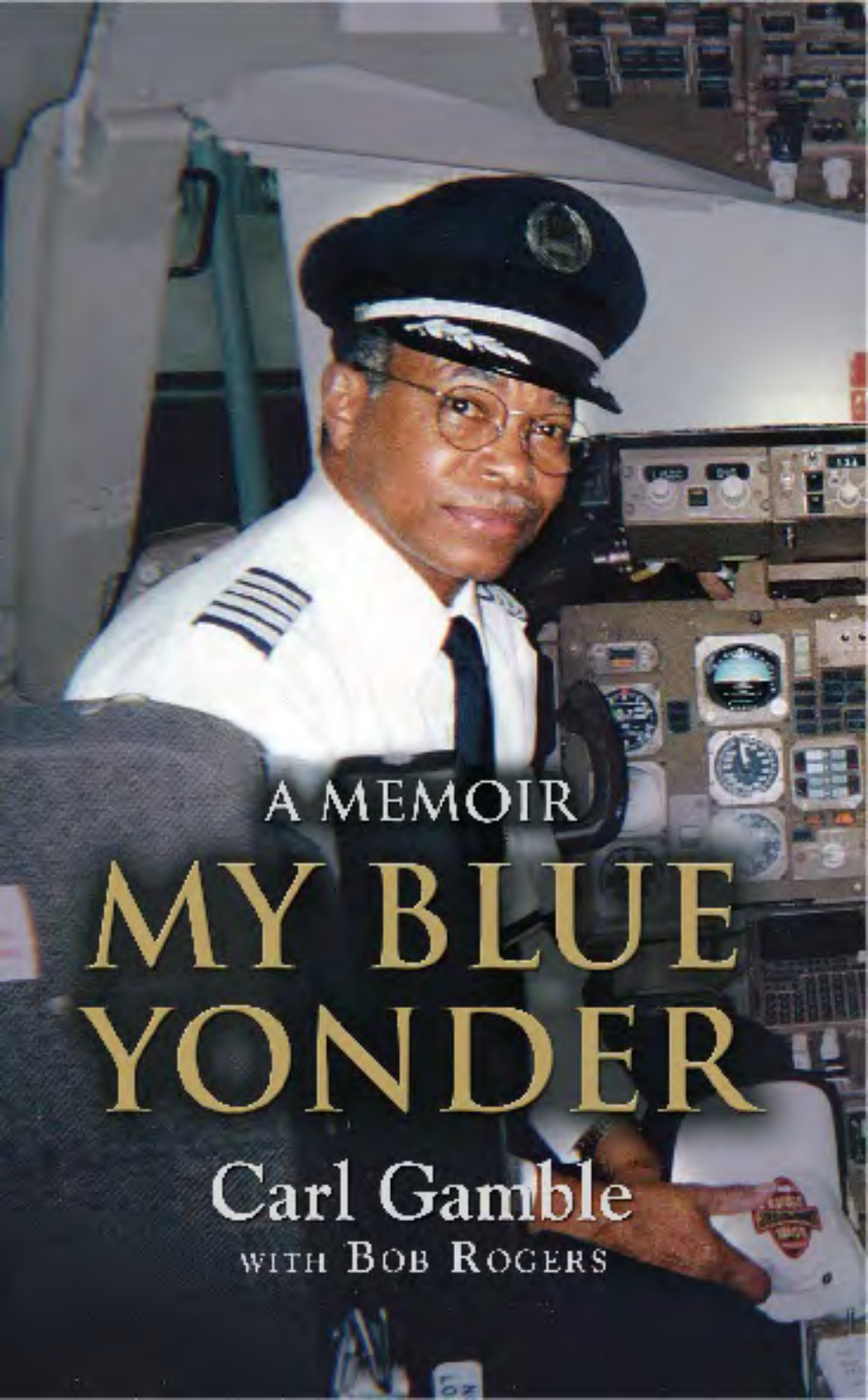
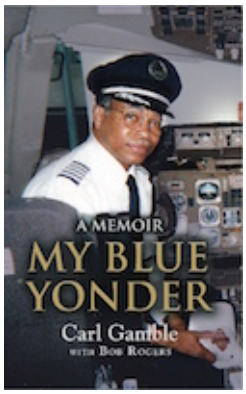

A MEMOIR
MY BLUE YONDER
Carl Gamble
WITH BOB ROGERS



Carl Gamble, a premier airline pilot, has penned a remarkable memoir, a powerful story about his journey from the cotton fields of Madison County, Alabama, to the captain's seat flying jumbo jets between North America and Europe. While in grade school, Gamble was inspired by Air Force jet fighters flying over Madison and his dream to become a pilot was born. Gamble's hard and focused work overcame an inauspicious start studying aviation at Tennessee State University, a necessary stepping stone toward a flying career for African Americans of small means in the 1960s.

Gamble was awarded the Air Force's coveted Distinguished Flying Cross. His quick thinking and superior flying skills enabled him to land his C-47, severely disabled by enemy antiaircraft fire, and save the lives of his crew in Vietnam.

My Blue Yonder tells Gamble's story by taking you to his boyhood home, into the cockpit of his burning airplane, and into his PTSD. You fly with him to rescue men adrift on an ice floe in Lake Superior, refuel combat aircraft at four hundred miles per hour over the Gulf of Tonkin, and negotiate with a hijacker while flying in a holding pattern off the coast of Florida...

My Blue Yonder

MY BLUE YONDER

Carl Gamble

with Bob Rogers

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This book is a memoir. I have described events, locales, and conversations from my memories of them. In order to maintain their anonymity in some instances I may have changed the names of individuals and places, I may have changed some identifying characteristics and details such as physical properties, occupations and places of residence. Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals. I indicated in the text that other names were inserted to represent persons whose names I could not recall.

Photo credits:
Front cover: Captain Carl Gamble seated at the controls of a US Airways Boeing 757 ready for his last flight before retirement. *Photo was provided courtesy of the Carl Gamble Collection,* © 2002 Carl Gamble.

Back cover: A US Airways Airbus A330-300 jumbo jet at Frankfort International Airport, Germany flown by Captain Carl Gamble in 2001-2002. *Photo was provided courtesy Aero Icarus, Zürich, Switzerland, © 2000 Icarus.*

Captain Carl Gamble.
http://captaingamble.biz

2016

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Part One: Vietnam

Chapter 1:
A Burning Airplane

Clank! Ping! Ping! Crack!

"We're hit!" Master Sergeant McDonald sounded the alarm at the top of his baritone voice.

We were struck by a .50 caliber bullet ricocheting inside the frame of the fuselage and into the left wing and engine of our old "Gooney Bird." The projectile caused a fire in the left engine when it severed a fuel line. Master Sergeant John Thomas McDonald was my loadmaster. His friends called him "J. T."

We were flying at thirty-five-hundred feet over the Thu Bồn River in South Vietnam's Quâng Nam Province near the end of the dry season in 1969. At only one-hundred-twenty miles per hour, we were a sitting duck for a Viet Cong gunner spraying .50 caliber bullets. When we were hit, I was following the river and making a left turn toward the southeast over An Hoa, a village nestled in the river's curve. From our altitude, An Hoa, the emerald waters of the wide river, and the expanse of white sand between the two seemed tranquil–enemy antiaircraft fire, notwithstanding.

In my yoke and rudder pedals, I felt the vibration from the impact of the large caliber bullet when it struck. At first, I thought, *What the hell?* Anxiety caused involuntary squirming in my pilot's seat, expecting another hit. I glanced at the cockpit

instruments and saw that my World War II era United States Air Force C-47D had remained in level flight. I thought, *Sturdy old bird*. *Thank God*. C-47s were used to transport troops and cargo during the big war against the Axis Powers–Germany, Italy, and Japan. It had occurred to me that some of these ancient, but solid, airplanes were older than me!

On the intercom, I said, "Sergeant McDonald, anybody hurt back there?"

"No, sir."

"Jim, Give me a damage report." Technical Sergeant James Hentz was my flight mechanic. On the ground, Jim supervised maintenance of our airplane. Aloft, he monitored several gauges from his usual position behind me and the copilot, including the vertical hydraulic bubble gauge mounted on the wall behind the copilot.

"Yes, sir." Jim turned and departed at a trot down the aisle.

My copilot, First Lieutenant Robert Coleman, or Bob as we called him, was making the same continuous scan of the instrument panel that I was making. In an emergency, neither of us could perform our duties and monitor the hydraulic fluid gauge. For that, we depended on Jim. Sometimes, though Jim was not Scottish, I thought of him as my 'Scotty', the engineering boss aboard the starship *Enterprise* in the television series, *Star Trek*.

Seconds later, I heard it. An unsynchronized dissonant sound came from the left engine, scarcely ten feet from my open side window.

With wide eyes, I turned my head to look. "Dammit! Bob, the left engine is on fire! Close the cowl flaps!" The controls for the cowl flaps were on the wall under the copilot's side window.

"Roger. Closing cowl flaps on the left."

JT's voice on the intercom interrupted my thoughts, "Sir, the left…."

"I see it!"

The panel instruments in our antediluvian craft showed no indication of trouble in either engine. Though we were sitting nearly elbow to elbow, I shouted, "Bob is the right engine still good?"

Bob, already looking out his side window, shouted back without turning his gaze away from the engine in the forward edge of the right wing. "It looks good, sir!"

I could hear relief in his voice. That was exactly what I was feeling. But, in less than a second, the feeling passed. Glancing again at the smoke trailing from the left engine and continuing to speak louder than ordinary, I told Bob, "I'm feathering the left. Check me."

