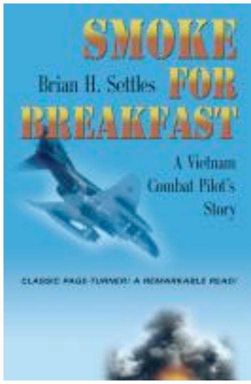
SMOKE FOR BREAKFAST

Brian H. Settles

A Vietnam Combat Pilot's Story

CLASSIC PAGE-TURNER! A REMARKABLE READ!



Retired airline Captain and author, Brian H. Settles, gives readers of aviation sagas a true page-turner memoir in ***SMOKE FOR BREAKFAST: A Vietnam Combat Pilot's Story****. Readers will feel, smell and taste the nonstop adventure as if they are riding on the shoulders of this Nebraska orphan who became a fighter pilot to prove he was good enough. Steamy tales of failures at faithfulness and the machismo of pilot ego drip from these pages...*

Smoke for Breakfast

A Vietnam Combat Pilot's Story

Order the complete book from

Booklocker.com

http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/7922.html?s=pdf

or from your favorite neighborhood or online bookstore.

Your free excerpt appears below. Enjoy!

Smoke for Breakfast

A Vietnam Combat Pilot's Story

Brian H. Settles

Copyright © 2015 Brian H. Settles

ISBN: 978-1-63490-092-8

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida, U.S.A.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2015

First Edition

CHAPTER 1: THE SECOND BEGINNING

The dark gray Philippine sky had thick clouds that hung over the land like a dirty blanket, convincing the drenched populace living below that the sun no longer shone. Lieutenant Bill Smoyer and I bounced along the rain-soaked streets in the blue U.S. Air Force bus that swerved from side to side, attempting to avoid the pothole-studded streets.

It was Monday morning, September 2, 1968, and we had just completed Air Force Jungle Survival School as well as F-4 fighter training six months earlier. Spiffy in our khaki summer uniforms with open collars and straight-cut trousers held up by navy blue belts, we sat across from each other, two young officers, both twenty-four years old, attempting to conceal our anxieties.

Three years earlier, in February 1965, Vietcong forces had attacked the Bien Hoa American airbase at Pleiku. By the fall of 1968, hundreds of fighter pilots had already been shot down. The war escalated rapidly. Our expanding involvement was abetted by the arrogant and misguided convictions of Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of State Melvin Laird, and other presidential advisors. They were our best and our brightest as the book title suggested: Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, General Maxwell Taylor, McGeorge Bundy, George Ball, General William Westmoreland, et al. Our leaders were convinced that a few more battalions, a few more fighter squadrons, and a few more of the latest gadgets of destruction would bring about a quick end to the National Liberation Front and the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) that were sustaining the war effort south of the 17th parallel, usually referred to as the demilitarized zone (DMZ).

Bouncing and swaying in the bus, we felt like two alien travelers in a foreign land. We wondered whether either of us would ever return to Clark Air Force Base.

Bill interrupted the quiet. “Let me bum one of your Salems, Dumbshit.”

I deliberately hesitated in reaching two fingers into my shirt pocket to withdraw a cigarette. Rolling my eyes, I complained, “Jesus Christ, man, I buy ’em and you smoke ’em.”

Extending his hand to retrieve the Salem, he responded, “Fuck you very much, Bee.”

I laughed and took another gut-burning swig from the fifth of Smirnoff I held wedged between my legs. I passed the bottle to Bill. He gulped such a hit it made me wonder if he would be able to keep it down. I withdrew a Salem from my shirt pocket, lit it, and took a deep draw. During a pause in the otherwise incessant rain shower, I stared through the color prisms dotting the bus window and at the brownish-black-feathered hens and roosters strutting around the trash-littered yards of the shanty homes that lined our route. I felt remote and detached, as if I was viewing my existence rather than actually being part of it. My mind revisited the shock and dismay I experienced when I saw the impoverished humans existing on a thread of life in the refuse at the outskirts of Mexican cities like Nuevo Laredo and Tijuana, the people Franz Fanon had labeled “the wretched of the earth” in his book of the same title. They eked out meager subsistence, cloaked in numbness, holed up in cardboard homes, living off daily scroungings.

My mind seemed to be running its own picture shows, fast-forwarding to the future. I saw my copilot self sitting in the F-4 Phantom, whizzing earthward in a five-hundred-mile-an-hour dive, dropping napalm on the thatched huts of Vietnamese peasant farmers. I could visualize them taking their breakfast rice while the same scrawny-looking hens and roosters scurried for their lives in the front yards of their jungle abodes. I grimaced and snapped back into the reality of the bouncing bus, my temporary refuge from what lay ahead.

