

A rescue helicopter is launched to save a downed aircrew over Vietnam. One crew member is rescued, but the Pararescue Jumper is captured! This story chronicles the daring rescue, the apparent disaster, and the multi-service effort to save the captured airman.

Perfect Day - The Last Misty

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/4379.html?s=pdf>

Perfect Day
The Last Misty

by
Lee Rand

Silent Steel Series
Volume One

Copyright © 2009 Lee Rand

First Edition

ISBN 978-1-60145-918-3

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.

Printed in the United States of America.

Perfect Day - The Last Misty is a work of historical fiction. Most of the main characters are fictional while some of the supporting characters are as they were historically within their actual units or commands. The main characters and the events are fictitious, and any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental, and not intended by the author. The story is used as a means to highlight many true-life heroes from the Vietnam War, and their names are presented as found in the public record. Their names will appear in the Memorial at the conclusion of the story. The postscript will also identify the supporting characters in their true roles or as known by the author.

Perfect Day - The Last Misty contains descriptions of a graphic nature concerning physical injuries and treatments for those injuries. Nothing in this work is or should be considered, or used as a substitute for, medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. The characters and their methods of treatment do not constitute the practice of any medical, nursing or other professional health care. Never disregard, avoid or delay in obtaining medical advice from your doctor or qualified health care provider because of something you have read in this story.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2009

A portion of the proceeds from the sale of this work will be donated by the author to the following Vietnam and veteran advocacy groups:

Vietnam Veterans Association
Air Force Association
Military Chaplains Association
National Congress of Vietnamese Americans
The Montagnard Foundation

Thank you for supporting our veterans and these organizations!

The author may be contacted at: **RLeeRand61@gmail.com**

Chapter Overview

Foreword.....	xiii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Mission Ready.....	1
Chapter Two: The Cool of the Evening.....	30
Chapter Three: Called.....	56
Chapter Four: The Heat of the Day.....	79
Chapter Five: Inferno.....	101
Chapter Six: Service.....	137
Chapter Seven: Fortitude.....	157
Chapter Eight: Endurance.....	176
Chapter Nine: Persistence.....	206
Chapter Ten: Prudence.....	231

Chapter Eleven:	
Humility.....	252
Chapter Twelve:	
Bright Light.....	270
Chapter Thirteen:	
To Die for One's Friend's.....	293
Chapter Fourteen:	
Patience.....	311
Memorial.....	331
Postscript.....	333
Postscript Photo Gallery.....	339
Vietnam Memorial Wall Positions.....	349
Glossary.....	351
Maps.....	358

Chapter One

Mission Ready

Michael was eager to toss his military issue shovel next to the dusty-red and sun-drenched sidewall of the 37th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron PJ barracks. Michael was also a PJ, or Pararescue Jumper. The PJs and their fellow crew members - along with support staff - were part of the Air Rescue and Recovery Service. These daring rescue rangers rode upon workhorses with names like "Jolly Green Giants," "Pedros," and "Super Jolly Green Giants," and were legendary in Vietnam for their bravery and skill in coming to the aid of aircrew members shot down or forced from their aircraft due to battle damage or system failure. A large painted sign depicting the "Jolly Green Giant" of food marketing fame stood in front of the 37th Operations building and said it all:

"Fighter pilots have no fear - The Jolly Green Giants are always near!"

The PJs specifically had a treacherous task, for it fell to them - when needed - to leave the confines of their flying stallions - often under enemy fire - ride a hoist down through the thick jungle canopies of Southeast Asia, locate an injured airman, give first aid, then secure them both for the two-hundred foot hoist ride back to the helicopter. For this reason, PJs in particular and rescue service crews in general were some of the highest decorated individuals and units of the Vietnam War. As the youngest and newest PJ on

station, Michael quickly became a "little brother" to his fellow PJs - each with a unique specialty to teach their young charge. Some of those specialties were not exactly in accordance with Air Force training manuals: mixing drinks, "carrier landings" on bar tables, Reconnaissance-Commando training (something the Army did), collecting Russian and Chinese weapons or lessons on how to win a knife fight. However, Michael was proud of his maroon PJ beret, proud of the vital mission his fellow PJs and the rescue service performed and proud to be serving his country, so he took the unorthodox lessons in stride, enjoying the social activities and hoping that the additional training would never be required. Besides, his tall frame and lean constitution made him better at mixing drinks than consuming them.

As Michael set his worn olive-colored shovel into the dry red clay which passed for Vietnamese soil, the sweat stained handle lazily slid to one side and came to rest against a rust-faded wire cage with no apparent protest from its occupant, "Stretch." Stretch was a 10-foot Indian Rock python and unit mascot caged outside the PJ hooch - laying contentedly in the heat of the late morning sun. As if to accentuate the lack of enthusiasm for his visitor, Stretch managed to casually view Michael with only one of his deep black eyes.

"I know how you feel..." said Michael as he kneeled down and peered into the warm, sun-baked cage with its contented occupant.

"...but you just have to lay on that dirt, I had to shovel it by the bagful!" he finished.

Michael had just spent the last few hours filling sandbags as part of a base detail. This workout was not some "new guy" ritual, but a detail he had volunteered for and one that Master Sergeant Milton "Bones" Barnwell, PJ

Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge, was all too happy to give him since nobody else seemed eager for the work. Da Nang Airbase, Republic of Vietnam (RVN), was known to servicemen as "Rocket City" due to its frequent nightly mortar attacks. The base was located in the northern part of South Vietnam and along the shore of the South China Sea. Its proximity to North Vietnam and the vital role it played in South Vietnam's defense made it a favorite target for Communist insurgents and the North Vietnamese Army, or NVA. It was also massive - comprising units from all branches of the United States' and RVN armed forces. In the daylight hours, aircraft, personnel, and vehicles moved around like bees in a fortified hive, but as darkness set; the still working bees assumed a defensive posture for the almost nightly mortar attacks. Vietnam soon proved to Michael that it was not like his Uncle Joseph's World War II. Vietnam was not a war of lines - with the enemy "there" and the good guys "here." Vietnam was a war of circles and ever changing shades of concentration - with the enemy "cast" including semi-organized units sympathetic to the Communist and hence, North Vietnamese, cause up to and including highly trained and organized NVA troops. This "theater" of war employed selected cast members moving to center stage for their roles, then retreating in an endless shift of scenes. Sometimes, the scene was set for Rocket City, sometimes it wasn't.

Michael had just returned from jungle survival school in the Philippines - officially know as "JEST" for "Jungle Evasion and Survival Training" - and unofficially known to its students as "snake school" for obvious and forgetful reasons. He would not be fully mission capable without attending and he should have gone before arriving in Vietnam, but there was a war on, and the bureaucracy at Seventh Air Force and the Third Aerospace Rescue and

Recovery Group in Saigon missed it. In true military tradition, blame rolled downhill, and was placed at the feet of Sergeant Barnwell, so Michael was merrily shipped off to Manila for five days of taste testing Southeast Asia's strangest foods and slapping the largest mosquitoes he had ever seen.