For Tom, our navigator sitting behind the flight deck, my right hand must have been a blur. When learning to fly the C-47, I was told that in an emergency, a good pilot should in twenty seconds complete the procedure for shutting down a failing engine and beginning safe flight on the remaining engine. I had never completed the feat in less than twenty seconds. During training, no one mentioned what to do about an engine set ablaze by enemy action.

Sweating and barely breathing, I strained against the yoke with my left hand. I believe in fifteen seconds, with my right hand, I had changed the mix and pitch on the right engine, switched fuel tanks, shut off oil to the left, throttled it back, pressed the feather button, shut the fuel tank selector switch to the left, changed the mix on the right to emergency, closed the battery to the left, and discharged the left engine fire extinguisher.

Bob had grabbed the emergency checklist from its place above his head. When he looked up from reading and saw that I had finished the procedure, he said, "Damn. That was quick!"

"Yeah. Fire has a way of focusing the mind. Now, let's get the hell outta here!"

Under us, the Thu Bồn made a ninety degree turn to the southwest. I did not follow; instead, I kept my heading one-hundred-twenty degrees.

Bob showed a tentative smile, and then he frowned, "Do you mean bail?"

Suddenly, I remembered hearing the boys at the Danang Air Base Officer's Club say, "The Viet Cong in Quâng Nam Province don't play that 'rules o' war' shit. You ain't teachin' them a damn thing 'bout how to treat POWs. Why, they'll snatch your lil' Geneva Convention Card and nail the sucker to your fuckin' forehead." My friend, Bill Cobb, an old-school guy and seasoned F-4 pilot, offered up that profound truth and the boys agreed or sat like me listening with gaping eyes and slack jaws.

Though I had not thought of bailing out until Bob mentioned it, in about two seconds, I considered having the crew bail. I remembered telling my crew during every preflight briefing, "We will fly over hostile territory and there is a strong possibility we could be hit by enemy ground fire. If we're hit by enemy fire, or for another reason need to bail out, and I give the order to bail out; do so quickly. If you *think* you hear my order a second time, that will be an echo. Why? Because, I'll already be gone." Wow. Now I'm confronted with a decision that I never thought I'd have to make.

In one more second, I decided, "Oh, hell, no! We ain't bailing!"

Bob's nervous grin belied the tension. He was putting the checklist away and tried to make a joke. "By the way, sir, the checklist says you should see that the gear and flaps are up. I didn't see you check."

"Smart ass!" I grinned, and then grimaced. "Get on the horn. Declare an emergency and get us cleared for a 'straight-in' at Danang."

"What about the Marble Mountain airfield?"

"No. They can't foam the runway if we have to come in gear up." I looked again at the left engine. "Either that fire extinguisher didn't work or we've got one helluva fire. We need Danang!"

"Roger. Danang."

Bob broke into the radio traffic saying, "Mayday! Mayday! This is Paper Tiger Two-One!" Immediately, the drone of routine yammering on the radio quieted.

"Sir, I'll work out a new heading for Danang after your right turn." Tom spoke over my shoulder.

"No, Tom. I'm turning left. Forget the book. We're down to twenty-nine-hundred and dropping."

"But, sir, there's a…."

"I see that rocky-ass mountain dead ahead and I see it's higher than we are."

Close up, the mountain looked like a giant rock with trees growing out of cracks in its near vertical sides. And we were getting closer–quickly. My sweat poured. I thought, *so much for my bravado talk*. Though my knees trembled and my heart pounded, I forced myself to press more gently than usual on the left rudder pedal to begin what I hoped would be a slow and gradual turn toward Danang. With sweaty hands, I tightened my grip on the yoke and eased it counterclockwise. The airplane responded. I exhaled.

We cleared a lower mountain in the range by seven-hundred feet and flew past the big rocky mountain with less than a thousand feet between it and us. I thought, *God is always good*. I ended the turn on a new heading of three hundred fifty degrees.

The mountains of Cu Lao Cham Island in the South China Sea slid from my view out of the windshield as we came about with the horizon tilted. Looking, yet again, at the burning engine, I saw the confluence of the Rivers Vĩnh Điện and Thu Bồn beyond the left wing.

By now, we were well north and east of An Hoa. On my new heading, the Marble Mountains were in view to my right front and in the distance, beyond

Danang (aka "Rocket City), lay Monkey Mountain–or, Son Tra as locals called it. The tower responded using our radio call sign, "Paper Tiger Two-One, all traffic is holding. You're cleared for runway one-seven-Lima."

Bob looked at me. I was already shaking my head and saying, "Negative!" Bob nodded and responded to the tower, further explaining our emergency. I heard the tower say, "Paper Tiger Two-One, you're cleared 'straight-in' for runway three-five-Romeo."

Bob repeated, "Roger. Paper Tiger Two-One is cleared 'straight-in' for runway three-five-Romeo."

Smoke was pouring into the cockpit and cabin. I was blinking and squinting. My eyes were tearing and I could hear the crew coughing behind me. The farther I had gone into the turn, the more smoke entered the airplane. Our only exit from the airplane was behind the left wing. On that hot day, we flew our flying sauna without the door and with the cockpit windows full open. The temperature still felt like a hundred degrees inside the airplane. But now I closed my window because the smoke was obscuring my view of the instrument panel. The altimeter said we were descending through twenty-one-hundred feet. Now instead of mountains, below us lay the flat rice paddy laden Thu Bồn River delta, scarcely ten feet above sea level.

We were passing over Điện Bàn, when I said, "Tom, give me a heading from here to three-five-Romeo."

"Yes, sir."

Next, I heard rustling from Tom's map. "You're damned near on it. Come left ten."

"Roger. Left ten degrees."

Over my shoulder, I glanced to see Jim returning to his position. Panting, he said,

"Sir, besides the fire, that round must've busted a hydraulic line. I heard fluid sloshing under the floor." Jim's eyes were riveted on the hydraulic fluid gauge on the wall behind Bob as he continued his report. "Our fluid level is dropping rapidly. While I was aft, I could see from a window, fluid dripping from the trailing edge of the left wing."

No one spoke. For a long moment, the only sound was the right engine. Jim and Tom realized that Bob and I knew that losing hydraulic fluid meant soon we would have no way to control the flaps, lower the landing gear, or brakes–assuming we had landing gear down. In the heat of the cockpit, I felt a chill. Again, I thought, *Oh, shit!*

Our Mission that sunny Saturday afternoon, March 1, was to drop "Chieu Hoi" propaganda leaflets on the villages along the Thu Bồn River valley north and south of An Hoa, about twenty-five miles southwest of our home base at Danang. At takeoff, we had two tons of leaflets onboard, or about one million pages in fifty cardboard boxes. We could carry three tons. A chute was installed on the airplane to ease dropping leaflets. We called the leaflets bullshit. At first, I hated being called a 'bullshit bomber' pilot. However, long before today's mission, my one-

hundred-eighty-second sortie in eight months, I had decided that it was not so bad an assignment after all.

Bob was talking again to the tower at Danang, but watching me.

I said, "Yeah, yeah. I know what the book said; 'don't turn in to the bad engine.' But I guess you see how fast we were losing altitude–and still are. There's no way we could make it back if we turned right for three hundred degrees, then left to align with three-five-Romeo. That'd take time we don't have."

In a shaky voice, Tom said, "And though I didn't see it at the time, we also would've had to clear a four-thousand-foot mountain."

"Damn! I didn't know that." I blinked and prayerfully reminded myself of God's goodness. Bob whistled and looked ashen. He nodded and continued talking with the tower.

I felt the usual movement of boxes in the cabin behind me as I fought to keep the airplane as near trim as possible. I thought Sergeant McDonald and crew, plus, the three army guys aboard for leisure and picture-taking, were continuing with the mission. Into the intercom, I said, "Sergeant McDonald, fuck the mission. We're trying to make Danang!"

"Yes, sir. We already quit. We stuffed the last loose paper down the chute. We're workin' the sealed boxes toward the door. We still have about a ton left. Sir, do I have your permission to ditch the bullshit?"

Relieved, I said, "Hell, yes! Ditch it. And quick!"

"Yes, sir!"

About six minutes had passed since we were hit. Heat from the fire on my left side was intense. My flight suit was sweat-soaked. Trying to clear my vision, I blinked repeatedly and flicked perspiration from my eyebrows with the backs of my hands. Drops of salty sweat on my aviator's sunglasses would have rendered them unusable on a big sky day.

Sputtering, Sergeant McDonald said, "S-s-sir, w-w-we can hardly breathe back here. Everybody is coughing. Can you get us on the ground soon?"

"Tell the guys to hang in there. We're closing on Danang. ETA: five minutes."

Actually, I only *hoped* we could make Danang in five minutes. Given our struggles at the time, and for all I knew, it could take ten or more minutes to reach Danang. And I had no idea if five minutes would be enough time to land *and* evacuate the airplane.

Watching the burning engine, I began slipping the airplane, keeping the nose to the left of our direction of travel. This was my attempt to prevent the fire from burning into the fuselage, only about four feet away from the auxiliary fuel tanks, and lessen the smoke pouring through the open door.

Pressure was building within me to avoid mistakes from which there would not be enough altitude to recover. We were down to twelve-hundred feet. A new set of worries popped into my head–landing. I thought, *What about the landing gear? Oh, my God, please don't let that tire burn*.

Two explosions inside the left wing in rapid succession challenged my control of the airplane.

Immediately, though I didn't think it could, the pucker factor increased. Bob stopped talking and stared at me, wide-eyed. Tom and Jim were quiet. I forgot the left landing gear and its tire housed in the same nacelle as the engine. I thought, *Oh shit. Is this the end?* Though we would have already been falling like a bowling ball without it, I looked over my shoulder to see if the left wing was still there. I shook my head at the irrationality of looking for the wing in spite of my flying experience and a degree in aviation technology. Aloud, I whispered, "Thank you, God."

