamar had to bail out. He parachuted into the jungle close to the road in Mu Gia Pass without injury and talked to his wing man on the emergency radio saying he was OK. An HH-3 Jolly Green helicopter was sent to pick him up, but couldn't find him before bad weather moved in and the helicopter had to leave without him. When Bill Miller and I landed, Lamar was still out there evading the enemy on the ground.



Later, we had word that Lamar was picked up by the helicopter after 7 hours 30 minutes on the ground. Immediately following this word, came word that the helicopter had been shot down that picked up Lamar in Mu Gia Pass. It crashed with one survivor. It was not Lamar. Capt. Lamar Heiskell (single, age 27, on Majors list, of Memphis, Tennessee) and three others in the helicopter crew are presumed dead.



The survivor of the helicopter crash was Air Force A2C Duane Hackney who flew the two sorties as a 37<sup>th</sup> ARRS pararescueman on the unarmed HH-3E Jolly Green helicopter to recover Capt. Lamar Heiskell. On the first flight, despite the presence of North Vietnamese ground forces, Airman Hackney conducted a ground search for Heiskell until ordered to evacuate. On the second flight, Hackney located Heiskell and they both were

hoisted to the helicopter with the jungle penetrator sling. As the helicopter departed Mu Gia Pass, it was hit repeatedly with enemy guns and caught fire. Hackney fitted his parachute onto

the rescued pilot, Lamar Heiskell. Then Hackney located and donned a second chute, just as he was blown out of the helicopter by an explosion. Hackney managed to deploy his unbuckled parachute. He was injured by the explosion and parachute landing. He was later rescued by another helicopter. For his part in the rescue attempt, Airman Hackney became the first living recipient of the Air Force Cross, which was awarded to him after an additional rank stripe along with the Purple Heart for combat injuries by Gen. Howell Estes Jr. in 1967.

**Tuesday, February 7, 1967.** I flew as low man on a FAC mission to Cricket West today. High man was Nail 42 (Combs). We were briefed by Intelligence that we had validated targets for 1800 Pathet Lao (total of three different targets). Further, these enemy guerrillas were in friendly Laotian territory, and it would be the first time we have ever hit the enemy in Laos amongst friendly civilian villages. I picked one target which contained 300 Pathet Lao, rice storage, and a headquarters with a Pathet



Lao General. Cricket gave me ten Navy A-4s with a total of 60 bombs to use. We got about a 75 percent coverage of the target with the bombs. The Pathet Lao fired back with .30 caliber rifles and machine guns. Then the Pathet Lao lit three diversionary fires, but we kept hitting them anyway. One flight of three A-4s was so inaccurate that 11 of their bombs landed near a friendly village. Fortunately, there were no friendly casualties, but it scared the hell out of me. After the strike, we returned to NKP with 3 hours 40 minutes flying time. A Laotian ground team did a bomb damage assessment for us, and

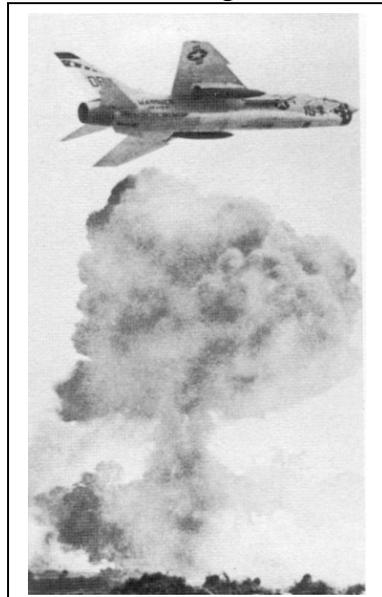


**A1C Hackney receives Air Force Cross and Purple Heart**



reported to us through Intelligence that we had killed 82 Pathet Lao plus destroyed their rice storage (maybe that was what the fires were but we didn't light them).

**Thursday, February 9, 1967.** I flew low man on a FAC mission to Area 12 today. High man was Bill Miller. Cricket sent me three flights of fighters: two Navy F-4Bs, two Navy F-4Bs, and two Navy F-8E Crusaders. We tried to interdict Route 912 at two points. The four F-4s missed the road with their bombs. While we were waiting for the two F-8s to arrive an automatic weapon started firing at me and my high man from near the target. The F-8 Crusaders put two

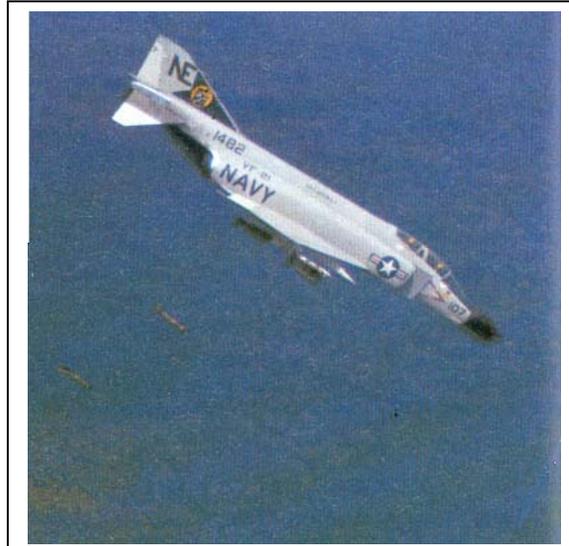


**F-8 over secondary explosion**

bomb craters in the road. Then I marked the machine gun for them to strafe. My marking rocket hit 5 yards from the gun. The F-8s strafed right on the gun position with 20 mm cannons and blew up the ammo cache there – a 5 foot diameter fire ball with gray smoke to 100 feet. So scratch one automatic weapon and Pathet Lao gun crew. We returned to NKP with 3 hours 35 minutes flying time.

**Friday, February 10, 1967.** I flew high man on a FAC mission to Area 14A today. Low man was Page Stanley. He put three flights of fighters on two gun positions for a total of five Navy A-4s and two Navy A-6As. The A-4s carried 4 to 6 500-pound

bombs each. This was the first time we had worked the new Navy A-6A Intruders which were still being tested in combat. By comparison, each A-6A carried twenty two 500-pound bombs (equal to four A-4s). In spite of the 64 bombs dropped, only one gun seemed to be knocked out. When we left, at least 3 guns were still firing at us. We had to leave a little early because Page Stanley's O-1 started losing engine RPM. It dropped to 1600 RPM, so he pushed the power up, reaching 7800 feet altitude before it fell off some more. NKP was 70 miles away, and Page held all the altitude he could enroute and arrived over NKP at 3500 feet. He landed safely. We landed with 3 hours 15



**U.S. Navy F-4B Phantom**



**U.S. Navy A-6A Intruder with 22 Bombs**

minutes flying time.

**Sunday, February 12, 1967.** I began upgrading to Instructor Pilot in the O-1 today with practice back seat landings. I went to church this evening at 5:30 PM. The military Protestant Chaplain presented a nice service and I enjoyed the singing. I really felt that God was with me.

After one pilot (Jim) was killed on the gunnery range from our Holly Field O-1 training class in Florida, three of our remaining O-1 class ended up at Nakhon Phanom: Lt. Ray Krogman, Capt. Lamar Heiskell, and myself (Capt. Dick Pierson). I was good friends with Lamar while training in Florida. Now, of the three of us that came to NKP, I am the only one alive. Including Jim in Florida, that is three FACs dead in two and a half months. God knows that I need his help to carry on.

**Wednesday, February 15, 1967.** Maj. Young gave me my Instructor Pilot check flight this morning and I passed with ease. On February 23rd, I will take the Instructor Pilot closed book written exams to complete my status as Instructor Pilot (IP) in the O-1F aircraft. But I flew back seat IP in the low man O-1 this afternoon with Nail 49 (Jay Hays) in the front seat on a FAC mission to Area 8. High man was Nail 47 (Jim Pawson). We put two flights of F-105s (6 aircraft) on 3 trucks on route 911 and got 3 hours 10 minutes flying time.



**Friday, February 17, 1967.** I flew high man on a FAC mission to Areas 1 and 9. Low man was Gwyn Reedy. Together, we put seven flights of fighters on two targets. The flights totaled 14 x F-105s and 8 x A-4s. They delivered 69,000 pounds of bombs, four pods of CBU (bomblets), and 14,200 rounds of 20 mm cannon fire. Intelligence had given us target coordinates in the jungle for two targets. The first target was 150 Viet Minh and the second target was 600 Viet Minh with ammo and rice storage. We plastered the first target with five flights getting 100 percent coverage of that piece of jungle. The second target was only 10 percent covered. We could not see any results, but we asked for ground bomb damage assessment (don't know if we will get it – no report came).



**Saturday, February 18, 1967.** I flew low man on a FAC mission to Areas 12 and 14 this morning. My high man was Gwyn Reedy. I put two Navy A-1Hs (prop aircraft) and two Navy F-8 Crusaders on a road interdiction target. No damage to road. Worthless bombers, that bunch! We landed at NKP with 3 hours 40 minutes flying time.