Michael returned from snake school via Cam Ranh Air Base before sunset last night, heading straight to his bunk and side stepping a social call at the "Jolly Green Inn" - the bar maintained by the 37th PJs. He should have gone anyway - within a few hours, he would stumble to a nearby shelter for the center stage mortar attack and stumble back to bed - resulting in a long but fit-filled night's sleep. The attack served to remind Michael of his commitment to Sergeant Barnwell so, just past sunrise, he left a note on the scheduling board announcing his return and slipped out to join the base detail in the continuous non-drama of filling sandbags.

A certain cynical irony occurred to Michael as he prepared to leave Stretch to care for his worn shovel. On the other side of the large cage where the ten-foot mascot was happily sunning himself was a cache of contraband weapons, ammo, and explosives which, if ever hit by the "golden-BB" of a nighttime mortar, would light-up Da Nang for days to come! All soldiers knew of the "golden-BB" concept - a military version of "God's time for you." Somewhere out there exists a bullet, bomb, mine, shell, or grenade with YOUR name on it and - if it is your time to depart this temporal world for Eternity - no amount of jinking, bobbing, or weaving would stop the "golden-BB" from finding its target. The intersection of "God's time for you" and earthly reality met for many unfortunate soldiers at a point called the "golden-BB." It was long known that among the PJ cadre at Da Nang and elsewhere were "weapons experts" who, in a never ending quest to defend themselves

and the airmen they were sent to rescue, collected a large assortment of contraband weapons for potential use in combat, marksmanship training, or spicing up an, otherwise, dull day. The 37th PJ hooch would make Fort Apache look like a candy store. These weapons included an assortment of grenade launchers, fifty caliber machine guns, a couple of 7.62 mm M-60 machine guns, various 9 mm "Swedish K" guns, AK-47s, claymore mines, hand grenades... well, the list is long. The PJs were reluctant to give up the vast majority of their "stash" despite pressure from the base Security Police Detachment and any number of commanders. The 37th Commanders knew of the weapons and instituted "amnesty" programs to clear it up, but the weapons stash managed to remain intact. Under the banner of "if you can't stand the answer, don't ask the question," the PJs held standing orders to keep whatever weapons remained under lock and out of sight or there would be hell to pay. Michael knew just one "golden-BB" mortar on the PJ hooch and hell would visit the 37th fast! He contented himself with the thought that maybe some of those sandbags he filled might save his neck or those of his fellow PJs. With duties complete, a clear afternoon schedule, and some time to sack out under the warm Vietnamese sun, Michael headed to the chow hall and another perfect day.

Tom was eating breakfast in the Officer's Mess when Jerry pulled a chair and cussed as he spilled his coffee.

"Hey, I'm flying with senior management..." said Jerry. "...they look good on you!" he added, referring to Tom's new Lt. Colonel insignia as he

licked hot coffee from his fingers and settled into his chair. Then, as if it just occurred to him, Jerry said, "I don't have to say sir all the time... do I, Sir?"

"Morning Jerry - you call me sir again, I'll deck ya..." said Tom.

Returning to his eggs, he added, "...and I had nothing to do with that lame backside of a package we drew today, so don't start."

Thomas Spenser Elliott was a new Lt. Colonel, an 'ol man in the Commando Sabre unit and, within a few weeks, due at his new assignment - flying a dreaded *desk* - in a dreaded *office* at Eglin AFB, Florida. Happily for Tom there would be no desk and plenty of action today, despite the short mission. Major Jerry Taylor was the pilot scheduled to be Tom's backseater - working the "pit" as they called it - for that short mission. Both men were members of an elite and small group of pilots called "Mistys." It was their call sign and signified to other aircrews their mission as Forward Air Controllers, or FACs. By 1970, the Mistys flew as part of the 31st Tactical Fighter Wing, Tuy Hoa Airbase, RVN - about 250 miles "down the beach" from Da Nang. They were known as "fast FACs" to differentiate them from the "slow FACs" in propeller-driven O-1 Bird Dogs, O-2 Skymasters, and OV-10 Broncos.

Fast or slow - the FAC job was one of the most challenging and dangerous in the air war over Vietnam. As the name implies, a FAC controls air assets in an attempt to increase the effectiveness of air units fighting the war in Southeast Asia. "Effectiveness" is a military euphemism for killing troops and destroying equipment to reduce the enemy's ability to wage war. If there were an air mission in North or South Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia, chances were high that a FAC was "working the job." Not only were FAC pilots very familiar with the terrain and suspected enemy infiltration points, they also knew the enemy weapons they were up against, having usually been

shot at first before a target could be marked and an attack initiated. As the U.S. Air Force's aerial "directors" in Vietnam's air combat operations, it was no secret the NVA hated all FACs with a passion and considered them prized kills. Small single-pilot O-1 Bird Dogs and O-2 Skymasters were used in the early days of the conflict - flying just above the jungle canopy and working to spot troop movements, camps, supply depots, or just "trolling" to entice the enemy to shoot at them. Once an enemy position was spotted, an attack could be coordinated with waiting fighter aircraft, the target marked with White Phosphorous rockets, or "willie pete," and removed. No doubt about it - the FACs were brave, cool under fire, and very effective. However, their loss rates were high and continued to mount.

As North Vietnamese weapons grew deadlier, with better accuracy and greater firepower, the Air Force looked to faster jets as a means to continue the FAC role but stem the losses. Enter the F-100F Super Sabre. The "F" model was a two-seat version of the single seat F-100D model. The "Hun," as she was known, was the first in a line of "Century-series" fighters produced for the Air Force in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The "Century" part was due to their numbering in the low 100s (100, 101, 102 105...). The F-100F brought speed, maneuverability, and greater range to the FAC job. With a cruise speed of 580 knots or 600+ mph on the deck, she could cover ground the slow FACs could only dream of. This increase in speed helped keep the Mistys out of harm's way but also decreased the ability of the pilot to locate targets; hence, the two-seat "F" version. The pilot in front flew the aircraft while the second pilot, nicknamed the GIB or "Guy in Back," worked the pit and completed the FAC mission - including photo reconnaissance, target mapping, directing fighter strikes, and working the strike radios. All this

taking place while the pilot in front constantly jinked the aircraft in a random pattern to avoid being blown from the sky by anti-aircraft artillery, or AAA, and Surface-to-Air Missiles, or SAMs. Not every Air Force pilot would dare consider being a FAC and many thought the job a "death-wish" assignment. Tom, however, loved it and he was happy to be "in the hunt" and not stuck in a dead end desk job somewhere. Although he knew that a desk was waiting, he could take solace in today's mission and enjoy his last weeks in the company of such a close and tight-knit group of veteran combat pilots. Popular or not, the job was vital to the air effort and fellow Air Force, Army, and Navy air crews throughout Vietnam were indebted to the FACs - slow or fast - for their incredible exploits.