Jim thumped the hydraulic fluid gauge with his finger nail and said, "Sir, I checked my watch when you announced our ETA three and a half minutes ago. If your estimated ETA is short by a minute or ninety seconds, my guess is this gauge will be bone dry."

Without looking back, I asked, "Is hydraulic fluid flammable?"

"No, sir. But it is combustible."

"What?"

Jim went on before I could interrupt. "Sir, the flash point for hydraulic fluid is about two hundred degrees. That means it won't be a hazard unless the engine fire spreads."

I soaked another sleeve wiping my brow, then took a deep breath and said, "Okay, guys. Listen up. Let me know whether I'm missing anything, but otherwise, here's what we'll do. Let's go in flaps up and save the hydraulic fluid for the brakes."

Bob frowned, "But, sir, what about the landing gear?"

"Pray for help from gravity when we let the gear down."

No one spoke.

I looked over my shoulder at Jim. He was still staring at the hydraulic gauge. "Jim, how's it looking?"

"Sir, the rate of fall in fluid level is looking worse for our ETA."

Even with the leftover ton of leaflets ditched, we were still losing altitude, though more slowly. Now, I figured some of my sweat was caused by second-guessing my decision not to bail and preparing for the landing. Again, I prayed, "*God, please help me get my crew and these men down safely. You already know what I want. Please don't let me die in this forsaken country. Please let me see Mama again, whom I love so dearly."* I paused in my prayer to check our altitude. What I saw was not good. My heart raced. Matters looked grim.

While struggling to keep the airplane trimmed, I remembered a story Mama told me when I was I sixteen. She told her story only because I found her crying and asked why. For years, she had kept this story from me. Her husband shot and killed her brother in front of her when he was sixteen. I remembered that Mama did not let her brother's death destroy her life. Showing faith and courage, she had used the incident as an instrument to make herself stronger.

The tower interrupted my thoughts. An air traffic controller was telling us we were too low and would likely touch down short of the runway. "Can you go around?"

Without prompting, Bob broke protocol with his response. “Hell, no!”

I felt the tension in his voice.

The altimeter was unwinding through eight-hundred feet and we needed to fly for at least ninety more seconds. Without speaking, I discontinued slipping and aligned the airplane with our direction of flight.

With a wrinkled brow and an unsteady voice, Bob asked, “Sir, we should be higher, right?”

“Yes, dammit!” I didn’t mean to sound testy. In my glance, Bob looked chastened. Immediately, I regretted my tone, but did not divert my attention from the parallel runways at Danang Air Base, now in sight. I could also see the fire trucks and emergency equipment Bob had requested. I said no more. I would try to remember to apologize later–if there was a “later.” I followed the highway over the Cãm Lê River Bridge, for it almost pointed to runway three-five-Romeo. Ahead, I could see the “T” intersection where the road ended a couple of hundred yards short of excavations for three large empty rectangular ponds at the end of the runway. The freshly turned earth was a rusty reddish-brown. On my previous one-hundred-eighty-one landings at Danang, the soil reminded me of my hometown; Madison, Alabama. Not today. My attention was riveted on the bold white threshold markings at the head of runway three-five-Romeo, not on the beauty one can observe from aloft.

Then it happened. I took a deep breath and repositioned my grip on the yoke. I felt better about

our prospects. Now, I believed God and my mother's example of strength and courage would help me keep the crippled airplane flying long enough to reach the runway.

"Bob, set the right engine cowl flaps to trail."

"Roger. Setting right engine cowl flaps to trail."

On the intercom, I said, "Sergeant McDonald, we're in final approach. Buckle and brace for impact. Jim, you, too."

I heard Jim say, "Yes, sir." *Was that relief in his voice?*

Master Sergeant McDonald said matter-of-factly, "Roger, sir. Buckled and braced."

"Bob, grab your checklist. When we stop, we'll shut down the engine so the emergency crews can approach from both sides."

"Yes, sir."

Seconds later, we cleared by a few feet the last houses before reaching the runway. As we crossed the excavation, Bob instinctively reached to lower the gear. I said, "Not yet! On my command, let the gear down."

"Yes, sir!"

Bob said nothing further as he reflexively gripped his yoke showing white knuckles, and then released it as if he had grabbed the wrong end of a hot branding iron. Though it was Bob's turn to land the airplane, his movements confirmed he was more confident in a safe outcome with me landing the airplane. Secretly, I thought, *Well, shit, I'm not*. My faith wavered. I thought, *God, please don't leave me now*. My sweat

poured. One by one, I wiped my hands on the legs of my flight suit below the knee and tightened my grip on my yoke.

Slowly, I raised the nose. I prayed, *God, please don't let this literally be my final approach.* Above the threshold markings and breathing again, I said, "Gear down!"

"Roger! Gear down!" The airplane shuddered. After a pause to look over his shoulder, Bob said, "Gear down and locked!"

We cleared the end of the runway about head-high–and I'm short.

"Roger." I glanced over my shoulder. After seeing the undamaged wheel of the left landing gear, I thought, *Thank God!* I said, "Gear down and intact!"

Two seconds later, at eighty-nine miles per hour, flaps up, and with me clenching my teeth and holding my breath again, we touched down with the left landing gear and the burning engine to the right of the center of the runway.

The tail-wheel on a C-47 is not retractable. I lowered the tail and said, "Tail-wheel down!"

Braking hard, I was vaguely aware of the fire wagons as they raced toward the place they thought we would stop. As we rolled to a stop, well short of the first ramp to a taxiway, I saw that I had avoided blocking the runway. I had no time to think about how to do it. It happened that the right engine pulled the airplane farther to the right. I applied the rudder before we stopped and guided the right landing gear off the runway and into the grass.

As Bob and I shut down the engine, I said, "Sergeant McDonald, get everybody out!" I had already heard feet scampering so I was not surprised that I heard no response from Sergeant McDonald.

About twelve seconds later, Bob and I were clawing to release our seat belts. "Let's get the hell out!" Now I realized that I was shouting so my voice would not betray the trembling in my body.

Tossing my headset aside, I motioned for Bob to squeeze through the narrow space between our seats, first. I went last to make sure everyone was out. I heard a helicopter at low altitude above our airplane, but could not focus on the question of why it was there. The smoke in the cabin was so thick that I could not see where I was going. Coughing and hacking, I crawled down the sloped floor toward the airplane's single exit. I did not see the doorless exit. When I reached the wall at the end of the floor, I thought, *this means all hands left safely*. That also meant I had missed the exit. I turned about and crawled, again, this time feeling for the exit on my left. Once I found it, I pivoted on my butt, swung my feet out, and jumped. On the ground, I felt the wind whipped by the wooden rotors of the HH-43 helicopter hovering above the airplane.

Now, I was afoot behind the burning left wing. My first thought was to turn and run as fast and as far from the airplane as my legs could carry me. The firefighters were spraying my crew. I gave a thumbs up to signal that I was okay. But they sprayed me anyway. The force from their hose against my chest knocked

me down. I leapt to my feet and ran in place to avoid being knocked down again. With haste, the firefighters evacuated us away from our burning airplane.

I don't know how far we moved in the seconds before the fire reached the auxiliary fuel tank. Our old "Gooney Bird" exploded. I hit the dirt and turned to see the airplane enveloped in a huge fireball. Thick black smoke billowed skyward. The helicopter pilot's mastery of his rotor blades had kept the flames and smoke away from the door so my crew and our Army "passengers" could bolt from the airplane. The 38th Air Rescue Services' HH-43 helicopter, known as "Pedro," from Detachment 7 escaped the explosion and departed unharmed. I took all this to be a miracle.

Our three Army "passengers" gathered around and thanked me and my crew for a safe landing. The army guys swore no more sight-seeing, picture-taking flights. The bottom of my stomach fell as the thought occurred to me, *Double-check. Is everyone safe?* Holding my breath, I did a quick silent headcount. All were present. I took a deep breath.

Pushing stray blond strains from his eyes, Bob said, "Sir, your dazzling and distinguished flying saved the day! I'll fly with you anytime!" Not waiting for me to respond, Bob prattled on, "Tom, did you see me nearly screw up Carl's perfect landing by almost deploying the gear too soon?"

Tom said, "Yeah, and I heard Carl's quick correction. Wow! Carl, the turn you made in front of that mountain oughta be in a textbook."

Bob said, "Yeah, where are the film guys when you need 'em?"

Tom gestured with palms out and up, "How could you remain so calm?"

I said, "Humph! My flight suit was soaking-wet *before* we landed. I'm afraid all the sweating I did shows that I was the total opposite of cool. Calm? In fact, I'm still shaking. But thanks anyway."

The medics met us on the grass between runway 35R and the base's F-4 revetments. Fortunately, there were no life-threatening injuries–just bumps, bruises, and minor smoke inhalation. By now, my body was pumping less adrenalin and my knees were beginning to smart from crawling. No flight crew member opted to go to the hospital. None of the medics inquired about our mental condition, and I never gave a thought to the possibility of a wounded mind.

While their teammates sprayed foam on the burning airplane, a few members of the fire crew caught up to us while I was again mumbling my thanks to God for the miracle of a safe landing and the timely appearance of Pedro. I took another look at the destroyed airplane and found myself shaking my head. I thought, *To God be the glory*.

Gazing and visualizing what could have happened, I was jolted back to the present by the smell of fire retardant. The stench from the retardant was worse than a fish's toilet.