I am high on flying time in the squadron for this month again, so have been put on 4 days CTO (crew time off). Therefore, I caught the noon C-130 flight to Bangkok. I arrived in Bangkok at 5:30 PM and checked into the Siam Intercontinental Hotel. What a beautiful place! I saw girls in bikinis by the pool on the way in. It is a first class hotel owned by Pan American Airlines, and all their stewardesses stay here.

**Sunday, February 19, 1967.** Bangkok. I laid by the swimming pool at the Siam Intercontinental all day, got sunburned, but enjoyed swimming and watching the pretty girls. It sure is great to relax for a change and forget completely about the damn war!!!

**Monday, February 20, 1967.** Bangkok. I went to the Navy Exchange this morning and found out it is closed on Mondays. So much for that cab fare! So went to Bangkok jewelers and bought myself a ring and some other gifts for others. In the afternoon, I went back to poolside at the Siam Intercontinental where I am staying. I met some American folks there that were on a trip around the world, Mr. & Mrs. Herman Knop and their daughter Sally (age 22) who works as a stewardess for Pan American Airlines. The Knops treated me and my friends (other FAC pilots that had gone to Bangkok with me) to cocktails and dinner. It must have cost them \$70, but they insisted that they wanted to do something for American servicemen and convinced us that they could easily afford it.

**Tuesday, February 21, 1967.** I departed Bangkok at 5 AM for Don Muang airport and checked in at C-130 Operations. Our C-130 arrived at NKP at 1 PM. The mail finally caught up with me. I had 9 letters and 2 packages waiting for me at Naked Fanny (Nakhon Phanom RTAFB).



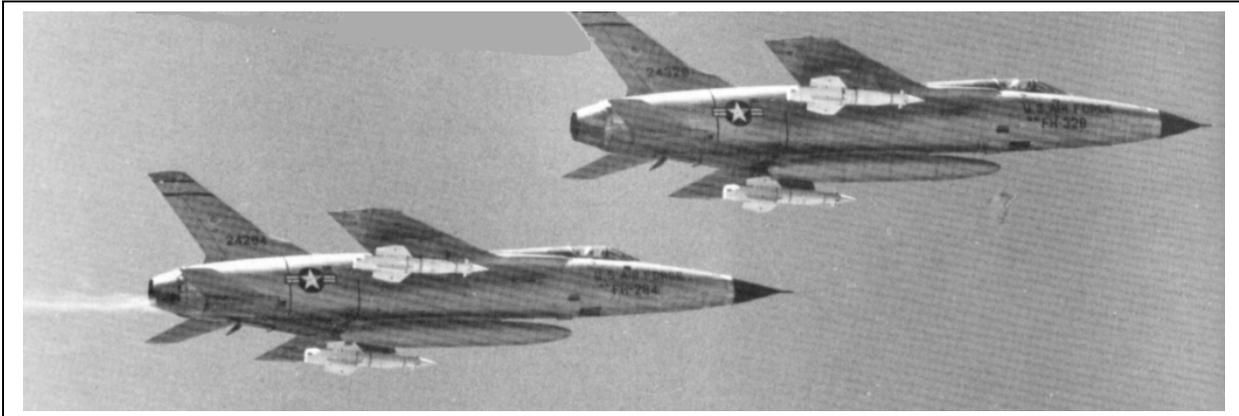
**Friday, February 24, 1967.** Naked Fanny. I flew a 3-hour FAC mission this morning. Tonight we had another Majors promotion party, held at the new base picnic area. It was a humdinger: beer, soft drinks, fritos, roast pig outside, beans, and potato salad. The food tasted great. They notified me that I would assume my new rank of Major on March 20, 1967, and of course, I will assume a new pay scale at that point. This base almost seems stateside, but one only has to remember a little bit of any mission to realize that it doesn't really come close.

**Payday, February 28, 1967.** We get paid the last day of each month, although I have some of my money sent directly to Roberta in California as an "allotment." I flew low man on what turned out to be a visual reconnaissance mission to nowhere. Bob Horning was high man. Just across the first fence outbound, Bob lost power and discovered his left magneto wasn't working. So we aborted the mission, landing at NKP with 25 minutes flying time.

What follows is a series of Instructor Pilot (IP) and weather flights to show the changing situation for March.

**Wednesday, March 1, 1967.** I flew high man on a visual reconnaissance mission to Area 2. Low man was Undelin. I was IP in the front seat with Tom McConnell in the rear seat on his first combat mission. We found some good targets, but no fighters were available, thus the reconnaissance mission instead of FAC mission. We landed with 2 hours and 30 minutes flying time.

**Thursday, March 2, 1967.** I flew low man on a FAC mission to Area 12 today. High man was Jay Haye. I was in the back seat logging IP with Tom McConnell in the front seat. We put two F-105s on a ford with four Bullpups (television-guided 1,000-pound bombs). The first two Bullpups went uncontrollable, with one flying very close to us. We had to bank and try hard to



escape the bomb which seemed bent on chasing us. The next Bullpup hit the ford dead center, but it was a dud (did not explode). The last Bullpup hit 20 feet east of the ford, damaging the ford but it was still passable. After the strike, we did a visual reconnaissance into the adjacent part of North Vietnam to get our March counter for combat pay.

**TGIF, March 3, 1967.** Most Fridays in my diary, instead of writing "Friday," I wrote "TGIF" meaning "Thank God Its Friday" of course. It really had little meaning since we worked seven days per week here but it was a good excuse to drag God into this mess. I flew as high man today as back seat IP for Tom McConnell (his third dual combat flight). Low man was Maj.

Jarvis, who led the 2 hour 5 minute VR mission. It was scheduled as a FAC mission, but visibility was too low to work fighters (varied from ¼ mile to 2 miles visibility).

**Saturday, March 4, 1967.** I was scheduled for a Cricket West mission today, but it was cancelled due to weather (visibility ½ mile). I needed a day off anyway.

**Sunday, March 5, 1967.** They cancelled my combat mission due to weather. So I flew locally to practice landings from the back seat. Maj. Keith Taylor and I flew together and went over to the dirt strip downtown Nakhon Phanom. After landing and shutting down the engine there, we traded seats so each of us got some back seat landings. We landed at NKP with 1 hour 5 minutes flying time.

**Monday, March 6, 1967.** I flew low man on a FAC mission to Area 11. High man was Jay Hayes. I directed four F-105s and six A-4s on one company of Viet Minh, 70 Pathet Lao, and two storage areas. We drew small arms fire from the target. The fighters put 3 pods of CBU, 8 x 750-pound bombs, and 36 x 500-pound bombs on the target. CBU is “Cluster Bomblet Unit” and is the equivalent of dropping about 200 hand grenades together per pod. It is an anti-personnel weapon and all rifle fire ceased from the areas hit. The bombs created three secondary fires. We landed at NKP with 2 hours 50 minutes flying time.



**Tuesday, March 7, 1967.** Today began missions with Laotian crew members over Cricket West. I flew high man on a FAC mission to Cricket West. Low man was Combs. Sery (Laotian crew member) was in my back seat and Pluang (Laotian crew member) was in Combs' back seat. We flew

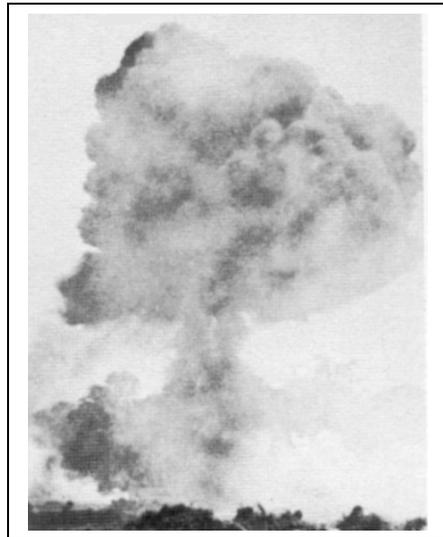
20 minutes with radio difficulties and had to return to get Combs another airplane. Then back to Cricket West where we received three AT-28s for a “Cricket West fringe” target. But there was no visible results. Then we put two Navy F-4B Phantoms on a cave storage area in “Cricket West proper,” but no visible results. We landed at NKP with 3 hours flying time.

**Wednesday, March 8, 1967.** I flew low man on a VR mission to Area 12 and a FAC mission to Area 4. High man was Gwyn Reedy. Gwyn's radio failed so I did all the briefings also. I put two F-105s on a 37 mm storage area. Intelligence said there was six 37 mm guns there. The

fighters wiped the area off the map with one 1000-pound VT bomb and 10 x 750-pound bombs. Then I put three A-4s and two F-4Bs on a reported one battalion of Viet Minh, 50 trucks, ammo and rice storage area. One .50 caliber machine gun fired for awhile. I could see him in my binoculars sitting in a hole with his machine gun, but I didn't want to waste bombs on such a small target. So I put the 18 x 250-pound bombs and 22 x 500-pound bombs on a truck park, troops, and storage area. The last 500-pound bombs got two secondary explosions leaving a hole 200 feet long by 75 feet wide by 20 feet deep (ammo storage I think).