Today, Lt. Colonel Elliott and Major Taylor would comprise one of four Commando Sabre missions on the scheduling board, mission number CS700403A-8R-1Y-4, tail# 837, with an 0800 launch time. The mission number told Tom - in jargon only a military scheduler could love - that he and Jerry would be the first (A) Commando Sabre (CS) sortie of the day (3rd day, 4th month in 1970), Oscar Eight AO (Area of Operations) and random (8R), one air refueling scheduled in Yankee track (1Y), for an approximately four-hour mission - a short trip by Misty standards. Their briefing had them assigned to work Areas 611 and 609, both south of Route Pack One where the Mistys usually flew.

"Hell, why don't they give me a cane and a golf cart to get to the jet," thought Tom on his way to breakfast.

Everything seemed to be reminding Tom he was turning the page on a new chapter in his life, and he was not looking forward to it. If that was not bad enough, preparing for the change in jobs and scenery had the effect on

Tom of looking back on where he had come from and where life was taking him. "Reflection" is the word most often associated with such thinking and reflection was not something Tom had any time for. Always looking ahead, always eager for the next flight, next assignment, next task, next anything as long as it did not include looking back. His tour in Vietnam gave him just enough time to unpleasantly reflect on his relationship with his two daughters back home living with their mother in Georgia. Tom and their mother divorced years earlier, and he had little to do with their lives while growing up. Their mother had remarried, and the girls seemed happy being lost in the Sixties. Even with repeated attempts at contact through his letters home, little changed. Despite the new silver oak leaves he had on his shoulders, Tom grew another pay grade older, another year slower, and a lot less eager to look forward to the next challenge in his life. "Senior management" was not far from "Senior citizen" to Tom and the fighter game was for the young turks. Tom swallowed the daunting prospect of returning to the states and disappearing in a no-name job, doing no-name work for some no-name project, then retiring in four years to civilian life and running his family's lumber yard in Ohio, and only then if his younger brothers were willing to cut him a piece of that lame action.

"Just shoot me now, Lord," Tom remembered saying as he dropped his plate on the tray - not paying attention to the perplexed look from the tiny Vietnamese server.

Referring to the latest rendition of the "Tom and Jerry" show, Jerry said, "Look at it this way - we'll be back drinking Sing Ha or French 75s by dinner!"

This elicited little from Tom except a sly smile. Drinking was a great diversion for Tom and served to keep that reflection stuff at arms length.

"You always win," said Tom, referring to the "dollar game" pilots played at the bar - the loser buying the next round.

"Sing Ha" was the local Vietnamese beer and "French 75s" were a deadly concoction of brandy and cheap champagne - guaranteed to leave even the most battle-hardened drinker with a bruising hangover. The eggs and coffee did plenty to relieve any hangover Tom might have had, but the delayed launch of their mission was giving him an uneasy feeling of impending reflection again. Jerry broke into Tom's thoughts by reminding him of that mission, delayed nonetheless.

"Ops has us planned for a noon takeoff now - the fog must be lifting," said Jerry, knowing Tom already knew this.

"Area Six-Eleven has become hotter than hell lately - something big must be going on there... we know the Reds are staging for another move into the Highlands," Jerry continued.

"The little bastards keep trying, don't they?" added Tom. Jerry, sensing the rise in Tom's response, continued.

"Yea - too bad we're gonna blow the crap outta their supply depots and spoil the fun!"

"Shame on us..." said Tom with a sly smile - finishing his cup of coffee as he broke away from the table and headed to Ops and another look at the weather.

Jerry knew Tom's mood brightened just thinking of the flight. He knew Tom well from their previous assignment flying the Hun at Luke AFB, Arizona. Jerry knew Tom was the best the Air Force had while strapped to a

fighter, but distant when away from the cockpit, and he wished things were different for him and his daughters. Jerry then thought of his own family - his wife, their son, Jerry Jr., and two daughters. As if reading Jerry's thoughts, Tom turned from the Officer's Mess door and inquired of Jerry.

"Didn't your boy have a birthday recently?"

"Yea, number twelve," Jerry replied. He too was caught in a moment of reflection.

"Pretty soon he'll be booting our tired butts from the jet - tell him to hurry so he can save us from ourselves..." Tom chuckled, wishing he could apply the words to a son of his own.

"...I'll see ya in Ops," Tom continued. Jerry now replied through his own distant stare.

"Give the word boss, I'm ready," said Jerry - himself now anxious to launch and escape the growing thoughts of home.

The radios within Command and Control - Central came to life like a preset alarm clock as the sun rose on the fog-shrouded horizon. The morning situation report, or sit-rep, from Reconnaissance Team (RT) Texas was a positive one. Command and Control - Central, or CCC, was located in the small South Vietnamese hamlet of Kontum, in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam - north of Tuy Hoa, south of Da Nang, and 75 miles from the coast. The long and sinewy coasts of North and South Vietnam formed a large and lazily shaped letter "S" with the demilitarized zone, or DMZ, cutting across the middle. As you follow the lower part of the letter, Da Nang will come just

south of the DMZ with Tuy Hoa further along the lower curve. To find Kontum, you must depart Da Nang due south for just over 100 miles, cutting down through the figure. This flattened triangle formed by drawing a line between Da Nang, Kontum, and Tuy Hoa points to the west of Kontum and highlights the stage upon which the cast members and scenes will come forth in this early Spring drama. As with any positive sit-rep, RT Texas' call was welcomed by CCC command personnel. The Ho Chi Minh Trail was becoming increasingly hazardous for their reconnaissance teams. The trail, named for North Vietnam's Communist leader, was not really a trail, but a series of jungle shrouded roads, trails, waterways, and bike paths used by the resourceful North Vietnamese to funnel the troops and equipment needed to wage war on the Vietnamese people in the South. The trail stretches hundreds of miles along the backside of North and South Vietnam, mocking the graceful curves of the coast and sending abrupt sallies forth to menace the valleys of South Vietnam. With the successful U.S. blockade of Communist ships carrying war material from the north to Cambodia, the only remaining "avenue" for supplying the demands of war fell to the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Had America's resolve to block or eliminate this primitive "super-highway" of war-torn Southeast Asia been greater or at least more effective, the Communist insurgency of the south would have ground to a halt in a matter of months. The North Vietnamese, however, were quick to exploit any weakness in American doctrine and shrewd enough to manipulate politics and terrain to their advantage, thus securing a continuous supply chain. Despite repeated attempts by U.S., South Vietnam, and allied forces to stem the flow of the Communist's instruments of war, the flow continued and eventually became a hemorrhage following the pull out of U.S. and allied forces in 1973 - leading

to the bloody death of a free nation. Military planners rightfully saw the Ho Chi Minh Trail as a target of absolute importance to the war effort, but equally disturbing was the fact that most of the trail was officially "off-limits." Why? Because the trail lies within neighboring Laos and Cambodia - each dealing with their own problems and policies. Covertly, planners and administrations recognized this dilemma and attempted to stem the flow, but the trail, and, ultimately the will of Ho Chi Minh and his followers, proved too great. Ironically, Ho Chi Minh himself would not live to see "his" trail bring about victory, having died in 1969.