Chapter 2:
The Officer's Club

An airman threw a stone that made a loud clank against a steel dumpster behind the dining hall. Screeching cries of alarm, a flock of seagulls fluttered from their feast inside the open steel dumpster. Without formation, they circled above the street we traveled. Mingling with the sound of the seagulls was the roar of a flight of four propeller-driven bomb-laden A-1E Skyraider attack airplanes taking off in perfect two-by-two formations. For an instant, the planes, three blocks away, and the birds in the foreground were framed together in my passenger side of the jeep's windshield. The orderly flight of planes and the random directions of the white birds against the clear blue afternoon sky gave me another picture to remember from March 1, 1969. *Where was my camera when I needed it?*

The Air Rescue Service sergeant driving me back to my dormitory said, "Wow! Sir, did you see that?"

"I saw it. That was a great picture. The sight of the gulls and planes together made me forget for a moment the shit you fellas sprayed on me." I tugged at my wet flight suit. But only for a moment! How can you stand to have me in your jeep?"

"Well, sir. We handle it daily. So I suppose I've gotten used to it. Don't worry, sir. It'll wear off in time."

I turned in my seat and looked directly at my driver. “Until today, I’d never thought about how your firefighting buddies put out fires. That crap was wet, but it sure as hell ain’t water. So what’s in it making that powerful stench?”

The sergeant threw his head back and his laugh shook his belly. When he recovered, he said, “Sir, fluoroprotein foam is our primary weapon to knock down and smother aircraft fuel fires.”

“Humph! The stink alone should knock down any fire!”

More laughter.

“Is the source of the stink some big-ass classified secret? I’m cleared for ‘Top Secret.’ Fluoride protein, or whatever the hell you said, didn’t tell me what’s in it.”

Still laughing, he hacked and sputtered, “Sir, the protein in fluoroprotein foam is a mixture of soybeans, chicken beaks, fish bones, animal hooves, and horns combined with fluoro chemical surfactants and water.”

* * *

In anxious anticipation of a hot shower, I hung my flight suit outside of my dormitory. I welcomed the thought that, unlike the crude hooches we lived in a few months back, there would be all the hot water I wanted in the new air-conditioned dormitory, with its stucco exterior and red roof. Wrapped in a towel at my waist, I nearly ran from my private room to the showers, in what I called the connector, for the building was shaped like an uppercase letter “H.”

Remembering a four year old-television ad, I entered the shower. I could hear the announcer's voice in my head. "Every bar of Lifebouy Mint Refresher contains the essence of one hundred-twenty-five mint leaves. Soap has never smelled this good before, and neither have you."

After fifteen minutes, I smelled the same as before. I turned the water on again—hotter. Three scrubbing showers later and with irritated skin, I still smelled like a fish's toilet.

While pulling on a fresh flight suit, the first soap I knew came to mind. Mama made her soap from wood ashes, water, lye, and pig fat that she boiled in a large black iron pot over a fire pit in our backyard. The usual use of that pot was to boil water for washing clothes. Mama's soap…. I smiled at the thought, *is that what I need?* Calculating that it would soon be dawn back home in Madison, aloud, I said, "Mama, what will you do today?"

* * *

Scenes of the scramble to escape the burning airplane would not leave my mind. What if we had been seconds slower crawling out? What if I had turned right? What if the left engine fuel shutoff valve had leaked? In my head, the Kodak Super-8 video of the final explosion on the ground had me and the crew still inside. It played on an uninterrupted loop. I could not find the stop button on that piece of video; nor, could I erase it.

Trying anything to distract my mind, I focused on home–Alabama. Sitting on the edge of my bed with my hands at the sides of my head and my elbows resting on my thighs, memories of long-ago days in Madison returned. I closed my eyes and saw the swift movement of Mama's fingers picking cotton fiber cleanly from the bolls and shoving handfuls into the long sack slung over her shoulder and being dragged behind her. The rows seemed miles long and ended at the woods. Barely taller than an Alabama cotton stalk, I always started in a row next to her, but couldn't keep pace. Mama picked two rows on each pass through the field. In the fall of 1950, cotton was the central thought on the minds of Madison's less than six hundred residents.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the globe that September, C-47s were hauling troops and supplies from Japan to Korea in yet another war.

Picking cotton was back-bending and backbreaking work that lasted from sunup until sundown. We needed the money for food and clothing. So, at age seven, I helped as best I could. My meager pickings were added to Mama's at the end of the day, and she'd collect our small earnings. Less and less frequently, I complained about my back hurting. I knew Mama would gently scoff and laugh. She would tell me, "It can't be your back. Young'uns your age don't have backs; only gristle. And I know for a fact that gristles don't hurt."

We lived in a small frame house on Pension Row. Pension Row was founded by former black Civil War

soldiers given pensions by the federal government. The "Row," our center of commerce and residence, was located two blocks west of the tiny downtown area run by Madison's whites. From the "Row," as dawn broke, we made our way to the fields. Since it was September, my schoolmates and I should have been in classes. That was not so in the rural south for many black children. For cotton-belt black children, summer vacation ended soon after Independence Day. But school shut down again for the work of gathering the cotton crop by late August and remained closed until early October.

My best friend, Virgil, and I walked to school together as white children rode past us in buses. And as worse luck would have it, during my first-grade year, our elementary school was destroyed by fire. Education for me, Virgil, and neighborhood children continued in black churches that were small white frame structures not far from the "Row." Each church housed students in two grades until a new school was built four years later. When Virgil and I were promoted to second grade, we merely crossed the aisle and sat in pews on the other side of the same church.

The same hated OshKosh B'gosh overalls and plaid flannel shirts served me as school attire and in the cotton fields. Virgil dressed the same as I and except for picking cotton in different fields, we did almost everything together. Virgil was bigger than I. With his size, Virgil helped me in fights that I started before the boys wearing nice waist pants, held up by stylish and colorful rubber galluses, could begin hazing

me; for I was short and skinny. I hated being little as much as I hated overalls. Sometimes, I wore two pairs of boxer shorts to seem bigger.

Though I was taught not to listen to old folks' conversation, I played at the edge of earshot and pretended not to hear. I found what adults had to say fascinating and bewildering. When they gathered to pass the time, I made it my business to listen. In the warm evenings of late September, sitting in the dark on the front porch, Mama and her neighborhood friends would swat mosquitoes and lament.

Mama said, "Them radio news people claim the recession ended 'bout this time last year."

Her friend from across the street, Miss Mildred, said, "Chile, they sho' ain't talkin' 'bout no Alabama. Did it end fer any o' y'all, yet?"

Laughter.

Old Uncle George, from down the Row, who was nobody's uncle that I remember, said, "Naw. I'm heah to tell ya, I's sho' glad today's Sadday and the last day of the mont' to boot. 'Cause I ain't felt de end o' nothing, 'cep my lil' change runnin' out 'fore time."

More laughter.

Uncle George continued. "'Sides, yisdiddy dem same radio folks said the price for a pound o' cotton done jumped up leb'n cents all the way to forty cents."

Mama said, "Humph! Any y'all seen wages jump up for pickers? Last I seed, we still gettin' a measly three copper Lincolns a pound."

Miss Mildred, said, "Yeah, our wages gone jump up alright–on a cold day in hell!"

Raucous laughter.

As the laughter died, Uncle George stood, stretched, held his battered felt hat aloft while rubbing his shiny bald spot, and said, "Y'all may soon hafta fine som' else to grouse 'bout."

Miss Mildred said, "'Scuse me. Come agin."

"How cum y'all ain't talkin' 'bout whatcha gone do atter that new fangl' cottonpickin' machine takes away our lil' jobs?"

Mama put her hand over her mouth. I heard alarm and fear in her voice. "George, you don't mean to tell me that it's true what they say on the radio 'bout that new machine; you know that the thing actually works and all."

"'Fraid so, Ora. Big white farmers is buyin'em this year from that new International Harvester comp'ny right over there in Memphis."

Hands akimbo, Miss Mildred said, "They's already got the cotton gin. Looks like we's gone be put plum outta any kinda work to do wid cotton."

Then there was a pause. Now, Uncle George broke the silence. "Well, this thing is real enouf and it's a comin'. Why, anutter comp'ny's gone be make'em right down the road there in Gadsden."

By her voice, I knew Mama had not recovered from the thought of being replaced by a machine. I was still trying to figure out how a machine could pick cotton. Resigned, Mama said, "You mean right here in Alabama?"

"Yessum."

"Do, Lawd!"

The quiet was palpable.

Long minutes went by before Uncle George cleared his throat and said, "Sometimes, there's happy news from the radio. The Brooklyn Dodgers done beat dem ol' Phillies this afternoon, 7-3."

A cheer went up from those assembled. Even as a child, I sensed that they were happy to change the subject. I know I was, for I knew from where money came for living expenses.

Uncle George's friend, Mr. Jimmy, turned perky. He said, "Yeah, and if'n they win tomorrow, the season'll end in a flat-footed tie 'twix dem and those damned Phillies!"

Mama asked, "Did Jackie hit a home run?"

"Naw. But ol' Roy did. And, that Duke fella did, too. George, who's pitching tomorrow?"

"Don Newcombe."

* * *

Shortly before happy hour, I arrived at the Officers Club still reeking despite of a half-hour shower, scrubbing my skin raw, and applying deodorant, copious splashes of after shave lotion, and cologne. Marvin Gaye's soulful rendition of "I heard it on the grapevine" was playing on the Wurlitzer and the usual blue haze from cigarette and cigar smoke hung in the air.