I had a foul mouth before becoming a fighter pilot, but Bill’s language embarrassed me. The more we drank, the worse Bill got. There is a fog over the remembrance of what we talked about. Both of us had left new brides behind in the States. We were gripped in our private musings and could barely hear each other’s quiet hysteria.

We overcompensated with loud and boisterous chatter; it seemed to help drown out the roar of our private thoughts.

Occasionally, the enlisted airmen seated in front of us cast furtive glances over their shoulders. Self-conscious over some notion that we were officers and should retain some semblance of military bearing, I admonished Bill, “Cool it, man. You’re grossin’ everybody out.”

He snapped back indignantly, “What the fuck, over. They’re gonna send us back in plastic body bags in six weeks anyway for Christ’s sakes.”

I was silenced.

Since my mind was now like a short-subject movie reel that kept rerunning episodes of my life, I recalled a scene played out two nights earlier around a campfire in the Philippine jungle. I was sitting beside a young, blond-haired, blue-eyed helicopter pilot listening to his horror story of Vietnam. The light from the blazing logs danced as it flickered and flashed, reflecting off his face. He looked like a mere teenager squatting next to me, his buttocks resting on his heels, as if taking a crap. In subtle condescension, I had spoken to him. “Hey, guy, you wanna trade those Salems in your C-ration box for these Winstons?”

He responded with equal distance and indifference. “Yeah, okay.” That was the only exciting feature about C rations; besides containing canned food, they held mini-packs of five cigarettes. You never knew what brand you were going to get until you opened the thin cardboard box.

“Where you gonna be based in Nam?” I inquired casually.

“I’m on my tour now,” he said. I discerned he was in the Army from the insignia on his fatigues.

“Well, didn’t you finish survival school before going over?” I asked, knowing from experience it was not atypical of the military to screw up orders, often sending people on assignments out of sequence with training.

“Yeah,” he replied, “this is my second time in jungle school.”

“What the fuck? Why’d the Army send you back to go through this shit again?” I responded, thinking I had uncovered an administrative snafu.

He answered without looking at me, staring entranced into the flames shimmering off the crackling logs. His soft, low-key explanation left me numb.

“Well,” he said, sighing, “ten days ago I was on a recovery mission of what was left of a company of grunts assigned to the Americal Division in I Corp. They were in heavy contact with some Cong when we went in for the rescue and got the shit hosed out of us. Two of the five we recovered were wounded badly. Our asses were shot down on the pull-off by .50-caliber machine-gun fire. One of the other choppers had to come back for us. The ground fire was so heavy we didn’t have time to take the wounded off our bird; it torched as soon as we hit the ground. The copilot on the bird that rescued us took a round in his hip just as we lifted off.”

The kid continued talking, never taking his eyes off the fire and never looking at me. “Then, last Thursday, I was on another rescue evac, fuckin’ metal flying everywhere. On our third pickup we got hit bad and barely made it out. The pilot took one right in the side of his face, and the paramedic got his arm blown clean off. I grabbed control of the bird just before we hit the trees. I still don’t know how we made it out. When I got back to the base, admin set me up to come back here on a lark R & R to jungle survival school. I guess they figured after gettin’ shot down twice in one week a guy deserves a little break.”

By the time he finished talking, I was staring trancelike into the fire myself, wondering how this handsome, baby faced dude was stooped there beside me acting so calm. I thought that if I had gone through what he had described, they would be sending me to the psycho ward, not jungle survival school.

Turning my thoughts away from the kid’s campfire story, I took another healthy swig of Smirnoff and passed the bottle to Bill. We had to finish it before we arrived at the flight line to board the C-130 cargo plane that would propel us toward our destiny. My palms were sweaty with uneasiness.

Sadly, throughout the long stream of history, man still has not figured out how to resolve conflict without concluding that the only way out was to line up against the foe and shoot until there was only one person standing or someone surrendered. And now, like some ancient Spanish knight leaving his fair maiden for the Crusades or some GI about to storm the beachhead at Normandy, I was another insignificant human speck joining the legions of expendable warriors littering world history.

The dreary day following a wet week in the Philippine jungle, on the muddy bus ride leading us toward the Military Airlift Passenger Terminal, past the scrawny, rain-soaked chickens, was part of a series of ominous events moving me closer to an encounter like none I had ever experienced and for which my imagination was incapable of preparing me. My destination as a newly graduated F-4 Phantom copilot was Da Nang Air Base, Republic of Vietnam. There I would fulfill the orders for a yearlong tour waging aerial combat in a $2.5-million supersonic fighter-bomber.