Pathet Lao crew with 37 mm Anti-aircraft Gun



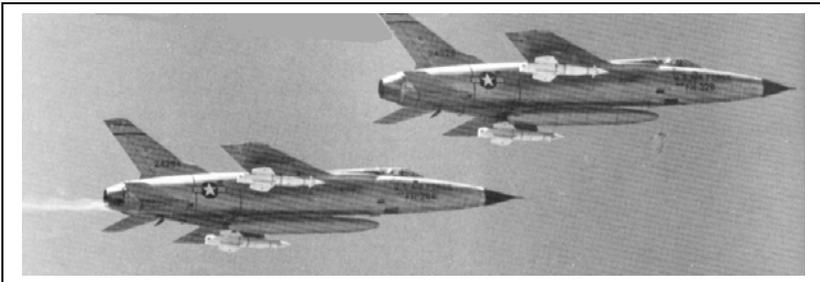
I flew a second combat mission today as low man on a FAC mission to Area 14B. My high man was Maj. Hahn. I put four F-105s and four A-4Es on a truck park. Two automatic weapons fired on me, one with tracers. The fighters strafed one of machine guns out of business with their 20 mm cannons. That gave me 6 hours 25 minutes flying time for the two missions today.

I am going to start skipping dull missions again now that March's typical missions have been shown.

**TGIF, March 10, 1967.** I flew a 3-hour visual reconnaissance mission today. So far I have flown 27 hours 40 minutes combat time in the first 10 days of March. On this combat tour, I have now completed 64 combat missions

totaling 188 hours 40 minutes combat time and have flown over North Vietnam on 14 of the missions. Tonight the 23<sup>rd</sup> TASS Awards and Decorations committee voted to award me the Distinguished Flying Cross for my February 2<sup>nd</sup> close air support mission of a ground team in Laos where we killed 40 and wounded 17 of the enemy and saved the ground team.

**Saturday, March 11, 1967.** I flew low man on a FAC mission to Area 11 today. High man was Jim Hull, my room mate. I put four F-105s on a bridge with 4 Bullpups. After they left, I received ground fire from several rifles while I was checking a spur road into a storage area. I couldn't get any fighters for the rifles target, but I could see the



individuals standing in the road shooting at me. That made me angry, so I opened the window of my O-1 and took my M-16 rifle and fired on the tree they had walked back under. They rushed out onto the road to shoot back and I exchanged shots with them leaving two laying in the road. I probably killed about 5 of them with 19 shots. There was no more rifle fire from the enemy. It was a little challenging trying to fly the aircraft and fire the M-16 at the same time. I told myself that I should not have taken this risk since my aircraft was the bigger target. And since I wasn't supposed to shoot the rifle from my aircraft, I didn't report the enemy casualties to Intelligence during the debriefing.

**Tuesday, March 14, 1967.** I flew high man on a FAC mission during the day and then was to fly a night local checkout flight. But the night flight was cancelled due to weather (visibility 2 miles). This is the first attempt to get me into the night combat missions which mission I will brief you on shortly.

**Wednesday,  
March 15, 1967.**

I flew a FAC mission at night to Area 14B. But this was not a normal night mission. The O-1s were cancelled for weather, so I flew in the back seat of an AT-28 so he could have a FAC to expend his ordnance on the enemy. He was flying as a single



aircraft with dark green paint that made him invisible in the night sky. While different from the normal night mission, this was not an illegal mission. The challenge was to find some targets for him in the dark without a starlight scope (they didn't work through the canopy). I asked Intelligence for targets and they gave me gun positions that had fired in the last 24 hours. The low visibility in Thailand was not a problem for an AT-28. Our call sign was Zorro and the T-28 pilot was George Williams (I did not record his number that went with the Zorro call sign). I pointed out a .50 caliber machine gun location on a creek embankment to him and he made a napalm run on it at 50 feet above the ground without flares in the moonlight on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. He missed it by 5 feet and as we pulled off, the machine gun opened up. The gunner swirled the machine gun around in a circle trying to hit us in the dark, and made several complete circles around the T-28 with tracers without hitting us during the pull off from the target. Small arms and a .30 caliber machine gun also opened up on us. I can't figure out why we did not take any hits (I guess God is our copilot). We returned to this target and dropped CBU anti-personnel bomblets on it and then strafed it with .50 caliber machine guns. We think we got both machine guns and the rifles, but no visible results due to darkness. We landed at

NKP with 2 hours 30 minutes flying time. As you know, I flew the AT-28 in 1963 and I really enjoyed this mission tonight (if you can call almost getting killed enjoyable).

**Thursday, March 16, 1967.** Tonight I began my normal night mission work. I say normal, to differentiate from flying as a FAC in the back seat of an AT-28. This mission is a hunter-killer team using one O-1 FAC aircraft, call sign Nail, and one AT-28, call sign Zorro, working together. The object is for the FAC to find a truck or trucks on the Ho Chi Minh trail, put a flare over it, and have it attacked and hopefully destroyed by the AT-28. This team uses specially configured aircraft. The O-1 is painted all black. It's navigation lights have cups built around them so that they can only be seen from above. Four of the 8 marking rockets are replaced with four 2-million-candlepower parachuted flares mounted under the wings. The O-1 carries a backseater with a starlight scope to look for trucks. The AT-28 is painted three shades of dark green camouflage. It has special ordnance (instead of bombs and rockets) consisting of two napalms and CBU tube groups in addition to .50 caliber guns. It also carries about 8 parachuted flares so that it can keep a target lit after the FAC initially lights it. Since the two aircraft cruise at different speeds (O-1 at 70 knots, AT-28 at 160 knots), they meet over the Ho Chi Minh trail at a predesignated rendezvous point. The O-1 arrives over the rendezvous point with its nav lights on steady dim at 4,000 feet above the ground. The AT-28 flying higher (say 4,500 feet) can see the FAC and begins to S-turn behind it so as not to pass the O-1 and advises the FAC that he has rendezvoused. The altitude is selected at 4,000 feet above the ground for the FAC because 37 mm anti-aircraft guns have a flack pattern that explodes between 6,000 and 9,000 feet above the ground depending on the angle of fire. Since the anti-aircraft guns are visually sighted, the FAC and Zorro only have to avoid the tracers or incendiary bullets to be safe. Since it is night, all the guns are active and the trucks are running down the Ho Chi Minh trail (just called the trail hereafter). On this mission, I took off at 10 PM and rendezvoused with the Zorro an hour later over the trail. Hatfield Brubeck was in the back seat of my O-1 acting as both a checkout person for me and operating the starlight scope to find trucks. In a few minutes, we had a found a truck moving down the road. They see at night by running infrared headlights with special driver viewing equipment. So in the front seat, I could not see the truck and Brubeck guided me over it on the intercom and I dropped a 2-million-candlepower parachuted flare over him. When the flare lit, the truck stopped right in the middle of the road. The flare was directly over the truck, but Zorro advised he could not see the truck. So I marked it with a white phosphorous rocket so close that



**North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh  
for whom the trail is named**

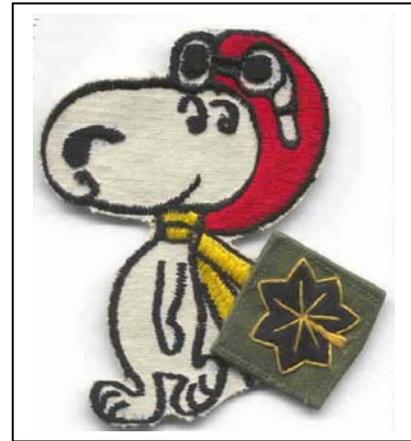
I almost hit it. The T-28 pilot still could not see the truck and the flare went out after two minutes of being lit without the AT-28 attacking the truck. I wrote in my diary, "Dumb Jerk." We had to find the road again in the dark and when that had been done, the truck was gone. I wrote in my diary, "We could sure use some guys that can see!" So my first normal night mission lasted 3 hours 10 minutes, we saw one truck and hit none.

**TGIF, March 17, 1967.** I flew back seat on a night hunter-killer mission. My turn to learn how to use the starlight scope and find trucks. Trouner was in the front seat. After rendezvousing with Zorro, I spotted a truck going north with his slit lights on. I directed Trouner to drop a flare over him and then we couldn't find the truck under the flare (probably left the road). It was a very dark night. The only light we had for the starlight scope was from flares 8 miles south of us. Every time those flares went out, we lost the road because the scope went blank. After Zorro departed, in desperation we dropped our flares over the road just before we were to depart. We were amazed to see a truck under the flare driving down the road. We called Zorro back, but by the time he got there, the truck had made it to the trees off of the road and Zorro couldn't see him. We landed with 3 hours 15 minutes flying time.