"Hey, Carl! Today, your money ain't no good in heah. 'Cause right now, you're the man of the hour." That was Bill Cobb rising from the chair he had sat on backward and heading to greet me, grinning. Other

pilots were rising to follow him. Bill was the only person wearing sunglasses inside the club. That was a part of his image. Bill was the coolest pilot ever. He was wearing sharkskin slacks, a silk shirt and matching silk socks, and the finest shoes in the room. Everyone else was wearing the usual flight suit or fatigues and boots.

Bill reached me first with his hand extended. "Man, we just got the big news that you landed a burning plane this afternoon."

As he shook my hand, Bill's expression changed as if I had slapped his face. His nostrils flared. He released my hand and backed away, letting others approach me. Alex Dawson said, "Every one of us thinks you're one brave pilot." But, Alex, too, let his expression drop and quickly stepped back. Alex's hand flew toward his nose, but with discretion, he diverted his hand to rub down his face as if he had a Van Dike goatee and let it drop from his chin. From a growing distance, Bee Settles said, "Brother Man, yes, it's sure enough true that you're a hero, but you're also lucky to be alive."

Their body language said, "Let me give you a hug." But all backed away, stumbling over each other.

Then Bill said what no one else would say, "Man, we know you had a butt tightening ordeal out there today, but did you shower? You smell like shit."

Wide-eyed, they were gazing at my mouth, waiting for words as if they would see them drop from my lips. Indignant, I said, "Hell, yes. I showered for a

half hour and scrubbed my skin raw trying to get rid of this damn smell."

Bill's hands flew akimbo. With his cigarette dangling from his lips, he demanded, "Well, what the fuck kind of stink won't wash off?"

After a quick explanation of fluoroprotein foam, we settled at two tables, five friends at one and me alone at another, but within earshot. Following Bill, friends delivered round after round of Jack Daniels to my table as they asked for the details of my harrowing flight–bringing back to my mind exactly what I was trying to forget.

Bob Coleman, my copilot, followed a group of his friends into the club. When he spotted me, he laughed and said, "Hey, fearless leader. I know why you have that table all alone."

I yelled back, "Yeah, tonight we're two of a kind. I'll bet you'll have a table of your own, too."

He approached my friends' table, but stopped short. "Let me tell y'all from over here, 'cause I smell like Carl. Y'all can write home and tell the folks at Tennessee State that Carl is one helluva pilot. I guess everybody at Danang Air Base knows the end of today's headline story. But wait–there's more. Take it from a guy who was there. To save our lives, Carl made lightning decisions, one after another, that minimized the fire, limited the smoke pouring in on us, and without, put us on a heading for home. On final approach, we were coming in low. I want you know he had the balls to *not* deploy flaps or landing gear until we were only about five feet above the runway!" To

demonstrate, Bob held his hand about shoulder high. "So lemme tell y'all. Add Carl's flying skills atop that cool decision making, and what you have is a perfect and safe touchdown—and a damn thankful crew. Now, you know the rest of the story."

Bill turned toward me wearing his infrequent solemn and serious face. "Damn, Bro. We knew you were a brave man 'cause you landed that flaming wreck. But, Carl, you didn't tell us these details. Man, what you did oughta be taught to every rookie. Dude, if this ain't fuckin' Silver Star shit; grits ain't grocery."

I shrugged and fidgeted with a glass in front of me.

From my friends rose a chorus of 'Amens' and 'Well dones'. I felt warm and embarrassed.

After more good-natured banter, Bob returned as near as he could to his friends. You see, though there was no rule in the club about seating, blacks and whites usually sat in separate groups.

The club had no waiters. Led by Bill, we entered the line to pick up steaks that we would grill outside of the club. A major in front of Captain Bill Cobb turned and said, "Why do you always wear those sunglasses in here?"

Bill didn't miss a beat. He raised his chin and looked the major in the eye and said, "You listen here, muthafucka. These are *my* damn shades. I'll wear'em anytime and anyplace I damn well please."

Without turning heads, the eyes of black and white officers shifted from side to side to surreptitiously

gauge reactions of comrades of their respective races. The silence in the room was palpable.

The crimson-faced major's blond hair flew as he snapped his head around and focused on a steak.

Long after dinner and more drinks than I can remember, I could not walk. At some time that night, another friend from our years together at Tennessee State, Lloyd "Fig" Newton, had the courage to overcome my stink. Over a distance roughly the length of a football field, Fig ferried all one-hundred twenty pounds of me on his back to my dormitory.

Chapter 3:
Back in the Saddle

"Halt, turkey! Stay where you are." That was a laughing Bill Cobb yelling from his table. We were back at the club, our usual haunt. Bill was seated between two of my grinning fellow Tennessee State alum friends, Chuck Guthrie and Lorenzo Pugh. Like Bill, both were F-4 pilots.

Bill pointed and said, "Sit over there." After a pause, he added, "Humph. You don't look too good."

In my best sarcastic voice, I said, "Good morning to you, too."

"We missed yo' lil' turkey ass in the bunker last night."

Chuck elbowed Bill and said, "After his heroics, didn't we promote Carl to 'eagle?' Man, show some respect."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot. Sorry. Anyway, I heard Bee tell you that yo' ass was lucky. But, if I were you, I wouldn't try to stretch my lil' luck. Next time, it might be 'Charlie' who's lucky enough to send a fuckin' rocket into our dorm and *yo'* lil' eagle luck jes might be at an end."

Chuck and Pugh laughed.

Perplexed and frowning, I said. "What the hell are y'all talking about?"

Chuck said, "Bill's just giving you some good advice. Take it. Get to the bunker next time the rockets hit us."

I could feel my face fall and shoulders droop. A rocket attack! And I slept through it. I slumped onto a chair two tables away from the boys. I said, "I dreamt there was a rocket attack last night. It sounded real."

Bill laughed and pounded the table with his fist. "Now, I've heard loads of bullshit in my time, but that damn weak-ass tale of yours takes the cake." Then he pointed at me and without even a hint of a smile he said, "Boy, next time you'd best get yo' lil' narrow ass in a bunker."

I sat holding the sides of my head, elbows on my table. I felt weak and dizzy at the realization that a rocket could have been my end hours ago. …*live through landing a burning plane to expose myself to rocket fire before dawn the next day*… Deeply troubled, under my breath, I muttered, "What's wrong with me?"

Bill spoke again. "By the way, turkey, oops, I mean eagle. It ain't morning anymore. It's a quarter past one."

* * *

Many days after landing the burning plane, the video tape in my mind of my near-disaster was still playing on a continuous loop. Tuesday of the next week was another hot day, and for me, a day of deep thought. Unable to sleep that evening, I sat outside my dormitory nursing a beer in the faint silver light of a

waning moon, enjoying a gentle sea breeze off the South China Sea. The sounds of a busy airport surrounded me. *Why am I here? How did I get from Madison to Danang, a place I never heard of before, a place where I came within seconds of dying?*

The word 'dying' stopped my video. My mind went back to flight school at Laughlin Air Force Base, not far from the confluence of the Rio Grande and the Pecos River, in southwest Texas, and a classmate known as Rex. Robert Alan Rex, unlike most of us newly minted officers, was married and completely serious about his studies and career. He was a reservist, who had returned to school, earned a bachelor's degree, and entered Officer Training School. Though we were not buddies, my memory of him had not faded, for his diligence earned him the number one position in our class and the Outstanding Pilot Award. The scuttlebutt was that he had earlier been named Outstanding Senior Student at Brigham Young University. Here was a guy to emulate.

Two months after I arrived at Danang, Rex deployed to Thailand, to fly F-105D fighter-bombers. I shook my head at the memory of seeing his name on the *Air Force Times*'s "Missing In Action" list in December. Everyone knew that he was gone. His body had not been recovered because the crash site was in territory held by the enemy. A Forward Air Controller flying near Rex's target in Laos around noon that sunny day reported that Rex's plane, in a flight of four F-105s, did not come out of a sixty degree dive and that his canopy was still in place on impact.

In my fist, I crushed my empty beer can. What of Rex's wife and daughter? What was to be gained in place of their loss? How might our country have benefited from the likes of a studious hardworking diligent Robert Alan Rex living his life and raising a family in his native Utah? Or, others like him? Rex was one of our best and brightest. What a waste… Now, more than ever, my question is still, what am I doing here?

My tape hit the start button.

* * *

Complying with my squadron commander's "request" for an incident report was not a problem, for I remembered far too much detail about my last flight. On the other hand, it *was* a problem, because it sharpened the images on my internal movie reel. The more I relived the experience, the less ready I was to fly again.

Days were passing and I was continuing to say to my commanding officer, "Sir, I'm just not ready to fly, yet. I'm still trying to get my head around how close I came to dying in an unarmed low flying slow-ass airplane."

My CO rubbed his chin and appeared for a time to be in deep thought. Finally, he said, "Look. Carl, why don't you take some time off and clear your head?"

Surprised, I said, "Sir?"

"Yes. I'm serious. Be creative. Start with some local outings around Danang. Then, let's think bigger.

I'll look into another out-of-country R&R, or ferrying aircraft to maintenance in Taipei."

That got my attention. Smiling, I said, "Sir, do you have all the electronics and cameras you want from Hong Kong?"

He laughed and said, "Come to think of it, I do need a few items. I'll bet others might want to give you a shopping list, too. So, go ahead. Add Hong Kong to your list."

Grinning, I said, "Yes, sir!"

"In the meantime, I want you to know that you're one of my best pilots. I'm sure you won't be surprised that you'll be getting the Distinguished Flying Cross for saving the crew and passengers."

I suppose surprise was written on my face.