The flight from Clark to Tan Son Nhut was a drunken blur, during which little time was spent in useful consciousness. The vibration and engine noise of the powerful turbo props made me feel fortunate that Bill and I were able to sleep through the trip. Before we knew it, we were on final approach for landing in Saigon. I was relieved we had a short ground time, discharging a few GIs and civilians before boarding more poor slobs whose assignments were bringing them with us to Da Nang.

In the wee hours of the morning, the hydraulically actuated cargo doors at the rear aircraft ramp began to close slowly, like giant whale jaws coming together before swallowing. The forward passenger boarding stairs were retracted by a short, burly potbellied master sergeant whose overly tight flight suit revealed that in nineteen years of Air Force service he had probably not missed chow call too often. The engine’s propellers rotated in sequence as the eight-foot-long turboprop blades spun like a giant mix-master up to idle rpm. After the rumble and rattle of a short taxi-run, we took off from the dimly lit field into the night blackness destined for Da Nang.

With Bill next to me, uncharacteristically quiet and solemn, I peered through the window. There was no moon, no stars, only soup above. The shoreline, the rice paddies, and the Vietnam jungle were indistinguishable in the night landscape below us except for the recurring flares that spread, suspended like lights strung out in a Fourth of July backyard barbecue. There was nothing for the eyes to fix upon, only the darkness sprinkled with the light of flares descending earthward.

I turned my head away from the window, pondering the thought that people— Americans—were down there doing a job they were being paid to do. That job was to conduct war. Soon, I thought, I would arrive at the site from which I would wage my own war against the people of North and South Vietnam who had been declared enemies of the South Vietnamese government—an enemy that would be intent on shooting me out of the sky for attempting to deter them from carrying out their war of national liberation.

As our C-130 bored its way through the early morning darkness toward Da Nang, I actually believed the Vietcong and the North Vietnam Army (NVA) could not be victorious. A part of me loved the idea of being an F-4 copilot and my flight training had impressed me with the awesome firepower the U. S. Air Force was unleashing against the communist forces in Nam. There was no way, I reasoned, that we could lose. Coupled with this conviction, two gnawing apprehensions ate away at me; first, a lot of ass would get burned on both sides before the point was proved; and, second, the political/military history of Vietnam, dating back to the sixteenth century, raised serious reservations as to the prudence, propriety, and morality of the increasing level of U.S. involvement. Was it in fact a civil war, not unlike our own conflict over slavery and saving the Union, or was it their revolutionary war?

My disenchantment with participation in the Vietnam war continued to grow. With haunting misgivings, as I perceived more clearly later, I understood my only objective was to survive. I would piece it all together when I was safe back at home.

Having reached cruise altitude, the C-130 leveled off, rolled, and bounced, cutting its way through choppy air as the flight proceeded

toward that once-in-a-lifetime rendezvous with the unknown. My thoughts once again escaped the reality of my destination. I missed my cat, Major, whom I had named after my sister Margerie, but then modified that after learning that Marge was a little male—the name didn't seem to work after that discovery. I longed for Celeste, my lonely bride. My concern for how she would hold up during my absence was rapidly becoming a preoccupation. She knew I had not wanted to go to Vietnam and that I had surrendered my convictions about the war. She realized more than any family members why my tour would be the greatest challenge of my entire life.

Throughout my combat tour, I wondered how my wife, family, and friends would handle the news that I had been shot down or killed, worse yet, taken as a prisoner of war. Perhaps it was my ego that distorted my sense of importance in the lives of all who knew me.

The C-130 abruptly lurched downward, raising us all off our seats before regaining stability. Bill, who sat silent and into himself most of the flight, turned to match my grin at the thought that the many motor drivers in the cockpit had gotten an unexpected nose pitch-down when they disconnected the autopilot for descent. Outside the windows the huge propellers sawed their way through the early-morning overcast. We bounced earthward in light turbulence, and reality came back into focus—the long trip to the combat zone from America the beautiful would soon be complete. The cloud cover on the approach to the runway at Da Nang reached to within a few hundred feet. Nothing could be seen outside the cargo compartment window until moments before touchdown. Then, with the abrupt screeching thud of rubber against concrete, we hit the runway. I was no longer going to Da Nang; I was there.

After taxi-in and engine shutdown, we were instructed by bullhorn to follow the passenger service co-coordinator from the aircraft, single file, to the Da Nang Air Base passenger terminal to await the arrival of our luggage and receive guidance on where the hell to proceed. The time was 0245, which most people know as 2:45 AM. GIs—Marines, Army, Navy, and Air Force—filled the passenger terminal. They were filthy and funky from hours in the

morning heat and humidity, cramped like crawdads in a fishing bucket. I had little knowledge of what it would really be like at Da Nang, but I knew from what I saw that first night that I envied those leaving.