**Sunday, March 19, 1967.** I had CTO (crew time off) yesterday and today. Tonight I watched the USO show at Naked Fanny. They had 7 guys and 2 girls (didn't record who they were in my diary).

**Monday, March 20, 1967.** I made Major today, pinning on those gold oak leaves and beginning to get paid more money. So call me Major Dick Pierson from now on! I am still on CTO today and it lasts through March 22 after which we will return to the saga of night truck killing, which I found is not an easy job.

Someone in the squadron had arranged for pilot business cards and I ordered some. They were actually gag cards since Air Force pilots don't need business cards to do their work of attacking the enemy. The image size is similar to the card so I



For S. E. A.'s FINEST FAC's	CABLE: "CRICKET"
"HAVE WILLIE PETE, WILL TRAVEL"	
MAJOR RICHARD E. PIERSON	
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE	
FLYING THE O-1 F BIRD DOG, FASTEST FIXED GEAR FIGHTER IN THE INVENTORY SNEAKY & UNDER HANDED BUSINESS CONDUCTED BY APPOINTMENT ONLY.	SPECIALIZING IN: ROAD, BRIDGE, TRUCK & GUN DESTRUCTION; HOT JEeps & COLD SINGHA; WOMEN, HOT OR COLD; TERRORIZING NATIVES, INSTRUCTOR PILOTS, SAFETY OFFICERS, & AIR COMMANDOS.

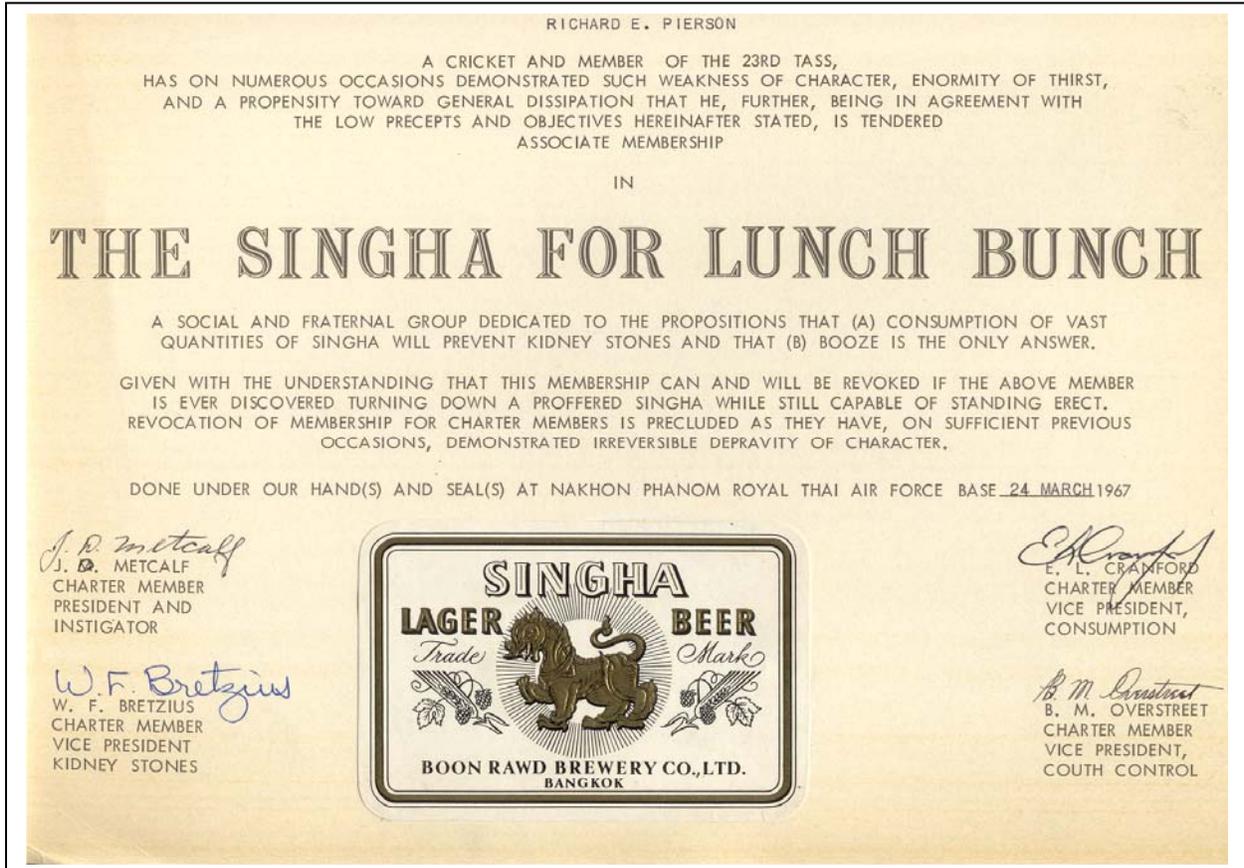
hope you can read the fine print. "Willie Pete" refers to our White Phosphorous marking rockets, "Cricket" refers to Operation Cricket (the 23<sup>rd</sup> TASS' main mission), Singha is a Thai beer brand, and Air Commandos refers to A-1, T-28 and B-26 crews.

**Thursday, March 23, 1967.** I flew a night hunter-killer mission to Area 14B. I was front seat and Jack Morrow was my backseat starlight scope operator. For the moment, the

starlight scope operators are O-1 pilots because that's who's available. After meeting with Zorro, we found a truck and flared it. Zorro strafed and CBUed him. Direct hits. But when the

dust cleared he was gone. We never found him again. It is probable that we killed the driver and the truck ran off the road. That mission was 3 hours 40 minutes.

**TGIF, March 24, 1967.** Today, I was indoctrinated into The Singha for Lunch Bunch by the squadron morale team. Singha is Thai beer. The part that didn't print below says above my name, "Be it known to all men by these presents that, whereas and to wit Richard E. Pierson" etc.



I flew a night hunter-killer mission tonight to Area 14B. I was the back seat starlight scope operator and Jack Morrow was in the front seat. I sighted two trucks moving south on route 911. But both got away because Zorro couldn't see them and high winds blew the parachuted flares away rapidly. Over the last truck, two 37 mm anti-aircraft guns fired on us. They must have had us visually in the moonlight. They each fired about 15 rounds at us at the same time from different sides of our aircraft. The air bursts went off above us at 6,500 feet altitude. We were at 4,000 feet altitude. I heard them very loudly. They all missed. That mission was 3 hours 30 minutes long (it takes about 1 hour 10 minutes to get out to the trail and the same to get back, leaving 1 hour 10 minutes over target).



**Saturday, March 25, 1967.** I flew on two night hunter-killer missions tonight. On the first mission I flew in the front seat with Dick Palmer in the back seat as the scope operator. After our Zorro rendezvous, we spotted 5 trucks. Zorro struck at one of them and didn't get him. But that got a 37 mm anti-aircraft gun firing at us along with four .50 caliber machine guns. It looked like the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. The 37 mm was air bursting at 6,000 feet. We were at 4,000 feet. They were not close (couldn't see us). Got 3 hours 15 minutes flying time.

On my second mission, I flew back seat scope operator with Maj. Chuck McGinn in the front seat. I spotted one truck. We flared him and Zorro hit him with .50 caliber strafing on three passes right on the truck. But the truck just kept on moving north on the road. We continued to hit the truck for 15 minutes but he drove on full of holes. I guess we missed the driver and engine (probably had armor plate over those). So took credit for another truck damaged. Got another 3 hours 15 minutes flying time and landed as dawn approached.

**Sunday, March 26, 1967.** I flew a night hunter-killer mission to Area 14. I flew in the front seat and Maj. Chuck McGinn flew in the back seat as my scope operator. After we met our Zorro over the

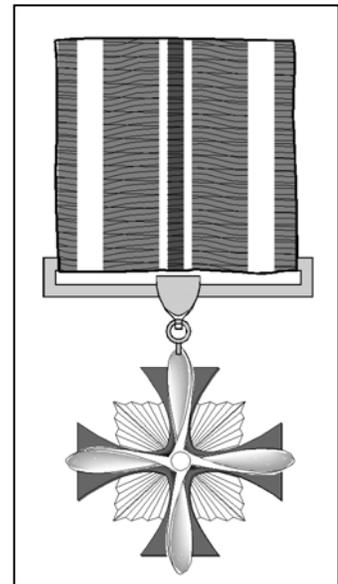


target area, we spotted 7 trucks and Zorro napalmed two of them. They burned, no doubt about the destruction this time. However, there were four 37 mm anti-aircraft guns shooting at us. One of them had a dead bead on me, and I had to bank

hard to escape the tracers. While this was not my best mission, we did kill two trucks and we did it while heavy anti-aircraft fire continued the whole time. But because it was Maj. Chuck McGinn's best day or night mission,



we were later both put in for a Distinguished Flying Cross for this mission (the second one awarded to me). It was the policy of the 23<sup>rd</sup> TASS that each O-1 FAC pilot would be recommended for at least one Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) because of the danger of our mission at NKP and because of the great damage to the enemy on more than one occasion for each pilot. This DFC was also later approved by higher headquarters. The mission time was 3 hours 40 minutes.