CCC was the controlling agency for a series of ultra-secret United States Special Forces (USSF) reconnaissance teams with between five and fifteen members each and given code names after various states back home. Further north, USSF teams came under the control of CCN for Command and Control - North and, in like manner, the southern contingent, CCS. Twenty-four hours earlier, RT Texas was inserted quickly and quietly, via assault helicopter, into the mountainous jungles along the Cambodian - Laos - South Vietnam tri-border area with the assistance of an Air Force "Covey" FAC and a Special Forces rider in the backseat to watch for trouble from their birds-eye perch. The team and their command and control support were parts of a larger reconnaissance operation throughout the war in Southeast Asia known as OPS-35 and administratively nestled within the Military Assistance Command - Vietnam, or MACV, and its classified Special Forces-run "Studies and Observations Group," or SOG. By 1970, the U. S. Special Forces had come to treat the jungles of Vietnam much like home. In the early years, they were seen by then-President Kennedy as the "magic weapon" by which the United States could fight a series of small, covert, and isolated incidents in

what appeared to be a future of sustained conflict between the free world and its Communist aggressors. Those assigned for such service and the attendant duties in the USSF and SOG were not your average ground troops - these men were bearers of the green beret and popularized by song, books, and their own John Wayne movie. These highly motivated soldiers worked in a variety of clandestine agencies, all covertly shrouded within MACV-SOG. Their specialties included photo reconnaissance, foreign languages, enemy tactics, munitions, demolition, communications, sensor placement, wire tapping - even advanced field medicine. Their missions were anything but the routine "drop - contact - fight" scenarios the standard U.S. Army troops saw in Vietnam - although fighting and dying in any combat should never be seen as "routine."

The reconnaissance team's greatest asset, due to its small size and limited firepower, was stealth - to complete the mission without the enemy ever knowing they were there. Lethally skilled as they were, reconnaissance teams were not prepared to slug it out with large concentrations of NVA. That is why the positive sit-rep coming from RT Texas at 0600 this morning was a relief. Because of this crucial need for stealth, the first hour, followed by the next twelve and, finally, the first twenty-four, were crucial. The NVA aggressively attempted to destroy any reconnaissance teams they spotted and developed specialized counter-reconnaissance "hunter-killer" teams employing dogs, squads of troops, and plenty of firepower to find and eliminate them. If the team made contact with the enemy within those first crucial hours, chances were slim they could be retrieved without losses, let alone complete their assigned reconnaissance tasks. If the first hour went quietly, good - the team proceeded to the AO, or Area of Operations. If the

first several hours of "humping" - a slang term for the trek through the jungle - went without contact, chances were high the insert went unobserved by the NVA. This AM sit-rep - with the calm and confident voice of Sergeant Ray "Tubby" Tubbs, RT Texas' radio operator, announcing a mission ready "good day" - told CCC all was proceeding as planned.

RT Texas was operating under the low-key and unassuming mission package entitled "Salem House 7004A" and carried the approval signatures of everyone in the command chain from the President of the United States through the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of State, various ambassadors, the Commander of the U.S. Navy's Pacific Command and, finally, the Commander of MACV. Given the chain of approval for these "ultra-secret" missions, how stealth was maintained for any of them was a miracle in itself. This team was comprised of three USSF troops and six indigenous troops or "indigs" from the Montagnard Jarai and Sedang tribes.

To any Special Forces soldier who placed his polished-dull and dusty "Bata" boots in Vietnam, the mention of the name "Montagnard" conjures a vast sea of images and emotions. The word "Montagnard" is a French compound word for "Mountain-person." As the name implies, the Montagnards make their homes in the mountainous jungle areas in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Most Americans know little about our closest "pseudo-Vietnamese" allies from the Vietnam War - many no doubt - know absolutely nothing. The Montagnard name was shortened by USSF troops into "yard" or "yards" early in our involvement in Southeast Asia. The name "yard" is in no way derogatory or just shorthand slang, but a term of admiration. The yard name was said with friendship and respect among the men of the green beret. The yards fought alongside and for

the USSF soldiers and their contributions in the cause of freedom cry out to be recognized. The yards did have their peculiarities and could be both exasperating and hilarious - at the same time - to live and work with. Some Special Forces troops could never get comfortable with yards and their ways and attempted to remain focused on the job at hand, although still appreciating their contributions in a war the yards did not ask for.

The Montagnards are predominantly a nomadic and primitive people who practice simple agriculture and utilize the jungles as their "supermarket." They tend to remain in small groups or tribes with such names as Jarai, Rhade, Koho, Sedang, Bru, Bahnar, and Raglai - each living within a particular geographic region of the Highlands. It is important to note that the yards were the first inhabitants of Southeast Asia, not the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese traveled south from China centuries earlier but are really the new neighbors who just moved in as far as the Montagnards are concerned. Co-habitation between the two remained peaceful through the centuries because of geography - the Vietnamese were the "people of the valley or lowlands," and the yards were the "people of the Highlands." As the Vietnamese population grew, so did tensions. In the 1950s, South Vietnamese President Diem attempted a series of movements with Vietnamese settlers into the Highlands and little has been quiet since. The Montagnard people are not "Vietnamese" people who live in the mountains. In physical features and skin tone, they are more Polynesian than their Vietnamese, Cambodian or Laotian neighbors.

Ethnic characteristics are only a start to the differences between the yards and the Vietnamese. As stated, the yards are a simple and primitive agricultural people. They harbor little interest in modern society with its

industrialized, mechanized, and educated world of plastic, concrete, and steel. There is a world of the jungle and its inhabitants, its good and bad spirits, good and bad plants, good and bad animals. In this simple "black and white" Montagnard world, there is little room for any middle ground. The Vietnamese, like their Chinese cousins, have preferred to move along with civilization - embracing modern cities, roads and transportation, schools and businesses - with the conveniences that modernity brings.

The Montagnard people bring their dualistic black and white view to interpersonal relationships as well. To the yards, you are either a friend or an enemy. When the Americans arrived, they reminded the yards of the French military and the Jesuit Missionaries who came before them. The missionaries were kind and generous to the Montagnard people, and the yards remembered them and their works, aptly placing them in the "good" camp of their dualistic world. The Americans, and especially the Special Forces soldiers, were quickly viewed in much the same way and their friendship blossomed. In the earlier years of America's involvement in Southeast Asia, the Vietnamese Communists, or "Viet Cong" - shortened to "VC" or just "Charlie" - only added to the poor relationship between the Montagnards and the Vietnamese. The VC were eager to exploit the Highlands as sanctuaries in the guerrilla war against their fellow neighbors throughout the south, and utilized terror as a means to subjugate or eliminate the Montagnard people. Countless numbers of Montagnard people and their villages were slaughtered in the ruthless quest to subjugate a people under a totalitarian ideology. If ever a people could be labeled as innocents in a conflict, the Montagnard people would make the "top ten" list. The yards were caught in a struggle between the free Vietnamese and the Communist Vietnamese and paid the price in the ensuing

carnage. As the presence of the Special Forces grew in Southeast Asia, so did their relationship with the Montagnard people. Thousands of homeless or orphaned men, women, and children were cared for by the USSF and a few courageous civilians like Dr. Pat Smith - their doctor, or "Bac si." Montagnard men volunteered to fight against those who murdered their families and destroyed their way of life. As politics would have it, the government of South Vietnam remained indifferent to their plight and somewhat indifferent to their new-found allies in the mountains and preferred to shuffle them off to their American Special Forces friends. In reality, this indifference was providential - tensions between the "valley people" and the "mountain people" would be a natural obstacle. However, even with the official government indifference, those among the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or ARVN, and its excellent Ranger battalions, did appreciate and respect the yards for their courage and contributions on behalf of a free Vietnam.