I was in Vietnam, suspicious and uncomfortable around every Vietnamese I encountered. I got the unjustified fear white folks often feel at being around inner-city Black youth with neck chains, baggy pants, and leather-laced hiking boots on a subway or dark street. At least half the crowd in the terminal was Vietnamese or Army Republic of Vietnam soldiers (ARVN) many of whom had their families with them. Babies wailed loudly, many clinging and clawing at mothers with big bellies, squatting down with buttocks resting on their heels. My old basketball knee injuries prevented me from bending my legs like that and I marveled at the exhibitions of contortion all around me.

Signs posted in the terminal were in English with the Vietnamese equivalent beneath. The air had a thick aroma of stale urine, garbage, and suffocating cigarette smoke. Everyone was greasy looking and sweaty. No one seemed happy, even though many of those people were going home. Laughter was sporadic and muffled. I thought about wanting to get the hell out of there before a bomb went off and killed us all. Numerous accounts of sabotage and Vietcong satchel charges detonating in public places fueled my anxiety in crowds. From that first day, I was perpetually leery of my surroundings whenever Vietnamese, military or civilian, were present. I realized then that uneasiness and foreboding would be constant companions.

The first stroke of good luck, I saw the 390th Tactical Fighter Squadron, my unit, directly across the street from the passenger terminal. Bill's baggage was delayed and I told him we'd hook up the next day. I headed out for the squadron. As I crossed the dimly lit street, I heard a deep but muffled rumble of distant heavy artillery bombardment and felt it beneath my feet. I wondered, *Are they really bombing enemy soldiers out there in the darkness and how far away are they?* It sounded too close. Suddenly, flares illuminated the sky over the departure end of the runway. It looked like Disneyland. But it was not Disneyland. The early-morning ambience echoed with the

voice of war. The crack, crack, crack of small-arms fire ripped a sharp staccato through the night air. It seemed to be coming from the perimeter of the base. I thought, *Shit! Is this for real or what?*

I approached a concrete walkway between two stretches of barbed-wire fence surrounding three small rectangular structures. A small wooden guardhouse, beefed up with five-foot high stacks of Army-green sandbags, was situated at the opening in the fence. A helmeted Airman 1st Class security policeman instantly emerged from the guardhouse clad in green camouflage fatigues, wearing a full ammo belt with an M-16 slung over his shoulder. Rendering a crisp salute, he greeted me, “Good morning, sir. This is a restricted area. May I help you?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “I see. I’m trying to find the 390th Tactical Fighter Squadron. They told me at the terminal it was over here.”

“Yes, sir,” he continued, pointing behind him “That’s it right there. Do you have orders, sir?” Having been conditioned to the routine of presenting my orders to someone every five minutes wherever I traveled, I readily produced my papers.

“Okay, sir, proceed.”

I couldn’t resist an inquiry. “Is that artillery very close to the base?”

He replied, “Yes, sir, about five to ten clicks south. That’s where the rocket attacks come from.” Five clicks were equivalent to five thousand meters, a little more than a mile.

“Yeah,” I responded, somewhat incredulously. “How often does the base get hit?”

“Regularly, sir,” he said, obviously amused by my naiveté and the hesitancy in my voice. “This is fuckin’ Rocket City. Welcome to Da Nang, sir.”

“Right,” I said, gathering my burden of bags, having heard all I wanted for the moment.

I trudged off into the humid morning darkness down the walkway leading to the squadron. Balancing a strange sense of pride with a palpable foreboding of what I was getting into, I couldn’t help asking myself: *What happened to me? How have I taken this wrong turn?*

This is not who I am, but there is no escape. How did I get my life into this place?

CHAPTER 6: “GUNFIGHTER 5, COME IN”

The shift change on one gloomy rain-soaked evening in early November 1968 took place at 1800 hours (6 PM). The base had been pelted with heavy thundershowers throughout the day. All three gunfighter alert crews changed shifts at the same time. Each crew was made up of four crewmembers flying two F-4s. The alert crews were designated Gunfighter 1 and 2, 3 and 4, 7 and 8. The two F-4s assigned to the air defense command commitment, Gunfighter 5 and 6, also had a crew change. The incessant showers had dulled the twelve-hour-duty day; it was too nasty out for war. The Gunfighter crew to which I was assigned had not flown, and after work, we did our usual thing, signing off from alert duty, leaving the alert trailer, going to the personal equipment shack, hanging up all our survival gear, and checking in our .38-caliber pistols. On this rain-soaked night we went directly to the DOOM Club to have our routine lavish supper, a few drinks, and some evening camaraderie before returning to quarters for shut-eye. We would repeat the duty routine the next morning, checking back in for gunfighter alert for another twelve-hour-duty day.