I will now begin to skip some of the night missions and tell you about the more interesting ones.

**Tuesday, March 28, 1967.** I flew on a night hunter-killer mission to Area 12. I flew back seat scope operator and Maj. Robinson was in the front seat. When we arrived at our rendezvous

point, the Zorro AT-28 did not show up. We heard on the radio that he had maintenance problems and that they were trying to get another Zorro airborne to support our mission. We immediately sighted two trucks moving north on route 912 about two miles from North Vietnam. They were on the side of a mountain on a dirt road only a truck-width wide, but we had no fighter yet. We followed them. Soon they met three trucks south bound on the same narrow road. I didn't think they had enough room to pass, but after about 5 minutes they figured out how to get by each other and proceeded on, two north and three south. While I had the five trucks in sight, I again requested fighters from the Cricket airborne command post. They said they had no fighters but could send me a B-26, call sign Nimrod, who was way north in Laos at the moment and would take some time to get to me. Send him to me, I said. I elected to follow the three south bound trucks. Eventually, they got to the bottom of the mountain and were approaching a jungle truck park but were spaced about a quarter mile apart now. Nimrod was still coming (he must have been a long way away). The first truck reached the truck park and disappeared under the jungle. I called on the radio for Nimrod to hurry. The second truck reached the truck park and disappeared under the jungle. Now I expected to lose them all. I had put a starlight scope mount on my M-16 rifle, but had not sighted it in. However, I decided to try that mount and shoot at the truck. I had gotten some incendiary bullets for my rifle and I figured I could adjust the cross hairs in the starlight scope to line up with the visible incendiaries. I mounted the scope and fired on the truck. The cross hairs needed a slight adjustment and I made that. The next shot hit the truck. Since I didn't have to fly the airplane at the same time, I was very accurate and laid in about 10 rounds on him from my 20-round clip. The last bullet must have hit the headlight switch and shorted it on because his regular headlights came on and the truck stopped in the middle of the road. Perhaps I had hit the driver also. He was 300 yards from the truck park turnoff. The enemy operators came out of the truck park and about 40 personnel were running down the road toward the truck, fully visible in the trucks regular headlights. At this point, Nimrod arrived. We said standby for a flare and he said I don't need a flare, I can see the headlights. We said, cleared to attack. The B-26 first made a CBU pass and rippled CBU all the way down the road



**M-16 rifle with  
Starlight scope mounted**



**B-26 Invaders, call sign Nimrod, with eight .50 cal. machine guns in the nose**

through the truck and all the people on the road. Just like a string of hand grenades, the people all fell still on the road, dead or injured. The next pass, the B-26 dropped a napalm on the truck. It wasn't a 500-pound napalm like the AT-28s carried, but instead a 750-pound napalm (standard on the B-26). The truck burned. It had taken a lot of effort to get that truck and we had done some collateral damage to enemy personnel in the process. Too bad four other trucks got away. It was a case of no anti-aircraft guns present. We landed at NKP with 3 hours 55 minutes flying time (my longest O-1F mission). That was the only time I put a B-26 on a target during this combat tour.

**Thursday, March 30, 1967.** I had just landed from a 3 hour 10 minute hunter-killer mission, when I was asked if I would fly as FAC in the back seat of an AT-28 to attack a truck convoy that had previously been hit in Laos near the North Vietnamese border. It was almost dawn and an O-1 was so slow that it couldn't get out there before daylight. They had found this convoy during the night of about 12 trucks running close together and had hit the lead truck and the trailing truck with napalm. Now the rest of the 10 trucks were trapped in the middle and they wanted to get them before they had a chance to get away. I said "Sure, I'll fly back seat in the AT-28 as FAC." So off we went. My Zorro pilot was George Williams. When we reached the coordinates given for the trapped truck convoy, there were no trucks there. However, it was approaching dawn and I could see down the road to where the trucks actually were. They were about two miles into North Vietnam. The AT-28s were not supposed to operate in North Vietnam because they were vulnerable to the radar-operated, surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) there. The target coordinates were either in error or intentionally relayed incorrectly to keep people out of trouble. However, we proceeded into North Vietnam since it was a legitimate target. I advised Williams to stay as low as possible so that surface-to-air missile radar could not see us in the mountain depression where we were. As we approached the truck convoy, I cleared him to attack the trucks. He delivered CBU and napalm from 50 feet above the road but only hit one truck which did not burn. Apparently, the trucks had been carrying enemy troops south and now they had already departed the trucks and positioned themselves on top of a ridge adjacent to the road the trucks were on. On each pass the AT-28 made, about 100 hand-held automatic weapons were fired at us from the ridge, probably from AK-47 assault rifles. They must not have known how to lead the aircraft because we got no hits on our 250-knot passes. But I could see the muzzle flashes and I had to divert Williams to attack them lest we get shot



down by not paying attention to them. He put CBU on them and strafed them after I took the planes controls, pointed the plane at them and ask him to squeeze the machine gun trigger in the front cockpit. I then steered the armor piercing incendiary bullets onto the enemy troops and said "right there" is your target. We ran out of ordnance and bullets before we got back to the trucks, but I estimate we killed upwards of 100 North Vietnamese soldiers. We landed at NKP with 1 hour 30 minutes flying time with no combat damage.

**TGIF, March 31, 1967.** Today is my wife Roberta's birthday. I flew front seat on a night hunter-killer mission to Area 8. Jim Robinson flew back seat starlight scope operator. We spotted three trucks going south on a main route of the trail south of Mu Gia Pass. We put a parachuted flare over them. Zorro attacked one truck, the biggest one, which was 40 feet long and looked like it was an 18-wheeler. It caught on fire on the first strafing run by Zorro who was using .50 caliber armor piercing incendiary bullets. Zorro continued to pound the truck with CBU and strafing and got six secondary explosions from the truck which was now burning end to end with flames 30 feet high. It was a fuel truck. It was still burning when we departed 30 minutes later and when we arrived back at NKP 80 miles away another hour later, you could still see the glow in the sky over the burning truck from Thailand. We had caught it with a full load of gasoline. We landed at NKP with 3 hours 10 minutes flying time.



**Saturday, April 1, 1967.** In the afternoon, I flew a 45-minute functional check flight (FCF) in an O-1F for the Maintenance section. It checked out OK. Then I flew a 3-hour night hunter-killer mission to Areas 12 and 24. I was the starlight scope operator and Dick Palmer was in the front seat. Because it was a particularly dark night with no moon (it hadn't risen if there was one), I saw two trucks but couldn't keep them in sight long enough to flare

them. So none were attacked by our Zorro team member. However, things were not so dull later in the night, when a hunter-killer team (which I was not part of) received heavy ground fire and Zorro 42 was shot down. The AT-28 pilot shot down was Maj. Dave Williams and he had another pilot in the rear seat with him (don't know his name). No parachutes were seen, but because it was night, parachutes were still possible. But the AT-28 does not have ejection seats and is hard to climb



out of to parachute (the canopy must be opened first which mechanism may or may not be damaged by the hit), so it is likely that the crew died in the crash. That makes three O-1 pilots and three T-28 pilots killed in the last 3 months since January 1<sup>st</sup> at Naked Fanny. Since I have started flying nights 16 days ago, my hunter-killer teams and Zorro backseat FAC work has sighted 37 trucks, damaged 4 trucks, and destroyed 4 trucks, killing over 140 of the enemy in the process. I am not the only one flying teams at night. I guess we were putting up about four hunter-killer teams per night, and occasionally I would fly twice in one night. Thus in two weeks we probably got four times the mentioned damage to the enemy and in a month twice that number. The current rate of night hunter-killer teams damage is then about 30 trucks per month destroyed, 30 trucks per month damaged, and about 500 enemy soldiers killed per month. With those results, we will probably continue the operation in spite of crew and aircraft losses.

**Sunday, April 2, 1967.** I flew front seat on a night hunter-killer mission to Area 14. Page Stanley was the back seat starlight scope operator. We spotted and flared 5 trucks, and Zorro attacked three of them which were together on the trail. One was a 14-wheeler fuel truck and Zorro easily burned it, and he damaged another truck which would not burn. Zorro ran out of ordnance and we ran out of flares and were low on fuel or we could have finished these 3 trucks off. As it stood, we destroyed one fuel truck and damaged one other truck. There was no opposing anti-aircraft fire. We landed at NKP with 3 hours 40 minutes flying time.