The command structure in Vietnam utilized their yard friends militarily by forming the CIDG, or Central Indigenous Defense Group, and establishing battalions of Montagnard men to provide defense of villages and strategic military positions within the Central Highlands. The task of leading, training, and deploying these indigenous troops was naturally given to the Special Forces of MACV-SOG. It is important to recall that, despite support from then-President Kennedy early in the war, many high ranking officials within the military and the Department of Defense did not come to the same conclusions about the efficacy or operational effectiveness of the Special Forces in Vietnam. In fact, given inter- and intra-service rivalries and old fashioned jealousy over the popular image of the green berets, many in the command structure were downright hostile to Special Forces contributions.

None of this hostility was lost on the Special Forces; hence, the relationship between the Montagnards and their American brothers strengthened by this "ugly-stepchild" treatment. Both the yards and the Special Forces troops recognized their need to take care of one another because no one else seemed interested.

Many Vietnam-era Special Forces soldiers can relate to the often humorous complexities surrounding the relationship with their yard friends. For instance, the yards grasp of English was minimal at best and led to the use of simple nicknames for team members. Try as they might, some American names were virtually impossible for the yards to articulate, so short and easy to pronounce nicknames - many ending in "y" or "ie" like Sonny, Brownie, or Sammy - became the order of the day. Still, their English was better than the American's Montagnard, so the nicknames - liked or not - stuck.

Although many Americans would be tempted to think of the Montagnards in a way similar to the American Indians of the United States, the temptation ceased abruptly when our troops got to know their Montagnard counterparts. Simply put, the yards working with the Special Forces considered themselves Cowboys - not Indians. Why? Because John Wayne was a cowboy, not an Indian. As the yards were trained, they were placed with American Special Forces troops at various bases and outposts throughout the Central Highlands and every unit in Vietnam showed old movies for entertainment and recreation - especially old western movies. Due to their dualistic black-white, good-bad, friend-foe natures, the yards did not comprehend the make-believe world of Hollywood movies. Things in their world were real if they could see, taste, or touch them so, when the "bad" guys started shooting in the movies, the yards shot back - often destroying

equipment and sending troops scurrying for cover! In their childlike view of the world, they were simply helping defend the "good" guys from the "bad." Commanders issued "no-firearms" policies or came up with ways to protect the movie screens, such as using bed sheets or wooden boards painted white, with marginal success. However, the term "childlike" is not an insult when referring to the yards. Although fierce fighters when they needed to be, their world - before the complexities and carnage of war destroyed it - was simple and uncomplicated. In the movies, John Wayne was a cowboy. Cowboys are good, yards are good; therefore, yards are cowboys. Once the movie *The Green Berets* debuted, John Wayne was not only a cowboy, he actually became an adopted Montagnard by being accepted into the Rhade tribe via full ceremony and the wearing of the brass bracelet with Rhade markings on it. "The Duke" wore that bracelet the rest of his life. Initially, Hollywood publicists attempted to downplay the Montagnard origins of the bracelet fearing a less than sympathetic movie-watching public. "The Duke" didn't care - he knew and the Montagnards knew. The bracelet could be seen on-screen several times in his later movies. It is even rumored he was buried with the bracelet, although his son, Patrick, could not confirm the fact. In summation: "The Duke" was a cowboy - "The Duke" was a Montagnard - the Montagnards are cowboys. Case closed.

By far, the one highly unique characteristic of the yards and, hence, their greatest contribution to defending South Vietnam, came in their ability to utilize their jungle surroundings to their advantage. The jungle was home to the yards and, in their home, everything has its place. Every bug, plant, animal, rock, or tree could be utilized for food, medicine, or information. The smart Special Forces troops learned of this ability quickly and many lived to

return home because of it. To the yards, everything in the jungle and the larger world "beyond the river" had a spirit dwelling within - including inanimate objects. Because of this belief, there were dos and do nots in the jungle with both good and bad consequences. The yards operated here with a legendary ability to decode the sights, sounds, and smells of the jungle. They were trackers of immense ability - often deciding on a course of action by tasting or smelling a few leaves and studying rocks, logs, or twigs scattered about them. Many Special Forces soldiers owe their lives to this seemingly incoherent discernment of the world around them. Special Forces jungle training was very good for the troops working in Southeast Asia, but that was also a problem, it was training. To the yards, these jungle traits were as natural as breathing and only a civilized Westerner would attend a course on breathing. The yards were also quick to avoid offending "good" spirits with some taboo, such as urinating on a "good" plant or killing a particular animal. This outlook also played a part in the yard's view of organized religion - open to most forms of faith although rarely embracing any. The world spoke for itself according to the yards - revealing all the inherent "goodness" the creator wished to reveal. Their job was to be docile to the Spirit and discern the "good" from the "bad." As for their current task, the yards of RT Texas would forgo this temporary onslaught of "bad" to preserve what would hopefully be left of their "good" world.

RT Texas was under the command of 1st Lieutenant Thomas "Colt" Colter, a veteran Special Forces soldier on his second Southeast Asia tour but new to RT Texas - having replaced 1st Lieutenant Antonio Cruz - who rotated stateside the previous month. Lieutenant Colter was referred to as the Team Leader or "1-0" in Army jargon. The "1-1," or assistant lead position, was

filled by a true gem in Special Forces circles. Calm in a firefight, hilarious in a bar, quick on his feet, and a favorite among the yards was Staff Sergeant Jesse "Slipper" Romero, the pride of Dallas, Texas. Nobody knew where the odd nickname "Slipper" came from, but Colt figured with enough tequila he and Tubby would find out before Sergeant Romero shipped back stateside. Speaking of oddities, "Slip" made it his own private mission to teach the yards Spanish as well - something Colt, and Lieutenant Cruz before him, discouraged. The yards have a hard enough time with English. The "lessons" did provide the camp with some comic relief though - listening to the yards say "bueno," "mucho gusto," or "cerveza" was a riot. Sergeant Romero, like his best friend and former team leader, Lieutenant Cruz, was due to rotate back home in July after his third tour in the jungles of "Nam." Both Lieutenant Cruz and Sergeant Romero would be together again as training cadre at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. Both fighting - not the enemy - but the boredom of not being in contact with the enemy or right under their noses and the adrenalin rush that such missions produce. For now, Sergeant Romero kept his eyes intently upon Lieutenant Colter - watching his every move and ready to assist when needed. Colt did not really need watching - in the USSF, everyone knows everyone, including the yards. Lieutenant Colter was a top troop and one hell of a soldier. Oddly, he came from a family of war protesting accountants in Seattle, "so what the hell do they know..." as Sergeant Romero would poetically put it. The U.S. Army contingent of this team was rounded-out by the "1-2," Sergeant Ray "Tubby" Tubbs, our radio operator with the earlier mission ready sit-rep. In ways of the world only God could explain, Sergeant Tubbs was on his way to medical school in his hometown of Chicago this coming fall. How one can go from the U.S. Army

Special Forces ultra-secret reconnaissance teams in the jungles of Southeast Asia to the tedious academic politeness of medical school was beyond his fellow soldiers understanding - maybe he liked the field medical training a little too much. No matter, he was great with a gun and great working the radios - in that order.