Alert duty, as all the fighter jocks knew, could be a high-pucker ordeal of adrenaline and sweat or a mind-numbing incarceration in a protracted boredom of not getting dispatched on a mission. It was a static experience, being holed up for half the day in the dilapidated mobile home trailer referred to affectionately as the alert shack. It broke the monotony to fly at least once on a duty shift. The operation was finely tuned: the claxon phone would sound and the first crewmember to get to the phone would answer it and announce loudly which crew was being called up. The designated Gunfighter crew scrambled out of the shack and sprinted the twenty or thirty steps to the waiting birds, scurried up the ladder to their Phantom, cranked the powerful JT-79 Pratt Whitney engines, took off, flew the combat strike, and returned to Da Nang, normally in less than ninety minutes. Maintenance debrief routinely followed engine shutdown.

The airplanes were serviced and reloaded with ordnance. When the munitions and maintenance people finished recocking the birds, they called the command post to confirm that the alert birds were mission ready, at which time their crews were officially back on duty.

Earlier on in this day soaked in dreariness, Major Yale Davis and Lieutenant John Reilly were the crew tagged for the most boring alert assignment. They were saddled with the Air Defense commitment, Gunfighter 5 and 6, an alert mission rarely called to action. The likelihood of an enemy air attack on Da Nang was remote, but that was the precautionary role performed by Gunfighter 5 and 6.

The GIB in Gunfighter 5, Lieutenant John Reilly, had been warm and cordial in welcoming me to Da Nang my first night on the base. Major Davis was the maintenance officer for the 390th Tactical Fighter Squadron. On this night, a mission assignment had been issued from 7th Air Force Command Center in Saigon for a special sortie that sent them off to fly what was referred to as MIG Cap for the B-52s flying Combat Sky Spot Operations, the saturation bombings along the border between South Vietnam and Laos, the A Shau Valley. The weather in Vietnam was in the initial phases of the monsoon season deterioration and deluges were arriving more frequently. All returning combat sorties were forced to execute ground-radar-guided instrument approaches back into Da Nang. Bad weather and low visibility conditions frequently required military traffic controllers to guide flights returning from combat missions back to the runway utilizing radar scope information.

In the midst of the gregariousness at the officers' club over medium-rare steaks and burgundy, our evening was shattered by word from the duty officer who rushed up to our table. He announced that Major Davis and Lieutenant Reilly had mysteriously disappeared ten miles north of the airbase. It made no sense to any of us sitting there with gaped mouths, peering at one another incredulously. Reilly and Davis weren't on a strike mission; they weren't doing multiple bombing passes on enemy troops. They were armed with radar-guided Sparrows and heat-seeking Side Winders to defend against unlikely MIG attacks from North Vietnam on a high-altitude B-52 bombing mission. Yet, incredible as it was, they had somehow

gone down. A buzz of chatter rapidly swept across the dining room. The gossip vine unleashed innuendo that made it sound like a Gunfighter flight bought it on final approach, coming back in for their ground-controlled approach to Da Nang, normally totally safe, but not this night. From intelligence briefs, we knew there had been sporadic incidents of arriving aircraft taking ground fire on final from miniature fishing boats referred to as sampans located in the bay on the approach to Runway 17L and 17R. The weather this night was dog shit; it was inconceivable that anyone, even the most zealous Vietcong warrior, would have been out there. But that was the only logical conclusion available we self-appointed Sherlock Holmes could arrive at that made any sense as to how Major Davis and Lieutenant Reilly had gone in—no chutes, no beepers. We were left with our informed speculations and wishful explanations on what could have possibly happened so close to the base, ten miles from landing. A few weeks later, the accident investigation board sorted it out.

After reviewing the voice tapes from the Navy Ground Control Intercept site, they determined that Gunfighter 5 had been given a heading change inland from the South China Sea for vectors to the final approach course. It was a heading that would take them directly toward the high terrain west of Runway 17L centerline intercept course. The approach controller also gave them a descent to three thousand feet. Tragically, confusion over a radio frequency change resulted in delayed contact with the final approach controller after they had been given the doomed clearance to descend and head west toward their demise, slamming into a high ridge just west of Da Nang.

In that one minute of radio frequency confusion, they lost their lives. John Reilly was a fellow student pilot from Laredo Air Force Base, clean-cut and sporting a flattop hairstyle—an Air Force officer. He was six foot, athletic, had a wife at home, and was a short-timer, close to completing his one hundred missions in North Vietnam, among the last lucky group of pilots on this program. Reilly had ninety-seven missions and was within weeks of going home. Major Davis and Lieutenant. Reilly lost their lives but left the rest of us

behind alive, yet feeling more lost, lacking answers. The vision burned into my memory of a jubilant Lieutenant Reilly two days before the crash, euphorically swirling around the squadron, thrusting fat cigars at everyone he encountered, being the proud recipient of congratulatory slaps on the back over the birth of his son whom he had named Brian.