**Monday, April 3, 1967.** I flew a 30-minute functional check flight of an O-1F in the afternoon. I guess we are killing too many trucks, especially fuel trucks for the enemy's liking and they seem to be adding more anti-aircraft weapons. I flew back seat starlight scope operator for a night hunter-killer mission to Area 12. Emery Cushing was flying front seat. We saw three trucks. We didn't hit the first one because Zorro was afraid of the .50 caliber machine gun near the truck. We let it go. The next two trucks came face to face on the narrow single-lane road and were trying to figure out how to pass each other when we dropped a flare over them. The damn flare was a dud and didn't light. A .50 caliber machine gun started shooting at us about that time and we had to take evasive action before we could drop another flare. After the evasive action, we couldn't find the trucks again. So we attacked the .50 caliber machine gun, but Zorro missed it.

**Tuesday, April 4, 1967.** I flew front seat on a night hunter-killer mission to Area 14. Bob Mahnken, a navigator, flew rear seat starlight scope operator. This is the beginning of using navigators instead of pilots for starlight scope duties. We spotted 5 trucks and Zorro destroyed one. But it wasn't easy. We were receiving ground fire from twin barreled and 37 mm anti-aircraft guns. We landed at NKP with 3 hours 25 minutes flying time.



**Monday, April 10, 1967.** After three nights not seeing any trucks (navigators looking) and one night off since April 4, my team damaged one truck yesterday when I filled in as starlight scope operator. Tonight, I flew front seat on a night hunter-killer mission to Area 12. My starlight scope operator was Vic Yoakum, navigator. We have three or four navigators in the squadron now, all are young Lieutenants. Vic saw three trucks, we flared them all, and Zorro attacked them all, destroying one truck and damaging the other two (the truck has to burn or explode before it is counted as destroyed). A direct hit with napalm will count any truck destroyed, but Zorro only carries two napalm. CBU and strafing fail to destroy the truck unless it is a fuel truck which burns or an ammo truck which explodes. On this mission, Zorro put all the ordnance he had on the three trucks in spite of the two .50 caliber machine guns and one 37 mm anti-aircraft gun that were firing at us. If it is a dark night, the anti-aircraft guns cannot see the FAC or Zorro so their accuracy is poor. But when the moon is shining it becomes much more dangerous as their aim suddenly becomes accurate. Tonight was a dark night. We landed at NKP with 3 hours 15 minutes flying time.

**Thursday, April 13, 1967.** The last two nights we had to cancel our missions because of thunderstorms. I flew a night hunter-killer mission tonight to Area 8. 2/Lt. Bill Howell, navigator, was in the back seat as starlight scope operator on his first combat mission. After meeting with Zorro, we spotted a truck going down the road on the trail. Howell didn't need to direct me to drop the flare because the truck had its regular headlights on (instead of infrared headlights) and I could see it from the front cockpit. That made me suspicious, but I figured we would drop a flare over it anyway to see what happened. I warned Zorro that this guy had his regular headlights on and to watch out for anti-aircraft fire. I rolled the wings of my O-1 level for the flare run, but before I could release the flare, all kinds of anti-aircraft weapons started firing. A new enemy weapon had been added - a twin-barreled



anti-aircraft gun firing right at my cockpit on the left and the tracers were coming at me twice as fast as the 37 mm did. I banked hard right to a 90-degree bank and the tracers only missed the cockpit by about 3 feet and would have taken the wing off if it had not been banked.

Immediately, there was another of these twin-barreled guns (turned out to be 23 mm with exploding shells at 11,000 feet slant range) on the right firing with the same accuracy as the first at the cockpit, and I banked hard left to another 90-degree bank in the opposite direction – another 3 foot miss. Now I faced the first gun, and banked back away in the opposite direction again to avoid those tracers. On this third roll and yank maneuver, the aircraft stalled and went into a spin. At this point, I was at the apex of a cone of anti-aircraft fire from two twin-barreled

23 mm, six 37 mm, and about six .50 caliber anti-aircraft weapons in addition to quite a bit of .30 caliber rifle fire. Worse, the 90-degree banking was exposing my cupped navigation lights to them. In the spin now, I had time to reach over and shut the navigation lights off. I was not hit, but decided to let it spin four turns before recovering so as to fall down to about 2,000 feet above the ground and away from the apex of fire.



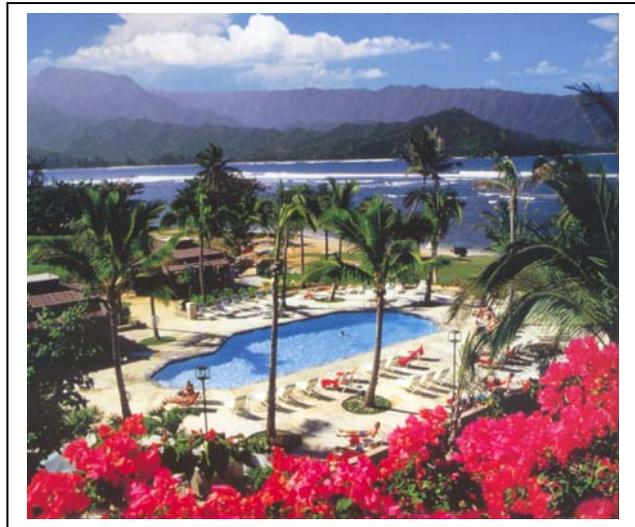
Normally, one cannot recover from a spin at night in the O-1 because the attitude indicator tumbles at about 60 degrees of bank and you thus have no instrumentation to tell the aircraft attitude by. In the daytime, O-1 spin recoveries are done by using outside horizon references and resetting the attitude indicator after spin recovery when straight and level. However, there was so much tracer firing into the sky that the light provided terrain lighting for a visual recovery.

I told my navigator in the back seat to stay put and not bail out as we had not been hit. I told him I would recover shortly from the spin and for him to help me find a hole in the cone of fire that I could fly through. The enemy just kept firing those anti-aircraft weapons and when they saw my navigation lights spinning downward, they thought they got me and moved to the AT-28 as the target. However, Zorro had been warned and he was faster than an O-1 and got away. I recovered from the spin at 2,000 feet, found a dark spot in the wall of anti-aircraft fire and flew through it. At that altitude, if they had seen me, I would not have had a chance of escaping. I put the power on gently after spin recovery lest anyone on the ground hear me, but they were too busy making all kinds of noise with their anti-aircraft guns to hear me. I got away without being seen, although I was so close to them that I could see people on the ground operating the anti-aircraft guns in the glow of their own tracers. Thank God my airplane is painted black I thought. I held my breath all the way out of the cone of fire thinking I would be seen any second. When I got clear, I climbed back up to 4,000 feet.

The radio was silent, but I waited until I had reached 4,000 feet to contact Zorro so that if the enemy was listening to the radio, they wouldn't know where I was. Zorro was disbelieving. He saw me spin down and was sure I was shot down. He said, "I saw those rounds go through your position. How did you escape?" I laughed for the first time on this mission, and said, "I'll tell you about that on the ground over a Bloody Mary (a cocktail of vodka and spiced tomato juice which we imbibed in after every combat mission if we weren't flying again that night)." I turned

my cupped navigation lights back on and rendezvoused again with Zorro. Then I called Cricket, the airborne command post, and advised that they put the “flak trap” coordinates off limits to other aircraft and advise all aircraft of the intentional trap and new anti-aircraft guns. But that was not the only flak trap that awaited us tonight. We found two more, each with less weapons than the first. They were easier to escape and I didn’t have to spin again. Each of these flak traps I also put off limits by giving the coordinates to Cricket. You might think that off limits coordinates would keep us from doing our job, but not so. The trucks had to go down the whole road, and we would just as soon attack them where they had no anti-aircraft gun protection. Because the enemy had concentrated its guns for these flak traps, they were not allowing regular truck runs tonight. The only trucks we saw were each in the middle of a group of guns and running with their regular headlights on instead of infrared. So we never got to attack a truck on this mission. Oh well, they aren’t moving supplies by truck while they are playing “flak trap.” Since these were new Russian guns (23 mm twin barrel), I figured this first night of operation was a demonstration of the guns using Russian operators. They were good – but not good enough! They are probably still looking for that O-1 they thought they shot down, hee, hee! On the way back to NKP, Bill Howell paid me the highest of compliments, saying to me on the intercom, “That was great flying. Anytime you and I are in the bar together, I’m buying.”