The nickname of "Doc" would be a natural for the med school-bound Sergeant Tubbs; however, it was already taken by RT Texas' number two yard. Montagnard names were sometimes long and always difficult for Americans to pronounce. The verbal gymnastics between Special Forces troops and their yard friends were fair fights though because they could rarely pronounce our names. The distance between the two cultures and dialect nuances between the various yard tribes was too great. As usual, the troops improvised with nicknames, hand signals, and simple words of the four-letter variety to bridge the gap. The yard nicknames usually identified some characteristic about each individual and "Doc" was no exception. The yards did not know of or use most Western medicines in their primitive world, but relied on their surrounding jungle and rugged Highland limestone hills for cures to what ailed them. Many plants native to the Central Highlands of Vietnam had "good spirits" and Doc was the man to know. If someone in RT Texas needed medical attention short of major surgery, Doc would find a remedy. Amazingly, many of his concoctions did solve minor problems and, when these did not bring success, the Special Forces medical kit and field medical training took care of it. To the yards though, the medical kits were just "good" spirit plant or animal matter from "far away" - they had no interest in chemistry, pharmacology, or Western medical science. Judging from their success rate on the trail, they didn't need it and were content with smearing or

placing various plant and animal parts on their bodies in the quest to find relief, and the Special Forces commanders were smart enough to recognize this by placing a "Doc" on every team they could. Doc would be valuable in his own yard hamlet as well. However, the Viet Cong sadly took care of that by destroying his home and most of his family with it three years earlier.

The yards within each reconnaissance team had their own chain of command. At the top of the yard chain in RT Texas was "Smiley." Smiley was a veteran CIDG troop - having worked with the Special Forces for nearly five years. Just surviving the harsh realities of jungle warfare over such a period is a testament to his ability as a soldier and to the Montagnard version of Divine Providence. The yards working with the Special Forces were known to be intensely loyal and friendly - almost always having large smiles on their Polynesian-like faces. Smiley, however, turned his facial features into an art form. He smiled doing anything. The difference in a smile and a frown to Smiley was a slight variation in the upturn of his lips, and you could spot Smiley on a moonlit night just by looking for the light reflecting from his almost effervescent pearly-whites! This trait, although not uncommon among all yards, was so pervasive with Smiley that Lieutenant Colter, who was certainly familiar with the yards, had to accommodate his own senses to it during this first night in the jungle. Smiley's well-known trait and good natured personality did not get him yard-lead though. He earned this position as a skilled fighter, tactician, and tracker. Smiley's word was final among the yards in his command.

As skilled a tracker as Smiley proved to be, however, the yards and RT Texas relied on the tracking skills of the yard team's final distinguished member - Beauregard, or "Bo" - the human bloodhound. Bo was the youngest

of the yard lead members and a Special Forces veteran as well - joining when he was 15 or 16. He had a tracking sense in the jungles Americans would marvel at. Even by high Special Forces standards, Bo's ability to notice anything that was stepped on, urinated over, broken, brushed, or out of place was surreal. The yards in general were excellent trackers and hunters, having used these skills and their famous crossbows to feed their families before the Communists brought the war to them. Like Doc, Bo had nowhere else to go, being orphaned early in the war. To all USSF troops operating in Southeast Asia, the Montagnard soldiers were not just assigned personnel to be used for their unique abilities and discarded; they were fellow Special Forces brothers, blood brothers to most, and cherished by their U.S. Special Forces counterparts for their loyalty, skill, bravery, and friendship. They may not have shared a common language, but they shared far greater bonds few Special Forces troops will ever forget. Bo and Sergeant Romero were a prime example of this special relationship. To Slipper, Bo was thought of as his adopted little brother. The Montagnard contributions to U.S. efforts in Southeast Asia have gone mostly ignored and unappreciated by the media in the United States, and their service in the cause of freedom cost them and their families dearly. Such is left to the tender mercies of a just and loving God to rebalance the scales in eternity.

With only the brief transmission of the AM sit-rep emanating from RT Texas, the team returned to the stealth and dark silence of the jungle to complete the placement of sensors and reconnaissance duties outlined for their five-day mission - only coming to "life" on the whispers of their thrice daily sit-reps.

The cool and humid air of the chow hall brought a welcome chill to Michael's still overheated face and helped to douse him in the fresh reality of being back in familiar surroundings. Within seconds of his entry, the elevated sounds of guitar and the lyrics to Steppenwolf's *Born To Be Wild* began over the chow hall radio as if to announce his arrival and break into Michael's silent morning. Michael arrived at the 37th with the nickname "MG" - a name one of his tech school instructors christened him with after his first and middle names. The British MG "midget" sports car had been popular for the last few years, so the nickname was easily picked up by others - even if this "MG" would be too tall to fit in the small, European-styled car. To add a dash of flavor to this branding, the lyrics of "Born To Be Wild" began with the phrase "Get your motor running..." so the names Michael, MG, and "Born To Be Wild" seemed forever formed into one identity. Much to Michael's apparent indifference, the nickname followed him to Vietnam and was now announcing his return from snake school. Up to this point, Michael was so busy with the logistics of his return - coming on the heels of Easter Sunday and a two-day wait at Clark Airbase in the Philippines - he barely gave a thought to seeing his squadron mates despite being anxious to get back and complete his checkout. Michael sighed as he removed his maroon beret. Despite the notoriety of having his own theme music, he was not one for grand entrances. He slowed briefly at the worn wooden swinging doors and used the pause to wipe the rapidly cooling sweat from his forehead. He then pressed forward, hopeful that the crowd would be small and the Friday menu selection would distance his survival school memories.

The chow hall was quiet with only a few squadron staff eating an early lunch. MG was welcomed back by a small chorus and, before returning the greeting, Sergeant Weirstein, the 37th Administrative Non-Commissioned Officer, soloed the choral welcome with, "Ready to get ya motor running, MG?"

"Thanks, glad to be back," said Michael, knowing the re-christening would not take long. He glanced toward the chow line, giving a wave to Airmen First Class Hank Summers, the food technician running the line of Vietnamese servers.

"Where is everybody?" Michael continued in the direction of Sergeant Weirstein.

"You're early - grab a tray and get something before your fella PJ mongrels take it all!" said Sergeant Weirstein between bites and finishing with "Happy East'a" in his thick New York accent.

"Happy Easter, Rab," said Michael, referring to him by his nickname and perplexed as to why a Jew would remember the Christian Easter Season.

"I'll grab a tray," he continued.

"How were the snakes?" inquired Airman Summers, standing back from the flurry of tiny Vietnamese women preparing for the upcoming lunch assault. Michael shrugged his lanky shoulders, drew a sideways smile in a manner of sharing an inside joke, and said:

"Tasted like chicken."