Despite being highly skilled, well-trained professionals, pilots still have a sad history of letting ego and neglect get in the way of safety, causing them to blow it too often in aviation mishaps. One of the occupational hazards a pilot always lives with is the possibility that a situation will occur that is beyond his or her means to control, a slightly greater consolation than a catastrophe caused by the stupidity of a dumb mistake. Many operating procedures have been compiled over the years for all the aircraft ever built, based on the mistakes that crewmembers and support staff made before others followed them in flying that equipment. It was always an eerie notion to be aware that many of the dos and don'ts written in our pilot manuals were placed there as a result of someone screwing up and learning the hard way what gets you killed or what happens if you fail to follow a certain procedure. No aviator wants to be the propagator of a warning, caution, or note. Yet that was the fate of Major Davis and Lieutenant Reilly.

After the accident board investigation was completed, it was determined that a radio malfunction had been the proximate cause of the crash. A new operational procedure for flying ground-controlled radar approaches into Runway 17 at Da Nang was implemented. It read simply: **No pilot shall descend below 3500 feet within 10 miles north of Da Nang until it is verified by radio navigation equipment that aircraft position is aligned east of the runway centerline**. With this guideline in place, given the high country just west of Da Nang, there would be no chance that the circumstances that killed Reilly and Davis would occur again. As simple as that, the problem was fixed, but at the cost of two fathers and a $2.5-million fighter-bomber.

CHAPTER 20: THE LAST HURRAH

A simple twelve months on the calendar live differently when the pages are turning over in a war zone. Through unearned divine intervention, I was closing in on my last six weeks at Da Nang. It was July 4. Nothing seemed real any longer. It was as if I were starring in my own private Fellini movie and all the other actors were imaginary characters, but the events surrounding me actually existed. My mind had shown me snapshots of that perception before, as if life was a continuum of imagined circumstances designed specifically to spice up my experiential trek. In that reality, I was the only human who existed.

The time warp repetition of bombing, drinking, and writing home had induced an anesthesia to the dangers around me and numbed my embarrassment over the shaky courage camouflaging my fear of dying. Reality had long ago crossed over into unreality. My only consolation was tied to a desperate conviction that my ordeal was delivering a profound life-altering lesson and the life I would pursue after learning it.

Being a fighter pilot had forced me to robe myself in the habit of the ancient gladiator, who daily entered the ring, fought the fight to death with an opponent, and returned to the warriors' quarters to rest up for the next battle. In the case of Vietnam, the enemy's resolve transcended mere struggle for life and immediate survival. It was about greater issues of communist-structured nationalistic determinism and sustaining the historical collective will of a xenophobic people who had outlasted the French, the Japanese, and then us. I had no loftiness of purpose. I was merely hanging out in a bad place, worse than the street corner, simply hoping to escape alive.

For eleven months, my front-seater--whoever it might have been--and I had always returned to base safely, our bird damaged by flak only twice, a marvel in itself, given the lethal hardware thrown at us on most missions.

My buddy, F-4 FAC Admiral Nelson, stopped by the room on my anniversary to get smashed, finishing off a quart of Gilbey's gin; three days later I was still in recovery. The combination of heavy gin and inadequate grapefruit juice chaser had left me with the raving munchies after his visit, but I was too shitfaced and too far from the chow hall to get something in my stomach to sop up the booze. I had searched the sparsely stocked refrigerator between my room and the guys next door and found some poorly wrapped remnants of tuna fish that was well past its danger, do-not-consume deadline. Unable to count on reason in my famished, inebriated condition, I made a sandwich out of stale bread and aged tuna and mayonnaise and gluttonously washed it down with a Pabst Blue Ribbon.

I paid the price for that dangerous combination of youth and stupidity for several days. I woke up the next morning feeling as if I was on my deathbed; I was in a cold sweat with fever and a gurgling stomach that repeatedly surrendered its acidic contents. My illness was horrendous. I had to go DNIF (Duty Not Including Flying) for three days. I vowed never to do anything so ignorant again and, to publicly declare it, I posted a sign over my headboard: **"I Will Not Drink, July 3, 1969"---- Bee Settles.**

My mind would not erase the images of my bosom classmates, Vince and Grant, meeting their doom a few months earlier, heightening my sense of mortality and the gnawing question, *"Am I next? Will I make it out alive or, worse, blind, crippled, or crazy?"*

That fear grew more intense and took me hostage as the weeks and days edged closer to completing my tour. I had become detached, more isolated and estranged from my routine. Alone in the death silence of my thoughts, my mind raced like a rat in a maze struggling to find the way out. I reflected on my dead buddies, my family back home, the July 1 wedding anniversary that came and went, illusory and remote. I wrestled with self-pity. I was recovering from food poisoning, which added a perfect emotional spice to my woeful countenance. I sensed that Grant's death in particular had triggered an uncontrollable fear I might not make it either. In the days following my recovery, I shifted into another valley of struggle--insomnia.