He went on to say, "Actually, I think since the plane was destroyed by enemy action and you saved all aboard, you should get a Silver Star." He shrugged. "But, the old man decided on the DFC and an Oak Leaf Cluster for another Air Medal."

"Sir, the Silver Star doesn't matter to me. What does matter is that I still have my life."

My CO blinked and his expression changed. Slowly nodding, he said, "Carl, I admire your humility." He stood and continued. "Well, right now, I'm taking you off the flight schedule for a while. But understand I'm going to need you back for duty as soon as possible."

* * *

Several days later, I took a morning stroll along the gleaming white sands of Danang's oceanfront, known to G.I.'s as China Beach or My Khe, as the locals called it. There, I met a marine corporal recovering from a battle wound. He sat with me and my driver at a very American picnic table in the shade of palms and short cypress-like trees I had never seen before. The bottom four feet of each tree growing out of the sandy soil was painted white. We were surrounded by airmen, marines, sailors, and soldiers at other picnic tables–all enjoying another day of well-earned R&R at the beach. This in-country R&R center was a part of the United States Marine Corps compound known as the Marble Mountain Air Facility and was located on a prime beach.

For a long while after an initial greeting, we sat in silence, watching shirtless men in fatigues and boots play catch with a softball and oversized mitts. Most wore swim trunks. Some passed an American football back and forth on the water's edge, while others dug starfish out of the wet sand, took photos, caught waves on surf boards, or cruised in power boats. At one of the 'official concessionaires' that looked a lot like a walkup Dairy Queen, I bought beers for my tablemates.

For a time, the sights took my mind off matters that I wanted desperately to avoid. But too soon, my nemesis drifted back. To push it out of mind, I said to the marine, "Are any of your buddies here on R&R with you?"

The corporal took a sip of his beer and said, "No, sir. It's just me. I'm nearing the end of my recuperation at the Naval Hospital across the highway–over there." He pointed west through the trees. "My battalion's up near Quảng Tri City. Where're you fellas from?"

"Danang Air Base. About four straight-line clicks west of your hospital. What happened to you?"

"Oh, in a fire fight, I caught an AK round. Damned thing passed through the fleshy part of my arm, right here below the elbow." He touched his left arm. "But, it's all better now."

"Are you going home?"

He laughed a cruel laugh and said, "Oh, hell no, sir. They're sendin' my ass right back to Quảng Tri in a matter of days."

The corporal was quiet. Rubbing my chin, I reflected on how lucky–actually, how blessed I was. I didn't have a scratch on me, save for my bruised knees. He had an enemy inflicted bullet wound. I studied his face and saw that, at least outwardly, he had accepted that he was on his way back to more danger, combat, the bush, and primitive living. Perhaps, and most likely, he's not willing to go. But go, he will. That's what we do; when duty calls, we salute smartly and go in harm's way.

After lunch, I will be on my way back to my dormitory and air conditioned comfort. I felt guilty of something I could not yet identify–but what? It nagged at me. The answer seemed close at hand, but still eluded me–it was that close, alas, just beyond reach….

Then it hit me. My war was the same as the corporal's, yet different. It was all there in the "b's" bayonets, bullets, bombs, and bullshit. My war was really a delivery service. So was Cobb's. Directly to the enemy, I delivered bullshit; Cobb delivered bombs. Unlike the quiet corporal, we didn't see individual enemy soldiers, much less fix bayonets and personally confront an enemy eye-to-eye who was determined to kill you before you could kill him. Yet, my war and Cobb's war supported the same American national policy as the corporal's war. That policy still made no sense to me.

Like Cobb, I will renew my determination not to die in this God-forsaken country.

* * *

"Why don't you try poker? Now, there's a game where paying attention is a must. It'll for certain make you focus, or you'll soon be broke." Alex laughed and continued shuffling a deck.

Picking up the dice from the table under Alex's hands, I said, "Poker looks like a longer learning curve than dice. Am I right?"

Alex twisted his mouth in a frown and then said, "Hmm. I don't know. The stuff you'll need to learn may be different, but could take close to the same amount of time."

"Huh? What's to learn? How many different ways are there to throw dice?"

Alex threw his head back in a hearty laugh. "That's what I mean. You shoot dice; you do not throw

dice." Momentarily, he said, "In two words, you need to know 'etiquette and language.'"

"What?"

"You heard me, turkey. Oh, that's right you're an eagle, now. Humph. I think turkey sounds better. Always did. Always will. Who the hell's going to laugh at an eagle?"

In spite of myself, I laughed with Alex.

We were sitting at a table near the center of the club. Alex took the dice from me and began my first craps lesson. He held up a small white cube and said, "You will hear some call this a 'die' and a pair, 'dice.' Others call either one or two by the same word–'dice'…"

My friend, Jack Daniels, was failing me. Jack had been my close companion and nurse for many days and nights at the club–for free. The boys were still buying drinks for me. The smell of fluoroprotein foam had worn away, but my video tape had not faded at all–no matter whether I was stone sober or inebriated. I had come to understand Jack's sedation limitations. Further, Jack could not stop my video, nor did he help me determine if I was as tough as I thought I was from the fights I started at elementary school, or what was now keeping me out of the cockpit. Jack offered no answers and was a rapidly diminishing temporary distraction.

After learning some craps stuff from 'snake eyes' to 'boxcars' to 'pass/don't pass bets;' I found out that Jack also helped me lose money–fast. When Jack was "helping me" I was so bad at craps that several

mornings, Bee would stop by my room and put money in my hand.

The first morning, I said, "G'moanin', Bee. What's this for?"

"That's the money I took from your pockets last night before you could lose it shootin' craps–or, tryin' to shoot." He grinned and walked away while I gaped at the money in my hand.

* * *

By Saturday night of the next week, I decided I needed real help. Sometime after midnight, I awoke in a sweat from a dream–my weekly nightmare. In the dream, *I had landed and brought the burning airplane to a stop on the runway. As I scampered out of the captain's seat of my C-47, an explosion ripped through the left wing. The blast hurled me against the right sidewall of the fuselage and I slid to all-fours. I felt an oily liquid on my fingers. There was a violent "whoosh" and my hands and flight suit were set alight. In a blinding flash, the auxiliary fuel tank detonated and added to the ensuing conflagration. My screams mingled with those of my crew in agony from our burning flesh. All of us perished in a billowing firestorm.* As usual, I awoke in a panic and bolted upright in bed. I frantically rubbed my hands. My breathing and heart rate slowed when I realized that my hands were fine and that it was only a dream–again. I sat alone in the darkness as my troubled mind gradually downshifted to near normal.

The following morning, Sunday, still hung over, I stood in front of the base chapel. Mass goers streamed from the building and filed past me on both sides.

As the sea gull flies, the chapel may have been as close as half a football field to my dorm. Looking up at the soaring A-line roof, I was reminded of the photographs I had seen of the recently completed United States Air Force Academy Cadet Chapel. My base chapel did not have seventeen spires like the academy's chapel, but the modern architecture of the roof line also reminded me of a delta-winged F-106 Delta Dart in vertical flight. And, instead of the gleaming aluminum tetrahedrons of the academy chapel, the roof of Danang's chapel was supported by rows of large square wooden beams that formed isosceles triangles if one included the ground as their base. The same thick beams extended below the top of the exterior walls all the way to the ground as flying buttresses. The entire structure was a soothing brown, reminiscent of African mahogany.

Inside, I craned my neck to follow the vertex of the high ceiling from the front door to the opposite end of the chapel. The interior color was the same brown as the exterior.

A Catholic chaplain startled me. "Good morning, captain." He was cheerful. Moving past me, he read my name tag. He said, "Captain Gamble, may I help you in some way?"

I thought, *I can read a name tag, too*. I focused and spoke slowly. I was determined to pronounce ending "g's" and avoid slurring my words. "Good

morning, Chaplain Balducci. I'm just looking for a quiet place to think." As an afterthought, I added, "And pray."

Though I was nearly an hour early for protestant services, Chaplain Balducci left me with my thoughts and prayers on the first pew. I bowed my head before the altar and thanked God again for my life. I repeated the 'Lord's Prayer' several times. And then, I prayed, *Almighty God, I need big help. Please guide me out of my web of tangled thoughts. Thank You again for delivering me physically from the plane. Now, please deliver me from my nightmares and my mind's movie reel repeating falsely that all perished at flight's end. Please grant me guidance. Thank You for Your divine deliverance. Amen.*

Chaplain Bates noticed that I did not leave my pew at the close of the Protestant service and sat beside me. His voice was warm and kind. He said, "Son, do you want to talk about it?"

Was the guidance I prayed for forthcoming already? "Yes, sir."

An hour passed quickly. When Chaplain Bates had heard my story, he said, "Captain Gamble, it has been my pleasure to meet you. Your reputation as a pilot has preceded you. What you accomplished, in the face of great danger, was extraordinary. I salute your courage and skill."

"Thank you, Major Bates, sir."

"Son, hold your head up. Even men of courage have a natural reaction to danger. If a man tells you that he never has fear, he's lying. Our brains are wired

for survival above all else. You've, no doubt, heard of 'fight or flight', yes?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, that applies to brave pilots, too. I think imagining what would have happened had you not escaped the plane once on the ground is something I would do, too. Your dreams further complicate your state of mind. My guess is, in time, you'll get past what *could* have happened, but, by God's grace, *didn't* happen.

"This brings to mind a baseball story we can discuss now and a football story I'll tell you later. When both of us were lads, Ted Williams landed a burning plane during the Korean War.

I frowned. "Do you mean the Boston Red Sox slugger?'

"Yes, he is the very same. Though Ted had no passengers, he may have had the same thoughts as you."