Hank Summers was a short and shy young man with drooping shoulders and comely appearance - someone most personnel did not even notice, much less talk to. Michael saw this in Hank and befriended him, continuing a childhood habit. Despite Michael's tall and physically fit stature,

he knew how it felt to be an outcast from his own background and sensed this in Hank. Besides, they were both about the same age, same rank, and fellow Catholics, so they had many things in common.

"Got some fine mystery meat and veggies today, MG!" said Hank.

"Did you get to Easter Mass?" he quickly followed. Michael let out a large sigh.

"At the Cathedral in Manila - there must have been ten thousand people there, but I was so tired from school, I was happy to just stay awake!" said Michael.

He then produced an envelope from his pocket and retrieved a small colorful card and handed it to Hank over the steaming aluminum serving counter.

"An Easter present from my mother," said Michael - looking over his shoulder at the small chow hall crowd and knowing Hank would appreciate the gesture.

The card depicted a scene of angels carrying aloft a large ark, adorned with gold-embossed shields listing the Theological virtues: Faith, Hope, and Charity. The stern plate of the ark bore the Cardinal virtues: Prudence, Justice, Temperance, and Fortitude.

"My mother found it somewhere... guess she couldn't help herself," said Michael with another quick glance backward.

Hank caught the protective motion and silently understood. They both knew such an item would receive a chilly reception from most of his squadron mates and with derision or scorn from some. The scene depicted seemed to be submerged in a torrent of counter images within war-torn Vietnam, even to Michael. The spirit of the times - with religious apathy, the sexual revolution,

materialistic fulfillment, and his home country bitterly divided over an unpopular war made recalling one's faith difficult and living it to its fullness almost impossible. Soldiers seemed to cope with the stress and anxiety of war in one of two ways. Unable to "sit on the fence" - one is either drawn to deeper faith or repulsed in the opposite - cursing a God who would allow such a predicament. Each soldier had to find his way in this war of the heart - forward or backward - unable to remain at rest. The "Hound of Heaven" was in pursuit. Faced with this dilemma, most chose to drown the calling with a world full of diversions - heavy drinking, combat, gambling, sex - even anger - were temporary claims used to avoid the encounter. Michael had to find his own way as well, and the diversions were always at hand. Still, he loved his mother and was thankful she was there for him - through prayers, letters, and even such simple gestures.

Chapter Four

The Heat of the Day

Michael was in a deep sleep as he sunned himself on the roof of the 37th Operations shack. With the afternoon free, he could have walked to China Beach, where the scenery, both natural and human, would be more agreeable for a free afternoon in the sun. In the end, he chose to stay close and made a mental note to have one of his PJ buddies show him the complexities of walking South Vietnam's National Route One and negotiating its maddening traffic. With little sleep the night before, Michael easily fell into a deep slumber under the warm Vietnamese sun. His dream found him back in Tennessee with Uncle Joseph and the launch of yet another rocket. The time period in Michael's dream was in the present; however, his Uncle Joseph was still alive and much younger, perhaps as Michael remembered him when he was ten or eleven years old. Michael could feel the warmth of the midday sun against his face as he watched his uncle launch their vehicle skyward, creating a perfect arc toward the heavy pine forest nearby. In his dream, Michael was, at one and the same time, present for the launch, and in the woods attempting to retrieve their prized vehicle. He stood on one side of a narrow shelf of forest floor covered ankle deep in pine straw and decaying leaves. In direct opposition to its sun-basked launch, the rocket lay at rest among the leaves completely immersed in shadow. Michael repeatedly attempted to retrieve the rocket despite its resting only a few feet from him. Behind him at some distance was his uncle, cheering him on. In

front of him some twenty feet away, were Father O'Kielty and Marti, providing encouragement from their perspective. Michael's outstretched arm and long body strained mightily for the rocket despite his mysterious lack of mobility. He finally took a large deep breath, exhaled, and hyper extended his long, slender spine, shoulder, and arm to within an inch of his prize. As he continued his determined sally, his head turned skyward and toward the warm rays of sunlight faintly protruding through the dream-filled tree line.

"MG! Come-on man, wake up, MG!" Michael awoke to the abrupt and brusque shaking he was receiving from his PJ boss, Sergeant Bones Barnwell. The tree line dissolved, and Sergeant Barnwell's features were cast within the corona of the now brilliant South Vietnamese sun.

"We need you to sit alert this afternoon and through tonight - Mada's gone DNIF," continued Sergeant Barnwell, unaware that Michael was still recovering from his dream-filled visit back home.

"DNIF... Who?" asked Michael still dazed. DNIF stood for "Duty Not Involving Flying," a military term for being sick and unable to fly.

"Mada... Sergeant Mada - he got sick after lunch," shot Bones with a slight sense of urgency as he helped Michael to his feet.

"Sorry MG, I know you were looking for some time to catch up after snake school. I cleared it with the boss and he gave it the thumbs up," said Sergeant Barnwell, attempting to resolve Michael's confused look.

Michael had only met his commander, Lt Colonel Holcomb, twice in his short tenure at Da Nang. Michael liked him, but Lt Colonel Holcomb was "The Boss" in the 37th, a busy man and; since Michael was only an Airman First Class, way beyond Michael's position in the squadron food-chain. He was momentarily proud to know his commander had the confidence in him to

be thrust onto alert without the customary alert preparation. Although Michael had done well on his in-country check out, the reality of military manning is that Michael was probably the only "body" available. The newer Super Jolly Green Giant was not yet used on alert, so Michael would be fully qualified in the older model. As Michael dejectedly reminded himself, he was here to serve.

After a quick shower in Da Nang's rust-colored water, Michael was in his flight suit, hastily stuffing various pockets and quickly trying to recall all he had been told by the PJ cadre during his in-country checks. As he zipped one of his leg pockets with his left hand, Michael's right hand rested upon the Easter card his mother sent him. His instinct was to leave it behind - as if its angelic image would be out of place or defiled in the world Michael was about to enter. Michael froze for a moment, then grabbed the baby bottle of water next to the image, and slipped it into his lower right leg pocket. Baby bottles with a flat cap were perfect as extra water bottles to be stored in flight suits and vital in Vietnam's searing and hellish jungles. Michael always found it strange the Da Nang Base Exchange carried them at all - Da Nang Air Base wasn't known for its population of nursing infants. Continuing to ignore the holy image, Michael strapped his boots, took one last look around his sparse bunk in the PJ hooch, and headed for the door - grabbing the Easter card and capitulating to that impulse to have something from home with him.