**April 14 to April 29, 1967.** After yesterday’s mission, I needed a vacation. Since this was a PCS combat assignment (permanent change of station), I was authorized to go on R & R (Rest and Recreation) once in a while. Most pilots went to Bangkok or Hong Kong. Essentially, that meant temporary duty (TDY) orders for two weeks to somewhere away from the combat zone. It was really a vacation, but in order to fly on military air to and from wherever, temporary duty orders were cut by the squadron. Mine said I was to go to the Philippines to pick up baseball caps for our squadron softball team. Of course, we didn’t



have any soft ball team, but it served the purpose at military passenger terminals. I had decided that I wanted to go to Hawaii, but orders could not be cut by the Squadron for anywhere in the United States. So I went to the Philippines on the TDY orders. There I couldn’t get on any flight as a passenger to Hawaii without the right kind of orders. So I talked to the crew of a C-141 going to Hawaii and asked if they could get me to Hawaii. They said yes, that I could go along as part of their crew flying copilot since they had an instructor pilot on

board. So having flown the C-141 before, I was quite comfortable with copilot duties part time on the way to Hawaii. But as you might guess, all this finagling in the Philippines took some days of waiting for the right flight schedule and getting to the right people. By the time I got to Hawaii, there was only time to catch a plane back to Thailand. I did get a chance to call Roberta on the telephone in California and talk to her before I left Hawaii. I was a bit worried about getting back on time without being reported AWOL (absent without leave), but my TDY orders said I was going to the Philippines so passenger service accepted those in Hawaii and put me on a plane to the Philippines. From there, I had no trouble getting military air to Thailand, and had to connect to the C-130 schedule out of Bangkok as it was the only military transport up and down Thailand. I got back on time, but I forgot to get those ball caps while I was in the Philippines. Oh well, I guess I need another R & R to get the job done. In spite of all the airplane chasing I did, I had a relaxing time and was ready to go back to work.

When I returned to NKP, I found that they had set my port call for June 9<sup>th</sup> (the date I depart for a new PCS assignment), but they hadn't decided where I was going yet. Further, the squadron decided to put me back on day missions again, but I would be available as a fill-in for night operations.

**Sunday, April 30, 1967.** I flew high man on a visual reconnaissance mission to the E segment of the trail. Low man was Maj. Clark. No fighters were available and no ground fire was received. I wrote in my diary, "Boy, this day flying is easy and safer compared to night flying." We got 3 hours 10 minutes flying time.

**Monday, May 1, 1967.** I flew a 2 hour 30 minute visual reconnaissance mission today and then gave a night local checkout to Don Brown for night landings, and flares & rockets at night over Laos for 1 hour 40 minutes. Tomorrow I have Supervisor of Flying, which means I stand by with the radio jeep to open the dirt strip if needed due to cross winds. When that happens, I play control tower operator from the radio jeep for the dirt strip.

**Thursday, May 4, 1967.** After yesterday's two missions totaling 5 hours 40 minutes with no fighters available, I was ready for fighters today. I flew high man on a VR mission to Areas 1,3, & 5 today. Low man was Cushing. We had a target of 250 Viet Minh but weather prevented us from putting two F-105s and two F-4Cs on them that Cricket had sent to us. The target was shooting at us with tracers, but there just was no way to get those jets under that low cloud ceiling that moved in just as the jets arrived (beginning of the monsoon season). So we landed with 3 hours flying time and no attacks on the enemy.

**Saturday, May 6, 1967.** After a couple more



**Pathet Lao with Russian Anti-aircraft guns**

VR missions and a night checkout for Jess Undlin, today I came up with a medical problem. My right foot was flopping when I walked and I couldn't prevent the flopping. Further, it dramatically effected how much pressure I could apply to the right brake when I landed the aircraft. I went to the Flight Surgeon to see what he could do. He grounded me from flying and decided to send me to Korat RTAFB, Thailand on a C-130 today for medical evaluation. They took one look at it at the Korat medical facility and said they were sending me to either Clark air base in the Philippines or Tachikawa air base in Japan on May 9<sup>th</sup>. So I flopped around Korat for three days. I was an out patient so it wasn't bad. It was like being on vacation without any money to do anything.



Medical Evacuation used C-130s in 1967

**Tuesday, May 9, 1967.** They air evacuated me to Clark air base in the Philippines on a C-130 today. There they said they needed to send me to the experts in Japan tomorrow. So I stayed overnight in the Philippines.

**Wednesday, May 10, 1967.** I flew to Tachikawa air base, Japan, today on an air evac aircraft. I was in better shape than anyone else on the plane so felt kind of funny about being there at all. At Tachikawa, they told me that I was an out patient and to go ahead and check into the BOQ (Bachelor Officers Quarters). They really treat combat pilots who are Majors very well here. I have an appointment tomorrow with an orthopedic specialist to determine the cause of the flopping.

**Thursday, May 11, 1967.** The orthopedic doctor X-rayed and checked my leg by hand. He said the problem was not caused by any tumors of the bone or other tumors, but is a neuritis problem (a nerve malfunction). So he scheduled me to meet with the Neurology specialist tomorrow.

**Friday, May 12, 1967.** The Neurology doctor was the best looking blond female doctor I had ever seen, but don't tell my wife I said that. She did some electronic tests on the muscle strengths and said it was a damaged peroneal nerve that is healing OK now. In our discussions about the cause, I related to her that I had been playing the guitar 3 hours per day with my legs crossed with pressure on that point on my leg. I told her that the flopping had been getting better ever since I had left NKP without my guitar and had almost stopped flopping now. She said that makes sense as the cause and you know what to do about that. Based on my current pressure capability for braking, she cleared me for flying again and to return to NKP. Well, it was a nice week of rest, but I felt like a damn fool now. I flew to Clark air base the next day, and the following day I flew to NKP. By this time, my foot was close to normal.

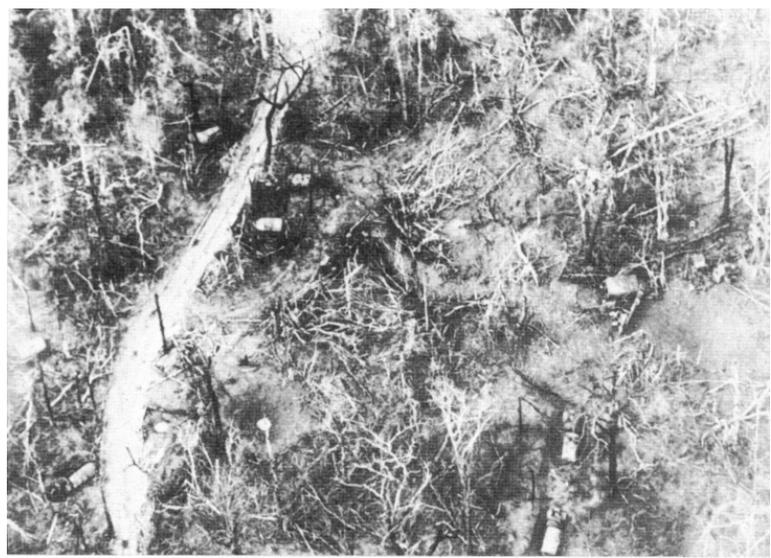
**Monday, May 15, 1967.** I flew low man today on a FAC mission to Areas 12 and 24. My high man was Cushing. I put two F-105s on RLAF 79 which was a road interdiction point. It was a slide area. The fighters dropped 12 x 750-pound bombs, two of which were 24-hour delays. The hot bombs put two 50 foot long slides over the road 10 feet deep. When the delays go off, they will bury the road again. The problem is that if they have a bulldozer nearby, they will clear this in 30 minutes. I put two more F-105s on a ford. They dropped four 3000-pound bombs and all



**Communists rush to repair Ho Chi Minh Trail before smoke settles from U.S. interdiction bombing**

of them missed the ford. I hate to see 3000-pound bombs wasted. We landed at NKP with 3 hours flying time.

**Tuesday, May 16, 1967.** I flew two missions today. On the first mission, I flew high man on a visual reconnaissance mission to Areas 11 and 15. McConnell was low man. Due to the monsoon season, the weather dropped to a 300-foot ceiling on the way home to NKP. We got 2 hours 10 minutes flying time. On my second mission, I flew low man on a FAC mission to Area 8. My high man was Chenowith. Cricket sent us eight F-105s, probably rejected from North Vietnam targets by bad weather there. I put them on a truck park and saw three trucks explode, and got six other secondary explosions. Essentially, the truck park was blown off the map with 48 x 750-pound bombs. Then Cricket sent me four F-4C Phantoms which I wanted to put on another truck park, but I was out of marking rockets and Chenowith's failed to fire due to a malfunction. I finally tried to talk them into the target under bad weather moving in. They dropped their bombs but missed the truck park, though they had tried valiantly against the weather. We landed at NKP with 3 hours flying time, making a total of 5 hours and 10 minutes for me today.