"How long before he flew again?"

"Ted flew the next day. Come by and see me during the week and let's talk again."

"Yes, sir. Thank you very much."

Leaving Chaplain Bates, I felt hopeful. His words about Ted Williams reminded me of a forgotten conversation from a warm fall Saturday afternoon among men sitting on wooden milk and Coca-Cola crates under a dome-shaped chinaberry tree next to Mr. Archie's store in Madison. Weeks later, John F. Kennedy would be elected president. In the fading sunlight, Uncle George and his friend, Mr. Jimmy,

played checkers on a homemade board resting on an upside down milk crate. They were engaged in their usual heated arguments about baseball and war, with the men sitting around them waiting for a turn on the board.

Uncle George said, "I'ma tell ya agin. War messes a man up on the inside. He might, then agin, he might not have scars on the outside. Ya won't never see the scars I'm talkin' 'bout–'cause they be inside."

Someone said, "Aw, how can a man have a scar nobody kin see?"

Mr. Jimmy said, "Listen to George. Y'all know he fit in World War One–back when they called it 'shell-shocked.' He done been whar y'all ain't and best hope to never go. Nigh, George, he a fine Christian man and ain't gone say but so much."

Mr. Jimmy held a checker piece, which was a soda bottle cap, between his fingers as he pointed in the man's face. "Lemme tell y'all muthafuckas straight from the shoulder. George, always talk right nice in his Christian way. What he meant was what a man sees in war fucks wid a man's mind. In my war, 'WW2,' dey called it 'battle fatigue.' Could be, a fella saw his best buddy wid'im in same foxhole hit in the face wid a damn big ass piece o' hot shrapnel and lose half his head. The man *not* hit could be all fucked up inside from seein' his buddy's life knocked outta'im in a damn instant. Would he think it coulda been him? You damn right! He'll think for years, 'Muthafucka, dat shit coulda kilt me 'stead o' him.' Nigh on top a dat, he still grievin' de loss o' his friend. You sombitches dat

ain't never been no whar but Madison County oughta keep ya damn moufs off'n whatcha don't know nothin' 'bout."

The man said, "Is that what you saw?"

Mr. Jimmy's nostrils flared. He leapt from his seat and the bottle cap checker pieces went askew. Ignoring the sliding bottle caps, Uncle George made up and down motions with his hands. "Now, Jimmy, jes calm down and rest yo' feets. He ain't knowed not to ask old soljers lak us 'bout what we done seed. But, I will say this much 'bout it. Jes lak outside scars, inside scars be de same way. Everybody don't get'em. Won't call no names from here 'bouts, but jes look at dese two fine ball players. After Korea, Bobby Brown returned to the Yankees a shadow of his ol' self. I don't know what dat boy saw, but war did'im no good. Now, take dat Ted Williams, he landed a burning plane in Korea dat done been hit by enemy fire. But I bet the Red Sox wuz sho' happy ol' Ted came back playin' lak he wuz tryin' a make up for lost time. Why, don't you know, ol' Ted jes finished up his playin' days wid a homer in his last at bat! Lak I said, some get scarred; some don't."

* * *

In the Twenty-first Century, the United States Department of Health and Human Services' National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) uses the term "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD" for what Uncle George and Mr. Jimmy called "shell-shocked" and "battle fatigue." NIMH lists the number one symptom

of PTSD as "flashbacks–reliving the trauma over and over."

* * *

A few days later, I made my first arrival in Hong Kong as the copilot of an Air Force C-47 we were ferrying from Nha Trang to Taipei for maintenance. This was also my first time back in the cockpit and we flew over twenty-five hundred miles in seven days. In my pockets were shopping lists from my CO and several of the boys for electronics and cameras. I was looking forward to three days in Hong Kong before our onward journey to Taipei.

During final approach at Hong Kong, my pilot made a sudden sharp and surprising turn while descending from an altitude of less than six hundred feet. Involuntarily, I held my breath. My heart pounded until I saw his calm demeanor and heard his responses to the tower in an unexcited voice. So, I exhaled. At first, it felt like we were maneuvering for a place in Kowloon's street traffic. We were at the end of over five hours in the cockpit and cruising at about 150 miles per hour in an uneventful flight–so far.

On the ground, I learned that the low altitude forty-seven degree right turn over Western Kowloon to land on Kai Tak Airport's runway 13 was necessary and the stuff of legend. I had no idea that when the turn was completed, the plane's altitude was to be only one hundred forty feet! I was told that veteran pilots called it the 'Hong Kong Turn' and passengers called it the

Kai Tak Heart Attack.' I thought, *How can 'fight or flight' apply here? Hmm…flight…?*

The chief attraction for me at the airport was the presence of the many Boeing 707s sporting the logos and colors of the world's major airlines. I smiled at the memory of having been offered and taking the controls of an airborne KC-135, the 707's near twin, when I was in Air Force ROTC Summer Camp. After the Aircraft Commander directed me to make several turns, he told me my flying performance revealed excellent skills. *Perhaps, someday I'll fly one of these babies.* The talk I had with Chaplain Bates and my periods of introspection alone in my dorm room helped turn my attention to connecting my past with a future. This felt useful, though, from time to time, the flaming images and dreams returned. The 707s were a reason to connect the future to my tangled web of thoughts. Those sleek 707s hit the pause button on my video tape.

* * *

It was like television. At a Kowloon night club, the proprietor marched them in like the lineups I remember from the TV series, *Dragnet*. When the line stopped, just like on *Dragnet*, he had them turn and face the men waiting to identify their choice. They were not burglary or murder suspects. They were attractive young women who were 'owned' by the proprietor of the club. By taste and fancy, a man could choose one of the women as his escort for an evening

of drinks, chat, and sex–all for a price paid to her "owner."

During my second visit to this Kowloon club, which was only two white-roofed red Mercedes taxis and a big green and white double decker ferry ride away from my hotel in central Hong Kong, I met a marine sergeant who was in his last evening of R&R. I first saw him through the blue haze of cigarette smoke hanging in the air. His long face and contemplative mood caught my attention.

I stood by his table and said, "You look like a fella in exactly what I'm avoidin'–deep thought."

The marine stopped stirring the dregs of his drink, took a long look at me, and above the music said, "You look like a pretty serious fella yourself." He pushed a chair toward me. "Join me. We can drown our deep thoughts together."

I grinned. "Drownin'em sounds good. And while we're at it, let's weight'em and sink'em deep. Lemme buy you a drink."

He displayed a fleeting smile. "Thank you."

(I do not remember his name. So I will call him Ken.)

In a short time, my new acquaintance, Marine Corps Staff Sergeant Kenneth Phillips, was describing the siege of Khe Sanh by North Vietnamese Army Regulars. He was at Khe Sanh until last August and after only three months back in the States; he was here for a second tour. I didn't ask, because Khe Sanh was heavy on his mind.

Ken was saying, "Yeah. That's TV news, alright. My wife had the same idea as you until I explained that Khe Sanh Combat Base was not on a mountaintop. Actually, it was on relatively flat ground–a plateau. It even had an airstrip."

"But, what about the photos showing the rugged rocky top of a mountain where there was definitely no place to build an airstrip?"

"Those were really several hilltops in the photos and footage you saw, not just one. That's where we setup listening posts on high ground. We wanted the high ground so we could defend KSCB. Funny thing about the high ground, everybody wants it–you and your enemy. If NVA troops held the hills above KSCB, as bad as things were with them farther away, it would've quickly turned into a turkey shoot. It would've been over real quick–not taken months."

Puzzled and still remembering TV news footage from when I was in Texas, I found myself frowning and nodding. "So, what about our patrols that I heard were surrounded by NVA troops?"

"Patrols went out regularly to probe the NVA positions. What made the news is when one got into trouble. No offense, sir. But, Captain, what I've got to say ain't nothing against officers."

I shook my head. "No offense will be taken. Go ahead. Talk plain."

"Well, here's a real example. There was this green-ass second lieutenant who took his platoon out on patrol and spotted three NVA soldiers. The NVA guys ran. The lieutenant ordered his men to join him in

an attempt to capture the three men. These fellas were decoys and led that platoon straight into a perfect ambush. The NVA company commander had correctly anticipated the route our patrol would take."

"Hmm. Eh, how'd the enemy commander do that?"

"No magic. This is elementary infantry stuff that both sides know. It's all about reading the terrain and asking yourself, if I'm the bad guy looking to kill me, what're his options given this landscape?"

"Oh."

"You can guess the end of the story. Yes, only a handful of men from that platoon made it back to their hilltop stronghold. And if they were wounded, *and* they made it back, there was low probability of being medevac'd out."

"So, that was because the enemy had the hills surrounded?"

"Yes. That and the weather.

"But let me be sure you understand. The entire KSCB was surrounded, not just our hilltops. During the battle for KSCB, about five thousand of us lived in mud, returned fire, and slept in the rain. The monsoon was on. It rained every day. On a good day, the clouds would lift by midday so we could get 'copters and 130's in to drop stuff on the airstrip–not land and offload. But the hilltops were shrouded most of the time."

Ken tapped the table with his forefinger. "Now, add this to the picture. We were under rocket and

artillery fire day and night–but especially intense fire when aircraft showed up."

"What happened to the wounded?"

Ken shrugged. "Some bled out."

"Damn."

More drinks arrived. We were silent for a time, each man alone with his memories and demons. Here was another marine who did his job no matter the enemy's shelling or the weather. Why was I not already back doing my job?

Still turning my drink glass in its water track on my coaster, I broke the silence. "Say, Ken, did your guys get most of the supplies we dropped at KSCB?"