After mid-July 1969, I was being scheduled for mostly day strike missions with "early gos" and 0500 (5 AM) briefing times. I had to force myself to go to bed early.. Avoiding my buddies and drinking were not the challenge since I was assuming a new discipline. What snuck up on me unexpectedly were insidious nightmares of my demise. I seemed inextricably caught up in a giant whirlpool of thoughts that could not be banished and some invisible diabolical force was testing me to see how much it would take to exceed my breaking point and thrust me into insanity.

For days I got no sleep, only night sweats filled with tossing and turning. I flew my missions zombified with fatigue. I had no roommate during this period; there was no social distraction. I had withdrawn from contact with my social partners. I forced myself to hit the sack early, knowing I had to get my eyes closed to visit sleep. I would lie in my bed surrounded by stillness and a disquieting silence—a silence that had a faint but continuous swooshing sound like wind blowing through a dark forest at midnight.

On each occasion that my head sank into the pillow and my eyelids lowered, my mind automatically clicked on the mental movie projector, and I was taking off on a combat mission. It might be to North Vietnam. We'd be over a railroad bridge, preparing to drop our stuff, and a missile would launch from undetected radar guidance and score a direct hit, blowing us to microscopic bits. As soon as I was killed in the dream, my mind would slip in a new reel and I would be off on another combat mission. The ensuing sortie might be a cluster bomb drop over the infamous Mu Ghia Pass. In that dream, our aircraft would take direct hits from level 7 North Vietnamese Army gunners and we'd have to punch out in Laotian territory. I'd hit the ground after ejecting and immediately be captured by vicious murder-loving Pathet Lao soldiers who would instantly commence their joy by thrashing the shit out me with sticks, fists, combat boots, and rifle butts. When they became bored with beating me, the giggling torturers would strip off my flight suit and boots, tie my hands together and then my feet with hemp rope, and knot me to the tail of a water buffalo. The soldiers would bicker and draw straws to see who got to swat the beast across the ass with a five-foot long

stick. The horrified animal would streak off across rice paddies, leaping over dikes with me bouncing and ricocheting off the ground like a Raggedy Ann doll on a rope. The soldiers would laugh hysterically and light their opium-laced cigarettes and drink rice wine, slapping their knees at their crafty innovativeness in meting out my suffering. Finally chasing the panic-stricken buffalo down, they would drag me back to the holding area and string me naked upside down with my legs spread wide apart eight feet above the ground. The Pathet Lao henchmen would then sit around the campfire laughing loudly, getting more stoned, and beaming with palpable pride at their trophy, playing more straw selection games to determine which lucky one would get to deal the next sadistic blow.

After I had been hanging there for hours, one of them would suddenly stand up and approach me carrying a razor-sharp three-foot-long machete in his right hand and wearing a smirk of devilish delight. He would slowly circle me, twitching up and down the long machete clutched behind his back, forcing me to shift my head around in odd angles to keep my eyes on his orbit. After the prolonged, gracefully stepped off paseo, in a flash of arms and elbows he drew up the machete and sliced me like a cantaloupe in the split of my groin, chopping me into two perfect halves. At that instant in the nightmare the mind projectionist would flip in the next horror reel and I'd be up in the Phantom on another mission to an equally macabre demise.

The death preoccupation insomnia was doing me in and mental breakdown seemed imminent. I shut myself off socially, didn't want to be around people, and began to despise who I was for behaving this way. I couldn't drink because of my pledge of sobriety, but the runaway dreams were scaring me to death every night. I needed help badly, but there was no direction to turn. I hadn't been to the base chapel often enough to feel deserving of seeking deliverance from the chaplain.

Fighter pilots must be brave and live by their can-do attitude. Big boys aren't supposed to cry, but I was slowly losing it in my preoccupation with doom. Pilots are often outspoken about their feelings, personal, political, or otherwise, but not many were

courageous enough to admit fear of cracking under the pressure--it just wasn't done. I was desperate. I had embarrassing flashes of suicide, which provoked outright laughter from me to think of the irony that I would be saving the North Vietnamese or the Cong the expense of having to pay someone war wages to shoot me down. Self-elimination--a most bizarre form of altruism. But how could I escape these thoughts that haunted my every idle moment? How could I get some sleep? Asking the flight surgeon for sleeping pills would have exposed me to the light of psychiatric evaluation.