**Bomb damaged truck park on Ho Chi Minh trail**

**Wednesday, May 17, 1967.** I flew high man on a visual reconnaissance mission to Areas 11, 15, 2, 4, and 8. Low man was Dan Dillon. This was a special mission. Someone sighted 60 trucks this morning at 3 AM and we were supposed to find them and strike them. The road they said they sighted them on hasn't been used for years so we looked everywhere. They couldn't be in that area. The guy that reported the trucks must have been way up in North Vietnam when he saw them and thought he was south somewhere. I wrote in my diary, "Dumb jerks anyway. I hate pilots that can't navigate during war time." We landed with 3 hours flying time. What a waste of flying time. The next day, I flew locally and checked out new pilot Bob Kellock and then flew a night check out over Laos for Maj. Jim Jarvis in a hunter-killer team operation. Total flight time for the two was 4 hours 15 minutes flying time.

**Friday, May 19, 1967.** I will just mention some diary comments here. Put two F-105s on a road interdiction. "They blew a couple rocks onto the road."

**Saturday, May 20, 1967.** "Turned back three flights of fighters because of weather."

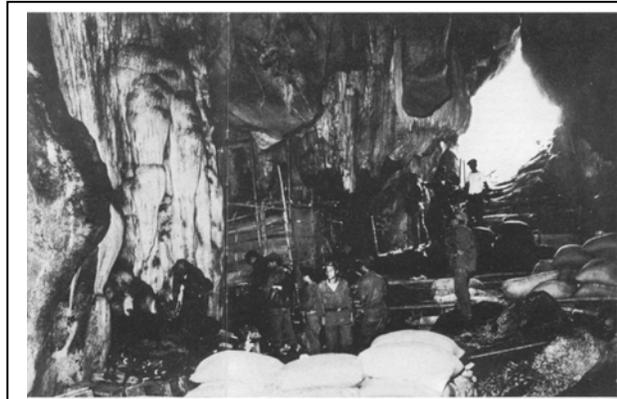
**Sunday, May 21, 1967.** Today is my 12<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. I flew low man with Bob Kellock on his third dual combat mission. He is cleared for solo combat now. High man was Chuck McGinn with a cameraman in the back seat. At 4 PM, flew a functional check flight on an O-1F. Good aircraft except the FM homer was 180 degrees out of phase.

**Tuesday, May 23, 1967.** I flew low man on a FAC mission to Area 12 today. High man was Lt. Col. Pallister, the new squadron commander. We put six Navy A-4s and four Air Force F-105s on a road, a ford, and a truck park. Results were a 150 yard slide across the road 3 feet deep, no visible results in the truck park, no secondary explosions. Flying time 3 hours 35 minutes.



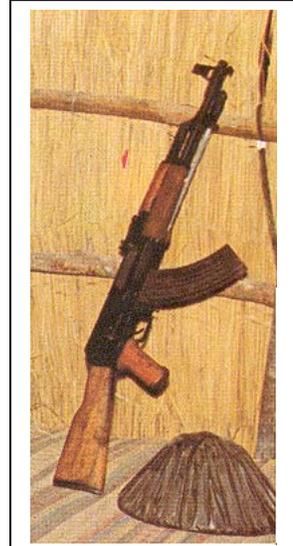
**Friday, May 26, 1967.** This is a quote from my diary. “VR<sup>12</sup>, 3 + 15, lo man, hi man was Lloyd Bishop on his 2<sup>nd</sup> supervised solo. I found some supplies in the road but no fighters available. Then I found a truck in the road, but still no fighters available. Then I found an active AW (automatic weapon, a machine gun), but still no fighters. So I put two marking rockets on the truck and missed. Then put two rockets on the AW gun and missed. Then used my M-16 (rifle) on the AW and didn’t miss. He didn’t fire any more after that. Some days it doesn’t pay to get out of bed (talking about me).”

**Saturday, June 3, 1967.** Last mission. Today I flew low man on a FAC mission to Area 8. High man was John Callahan. The weather was lousy, but we found a hole big enough to put fighters into over the road at “golf,” an interdiction point. Cricket sent me Zorro 13 and 14, two AT-28 propeller driven aircraft. I put them on a bridge and storage cave there. They put four 250-pound bombs on the bridge missing it by few feet. Then they put four 100-pound white phosphorous bombs, four LAU-32 rockets (28 rockets), and 1260 rounds of .50 caliber on the cave which generated a secondary explosion. Then we headed home to NKP. But the clouds had dropped to about a 300-foot ceiling, so we proceeded at 50 feet above treetop level to make us harder to be hit by



Supplies in Laotian Cave near Ho Chi Minh Trail

ground fire. I told Callahan on the radio not to fly directly behind me as any warning I gave to enemy patrols would make them ready for him. He obeyed this instruction until we entered friendly Laotian territory in western Laos, then he fell in directly behind me. Since I couldn't see him, I didn't know he was there. About five miles into friendly territory, I flew over a Communist Pathet Lao patrol, and when Callahan reached them, they sprayed him down good with handheld automatic weapons (probably AK-47s). He was hit six times, one through the center of the American star on the side of his fuselage. He called out the ground fire on the radio, and I instantly banked as a self protection action. Seeing me turn, Callahan urged on the radio, "Don't go back!" He was afraid I would attack them and be at a disadvantage. But I had no intention of attacking them in this weather. Luckily, Callahan was not shot down, and we landed safely at NKP with 2 hours 30 minutes flying time. Callahan was unhurt except for the extra breeze through 6 holes in his airplane. As I said at the beginning of this mission, this was my last combat mission from NKP, and apparently God has watched over both me and Callahan. It is hard to describe the mental load of life threatening work that has been lifted from me at this moment. I might even have three beers tonight in celebration.



**AK-47 Assault Rifle**

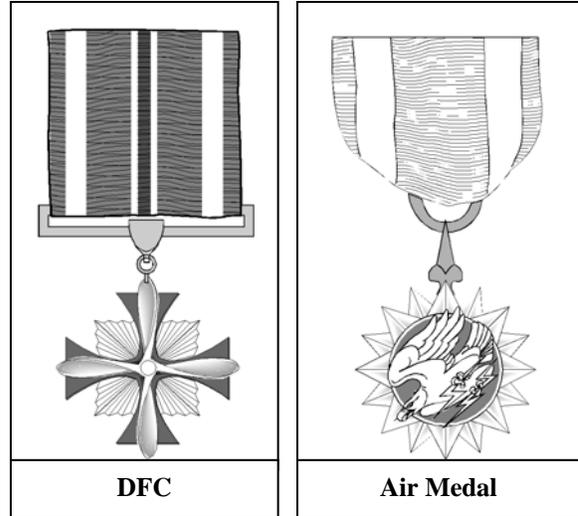
In January, I had asked my father Karl to have a piece of steel made for me in San Diego that had the correct dimensions and weight to fit under the O-1 pilot's seat. He mailed this piece of armor to me in February and the Personnel Equipment section at NKP made me a canvas bag for it. I just wanted to decrease the odds of injury from anti-aircraft fire. It probably would have stopped a .30 caliber or .50 caliber bullet. The O-1 does not have any armor. However, I carried this piece of armor out to my aircraft and stuffed it under my seat on each flight after I received it. Thus, I had the only armor in the squadron in addition to our flak vests. It weighed 20 pounds. After I flew my last mission, I found another pilot that wanted my armor and gave it to him.

My total combat missions for this combat tour came to 121 (including the two AT-28 missions) of which I flew over North Vietnam on 25 of them. The remainder were over Laos only plus four in South Vietnam during checkout there. These missions totaled 360 hours 20 minutes of combat time. My highest flying time month here was 88 hours 5 minutes of combat time in January (33 combat missions). I believe it was at 80 hours when the squadron had me go to the Flight Surgeon to be cleared physically for more combat flying that month. The Flight Surgeon had cleared me to fly to 100 hours that month, but I didn't reach that level. I also had to see the Flight Surgeon in March at 80 hours and ended up with 84 hours 45 minutes that month (27 combat missions). Total combat damage to my aircraft this tour was two hits, a .30 caliber bullet in the wheel strut in South Vietnam and a .50 caliber bullet in the propeller over Laos. I have to say that God and the Angels did a great job taking care of me.

**Friday, June 9, 1967.** Today was port call (for Maj. Dick Pierson) and I departed for the United States. My new assignment is at Eglin AFB, Florida, as a Reconnaissance Development Engineer doing operational testing on airborne electronic equipment at the 1<sup>st</sup> Combat Applications Group under the Tactical Air Command. I like the assignment because it uses all of

my background as a fighter pilot, a Forward Air Controller, and Electrical Engineer. I will hold this job for six years until I retire from the Air Force.

Air medals are given at Nakhon Phanom, one for each 20 missions. So this Forward Air Controller combat tour generated six Air Medals and two Distinguished Flying Crosses (DFCs) for me. The medals were awarded to me at my new assignment base in Florida.



**Maj. Gen. Corbin, Mark, Maj. Dick , Jeff, Roberta, and Scott Pierson  
Award of two DFCs and six Air Medals at Eglin AFB, Florida 1967**