"Oh, that reminds me to thank you. You Air Force guys really know your shit when it comes to air delivery–whether bombs or supplies. To answer your question, we got most of it–nearly all the Air Force dropped. Marines can fly 130s, but they aren't nearly as good at putting supplies where we could get'em as your guys are."

"Thanks. I'll pass it on. News footage didn't say whose C-130s dropped stuff that the VC got.

"What'd the Air Force do different?"

"Your guys adapted to the situation and instead of landing to off-load, they flew over the airstrip and did a 'touch-and-go'. Between the 'touch' and the 'go,' moving at a bit more than one hundred miles per hour, they deployed an extraction 'chute that pulled a cargo pallet out the rear of the airplane. That took brains and balls! With great skill, they did all this under intense

fire. The first time we saw this done, all the ground-pounding marines like me cheered and applauded."

"Wow!"

"Lemme take you back to the thought I was turning over in my head when you showed up. The thing that galls the hell outta me is I no longer understand what the hell we're fighting for."

"Well, don't look at me. I don't know, either. Understanding our purpose here is well above my pay grade."

"Going on nine years now, I've been a marine–an infantryman. That's all I know. That's what I do–and, even if I say so myself, I'm damn good at it. But, that's all over now. The bastards have worn me down. I'm done. Soons I reach Pendleton, I'm fuckin' out."

Turning in my chair to look squarely into Ken's face, I said, "Are you ready to give up your investment of time and energy in the Corps?"

"While I was home for those three months, I thought about it a lot. Yes, I've decided. There's a big-ass construction project starting this year to build a huge new airport for my hometown, Dallas, and Fort Worth. I'll try my hand at construction."

"Was it Khe Sanh?"

"In part, it was. The thing is, I noticed stuff I couldn't have imaged in the old days–like squabbles between generals that hit the press. Generals fought over whether we should even be at KSCB or not, and then who should own the planes that supported KSCB and worse. The first of two worse things was giving up KSCB after we had soaked the ground with American

blood. You know, just like that." Ken snapped his fingers. "We just packed up and left. The second was when the NVA, using tanks, artillery, and infantry, overran the Army Special Forces compound at nearby Lang Vei. A chicken-shit marine regimental commander refused to send a relief mission to bring the survivors to KSCB. I couldn't believe it. A *marine* refusing to rescue fellow Americans… This ain't the Corps my dad joined in World War II. What the hell ever happened to 'leave no man behind'?"

Ken's long face was back. He was quiet again. No appropriate words came to my mind, so I said nothing. I was hesitant, but I reached out and patted his forearm. It felt odd to comfort a white man–especially to touch him.

I stood to leave. We shook hands and I said, "Good luck in Dallas. Semper Fi."

The marine blinked back tears.

* * *

Shortly after my return to Danang, my CO called me. When I arrived in his office, he greeted me with a big grin, leaned back in his chair, and said, "Carl, did I hear you say some time back that you have a friend in Bangkok?"

Puzzled and frowning, I answered, "Yes, sir. Did something happen to him?"

"No, no. Hold on." He fished a paper from a stack on his desk and shoved it toward me. "Take this and why don't you go on over there and see how he's faring."

The paper was authorization for my second out-of-country R&R–an unusual thing. This time it was to Bangkok, Thailand.

It was my turn to grin. "Yes, sir! I'll consider that an order!"

* * *

My friend, Bob, met me at the Bangkok Airport. That was his first act of kindness as a gracious host. At his home, a bungalow where several walls were glass, he introduced me to his household–first to his sweetheart or 'telock,' then his maid, and finally, his interpreter–three women! An old guy expression that I thought I understood suddenly became very clear with new meaning: "Don't take me to the Promised Land; take me to Thailand!"

In his home and about the city, Bob wined and dined me. He was a great host. Bob, an AT&T engineer whom I had met on one of his occasional trips to Danang, shared his munificent living with me–something residing in Rocket City can soon make one forget. I thought, *While I'm here, I'll enjoy and remember every moment*.

Too soon, it was time to return to Danang. My three days in Bangkok were like a slow curveball–a hitter's delight. The relaxed time and leisurely pace of life made me a wee bit envious of Bob. While I wished him well, Bob's life was the opposite of the tensions I sensed in Danang where actual attacks and the constant threat of rocket attacks felt like head-high fastballs–coming in tight.

On our way to the airport, I remembered a conversation with Alex during our R&R in Sydney, Australia. At breakfast on our next to last day in Sydney, Alex and I agreed that the warm welcome we received from Australian women was one more reason for the stories we'd heard about G.I.s deserting and remaining in Australia. The combination of willing women, the absence of rocket fire, and lack of anti-African-Americanism in Sydney was tempting. Though we debated the matter for a while, in our heart of hearts, we knew we would return to Danang on time and complete our tours of duty with dignity. Bangkok was even more tempting than Sydney. I didn't say so, but in Sydney, as now in Bangkok, Mama's voice spoke inside my head, "Son, remember, your word is your bond."

* * *

Later the same week, I was alone again in the chapel for prayer. On my mind was the plight of the marine corporal whose name I couldn't remember, Bill Cobb's often avowed determination to live, Chaplain Bates' counsel, Ken's imminent departure from the Marine Corps, and the possibility of flying Boeing 707s. So was Mama.

Chaplain Bates revived my memory of a forgotten conversation between Uncle George and Mr. Jimmy about shell-shock and battle fatigue. So, Ted Williams flew again the next day and in due time, resumed his Hall of Fame baseball career. Chaplain Bates told me later that his football coach's habit was on the next

play after a fumble, give the ball to the guy who fumbled.

Perhaps, there's a simple lesson here for me. The longer I wait to fly combat missions, the more difficult it will be. That was already the case and it would only get worse as time passed. I want flying in my future, but I don't have to always fly for the Air Force. For now, I will do my duty. Sitting in the chapel, I resolved several matters and set a new heading for myself.

I realized that the officer's club and Jack Daniels were not helping me. When I had my fill of Jack, strangely, I felt sorry for myself. How could that be? With God's help, I had landed a burning airplane and saved the lives aboard. So, I decided to keep Jack away from my tangled web.

Next, I promised myself I'd spend regular time in the chapel, just like I did back home at Little Shiloh Baptist Church. Further, because I was so thankful to God for my life and now realized that no day is guaranteed to anyone, I committed that I would tell Mama and my siblings that I love them in every letter. I even did my best to give up hating my enemies.

I knew Mama would agree with my new heading. So would my hometown pastor, Reverend Betts. I had made a commitment to the Air Force. *I will keep my word; I will do my duty.* Forthwith, I will resume flying combat missions. Yes, I'm sure Mama would approve–actually, she would insist that I keep my word.

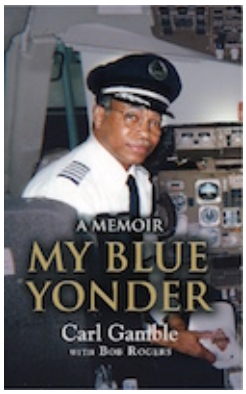
* * *

A few days later, I was in the crew room listening to the familiar preflight briefing as I prepared for my first combat mission since the burning airplane. The previous evening, my nightmare returned vivid and terrifying. But I had found a place of solace to help steel my splintered nerves. I recited a simple prayer; over and over. *"God, please help me remember I have nothing to fear for, you are with me."* I would not be deterred by a dream. When morning broke, I focused on my love of flying and a repeat of Mama's words to get me to the crew room.

Seated beside me was a senior pilot, an aviator in whose skills I had supreme confidence. My squadron commander had agreed to pair me with an experienced pilot who could take control if the need arose. To my surprise, all the squadron's pilots and support personnel were there to wish me well and see me off.

My nerves reminded me of the hour before my first solo flight–a mild case of butterflies. There was a great difference in how I felt climbing into the cockpit for my first sortie in a while over enemy territory, compared to shuttling a C-47 from the coast of Vietnam to Taipei by way of Hong Kong. It was then that my case of butterflies went from mild to severe, for my video of the burning plane hit the start button–again. In anticipation of enemy ground fire, that blasted tape sent my angst from high to higher. Thankfully, by the time we were halfway through the preflight checklist; I had calmed down and was feeling at home again in the cockpit.

Taxiing the C-47 toward runway 17R for my first post-disaster combat mission and hearing the staccato rhythm of her engines, I found myself nodding my head. I had just confirmed for myself that flying would indeed remain my life's work. There was a familiar tingle of anticipation in my spine when in my headphones I heard the tower say: "Paper Tiger Two-One, you're cleared for takeoff on one-seven Romeo."



Carl Gamble, a premier airline pilot, has penned a remarkable memoir, a powerful story about his journey from the cotton fields of Madison County, Alabama, to the captain's seat flying jumbo jets between North America and Europe. While in grade school, Gamble was inspired by Air Force jet fighters flying over Madison and his dream to become a pilot was born. Gamble's hard and focused work overcame an inauspicious start studying aviation at Tennessee State University, a necessary stepping stone toward a flying career for African Americans of small means in the 1960s.

Gamble was awarded the Air Force's coveted Distinguished Flying Cross. His quick thinking and superior flying skills enabled him to land his C-47, severely disabled by enemy antiaircraft fire, and save the lives of his crew in Vietnam.

My Blue Yonder tells Gamble's story by taking you to his boyhood home, into the cockpit of his burning airplane, and into his PTSD. You fly with him to rescue men adrift on an ice floe in Lake Superior, refuel combat aircraft at four hundred miles per hour over the Gulf of Tonkin, and negotiate with a hijacker while flying in a holding pattern off the coast of Florida...

My Blue Yonder