Early one evening I was lying on my cot reading my week-old editions of *The Muncie Star* sent to me direct from the newspaper office. I was waiting for Captain Chuck Guthrie, who bunked across the hall, to return from the officers' club. Around 9:30, I heard the slam of the end hallway door as someone wearing boots approached. It was Chuck. Unable to resist looking into my open room as he unlocked his door, he said, "Hey, Bee, What's happenin' kiddo? You didn't go to the club tonight, huh?"

"Naw, man, I been layin' low these days," I responded sheepishly.

"Yeah?" Chuck replied with a degree of puzzlement in his voice. Chuck was genuinely a good dude; he was an F-4 aircraft commander in the 389th, our sister squadron. We had shared the rare professional joy of flying a mission together, although we were assigned to different squadrons. Chuck was brown skinned, had a medium build, and wore his hair freshly barbered with a short-cut Afro that was flat on top. He kept his black mustache neatly trimmed. Like most of the brothers, he was conscientious about staying up with if not ahead of his peer competition. The opportunity to go to the altar and confess my sins had arrived with this encounter, As we say in the business, I was out of airspeed and ideas and needed a helping hand—at the very minimum, a listening ear.

"Hey, brother Chuck, you got a minute so I can rap to you about something?" I asked.

"Sure, Bee, come on over." It was mid-July at Da Nang, hot as holy hell outside, but chilly in our individually air-conditioned rooms.

"What's up, brother?" he inquired after I entered his room.

Hesitating for an instant, and taking a deep breath, as if on the precipice of a grave confession to Father Maloney, the resident Catholic priest, I admitted, "Man, I got insomnia. I got one month to go and I can't sleep. My classmate Grant over at Ubon bought it at Mu Ghia on my birthday and another pilot training classmate Vince Scott ran into the damn ground on a nape pass with his AC down in the Triangle area the month before. We've lost sixteen crewmembers in our squadron since I been here."

Chuck's eyes regarded me with an intensity that bespoke disbelief in the shocking truth of my statistic. All he could say was, "I heard that."

It was not quite the response I needed, so I continued. "Chuck, I'm getting short, man. I got a chance of getting out of this crazy place soon and I'm freaking out that I ain't goin' to make it. I keep having nightmares about buyin' it when I try to go to sleep." Then I hit the question I desperately hoped would make all the difference. "Brother man, do you ever worry about not making it out of here?"

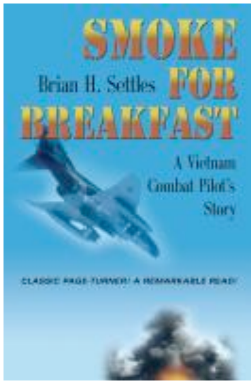
Pausing momentarily, Chuck admitted, "Yeah, man. I think about it. I got a wife and baby girl back at MacDill waitin' on my ass to get out of here. She's only two. I worry about not seeing her again. I try not to, but some time you can't shake it. I just try to block it out."

"Yeah," I said, exhaling in relief he hadn't said, "Naw, man, that shit never crosses my mind."

I told Chuck that nightmares were flooding my consciousness every night and that I had sworn off drinking after getting sick from food poisoning. It was ironic that Chuck ended up being the selected savior for my plight since I had not been particularly close socially with him. Some labeled him boring and a little too stiff, all knotted up in straitlaced discipline—a trait that might have been good for me. He was several months behind me with less than half a year remaining. He had seen me raising hell at the club many times with my partner in crime, Carl Gamble. He probably thought I was curiously wild.

Having had the courage to abandon the macho I-am-a-survivor-hear-me-roar fighter pilot ego thing and be a human being in front of

Chuck opened the door for some rare relatedness between two individuals struggling to survive the same ordeal. My angst had forced me to step outside my comfort zone, to permit myself and my self-esteem to be at risk for the possibility of something that was not available—liberation from the grip of my own self-doubt and fear. Being able to confront my sense of vulnerability and reveal it publicly produced a breakthrough. The commonality born out of sharing our humanity within the bond of being African-American pilots was the crucible that made the difference that summer evening, as I sat beside Chuck's bed. After that, I never lost another night of sleep and, miraculously, the dogged nightmares vanished.



*Retired airline Captain and author, Brian H. Settles, gives readers of aviation sagas a true page-turner memoir in **SMOKE FOR BREAKFAST: A Vietnam Combat Pilot's Story**. Readers will feel, smell and taste the nonstop adventure as if they are riding on the shoulders of this Nebraska orphan who became a fighter pilot to prove he was good enough. Steamy tales of failures at faithfulness and the machismo of pilot ego drip from these pages...*

Smoke for Breakfast

A Vietnam Combat Pilot's Story

Order the complete book from

Booklocker.com

http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/7922.html?s=pdf

or from your favorite neighborhood or online bookstore.