Upon entering the 37th Operations shack on his way to the intelligence briefing room, Michael stopped to glance at the unit assignments board. On the large hallway board, in messy grease pencil, Sergeant Mada's name was smudged clear and "Elliott" scratched in. For the first time since starting PJ tech school, Michael's name was by itself as the PJ on an aircrew - no

instructor, no check-out staff, no fellow students. After eighteen months, this was no small event to ignore - with the dizzying array of tech schools, his earning the maroon beret, snake school, in-country briefs, check rides, PJ initiations, and business cards behind him - Michael was now just another "crew-dog." No more hand-holding by the Big Momma Air Force - she, and her fellow airman, expect you to do the job you have been trained for. Another surprise awaited young Michael. He noticed his crew was JG "low" for this alert cycle. There are two Jolly Green Giant helicopters on each alert cycle and both are launched for a potential rescue. They are identified as JG (Jolly Green) "low" for the primary and JG "high" as the backup. Lt Colonel Holcomb could have reversed the order knowing Michael was replacing the "low" PJ. His decision not to switch them gave Michael a great feeling of pride and another possible indication his superiors considered him up to the task. As Michael basked in a moment of cocky self-assurance, the irritated and nasally voice of the squadron Intel Officer, Lieutenant Oberman, shattered the bliss-filled trance.

"Airman Elliott, we're waiting for you!"

"Oh... yes sir," replied Michael as he snapped the helmet bag laying at his feet and dashed into the room for his first alert brief.

The Air Force seemed to be particularly edgy when it came to the phenomenon known as "alert" - no matter what the alert status was for or who was sitting it. Be it bomber and tanker crews sitting nuclear alert, fighter crews sitting air defense alert or, in Michael's case, sitting air rescue and recovery alert - the Air Force developed strict guidelines for how it would be conducted. Those guidelines were for good reason - lives and national defense counted on them. In most cases, the crews sitting alert understood their

ultimate calling, but also had to live with the day to day boredom that came with it. Besides, each day that passed without thermo-nuclear war or without the Soviets attempting to transgress our borders gave the next crew sitting alert a sense that they too, would not be put to the test. For Michael and his fellow crewmembers in the Air Rescue and Recovery world, this false sense of "business as usual" could not be further from reality. This was Vietnam in 1970 and war was raging up and down the sinewy coasts of North and South Vietnam. Every downed airman was a life, not a statistic. That "life" was one of our guys and he was in trouble. A real person - not a statistic buried in a report and slapped on an endless number of overhead slides to be viewed at Seventh Air Force in Saigon.

The Air Force dictated that a new Intel briefing be conducted anytime a crewmember substitution occurred and, even though this alert cycle was only hours old, Michael's arrival triggered the new brief. The crew took the brief in stride and used the occasion to push "Obie" for additional details of action throughout Southeast Asia. Lieutenant Oberman, however, was not so eager. The long and busy week had beaten him down, and this was Friday afternoon. Getting drunk and forgetting the past week were higher on his priority list. Oberman - all of 25 years old - was a good egg and worked hard for the unit, but today he was ready to let go and refused to be excited for Michael or his "virgin" alert tour. Lieutenant Oberman laid a map of Southeast Asia on the noisy overhead projector and indicated two additional "red dots" since their earlier brief. Captain Trevisani, Michael's copilot, scribbled the locations on his vinyl country charts. Red dots were areas of increased enemy activity or anti-aircraft gun sites for crews to consider when they were called to action. The slide was not pretty - the area to their southwest, near Dak Seang,

received the two new dots, and it looked like a bloodbath. Even a hardened combat veteran would pause at the sight. Lieutenant Oberman finished with a somber note.

"Gentlemen, keep your heads down out there. Most of the steel and scrap iron of the Cold War is flying through the skies of Southeast Asia right now - most of it attached to high explosives. Only a small piece is needed to knock your little pink butts from the sky. Have a nice weekend."

Michael's eyes were still transfixed on the slide as the screen went dark, the lights came on, and the Staff Sergeant from the weather shop stepped forward. Captain Trevisani, who was more concerned with the accurate placement of his red dots than Lieutenant Oberman's parting words, was now looking at Michael as the lights came on. Michael had unknowingly left his Easter card on the desk throughout the briefing.

"That from your momma, MG?" asked Captain T.

"What from my momma, sir?" Michael shot back quizzically.

Captain Trevisani simply motioned with his finger toward Michael's hands and the icon. Michael was embarrassed by the gaffe and quickly tucked the card into his chest pocket and zipped it shut. Captain T. ignored the quick motion, sat silently as the weather briefing was about to start, then said:

"Don't let Oberman spook ya - he says stupid crap like that all the time."

"The red dots..." Michael replied in disbelief as he exhaled.

"Be cool, MG. They got guys to put red dots on the map and we got guys who take 'em off again! This show never stops, and it's outta sight, man. Besides, we're too valuable to lose!" said the robust New Yorker in a reassuring tone to his new crewmember.

Michael suddenly realized he was receiving a reassuring pep talk from a guy who usually gave him a hard time, and the idea of being indebted to him momentarily irritated him. Michael's in-country checks had already involved taking fire, and he held up well under the pressure. Besides, Michael decided that hell would freeze over before he let Captain T. brag to anyone who would listen about his "pep talk" to the FNG (loosely construed as "freaking new guy") of the unit.

"Thanks, Captain T... ya don't have to hold my hand," Michael replied as the weather brief began.

As for the weather, it appeared that the red dots might have to wait. Rain was moving into the western areas that night and would linger through Saturday, certainly putting a crimp on air operations. Strangely for that time of year, this was a mild frontal system producing an unseasonable slow soaker of rain rather than the late afternoon thunderstorm and cloudburst usually seen in April. Another sign of a dull Friday night and Saturday on alert. With the weather brief complete, Captain Trevisani could not miss the opportunity to apply his fatherly concern.

"See! No pressure!" he said as he slapped Michael on the back with the smug look only the "Big Daddy" from the Empire State could get away with.

Michael returned the smile with charity, but his thoughts were, "Oh, shut-up Trevisani!" Instead, he collected his humility, remembered his place, and spoke calmly, adding:

"I'll be ready Captain T. - with or without the pressure of red dots."

As was Captain Trevisani's custom, he ignored Michael's remark and quickly moved to the next issue.

"Say MG, you know how we was talkin' about your momma and my dad before ya left for snake school?"

Michael remembered the repugnant one-way dissertation Captain Trevisani delivered concerning his dad, a widower in New York, and Michael's mother meeting when everyone got back from this bad dream called Vietnam, and how the two might "hit it off." He also remembered that Captain Trevisani had delivered the idea with all the class of a drunken sales pitch. Michael, resisting the urge to punch Captain T. squarely in the face at attaching his mother to such a disgusting thought, allowed charity and the thought of a court-martial to rule the moment. He remembered saying something to the effect that "my mother has plenty of suitors in Tennessee," then putting some distance between himself and his protagonist for the rest of the week.

"Captain T., I don't..." started Michael abruptly.

"No - no - no! Hear me out MG!" shot Captain Trevisani with a wave of his big hands. Now Michael was absolutely convinced he should have punched him, but he took a deep breath and sat in his seat again silently wondering how much trouble a court-martial would really be.

"Ya say your momma..." Captain Trevisani started.

"Mother!" corrected Michael.

"Yea, yea... Ya say your mother sent you that holy... what did ya call it?"

"It's... an... Easter... card," said Michael slowly - his eyes fixed on the lumbering Captain and wishing the card had never left the confines of his room.

"Yea, Easter card. Your mother, right?" inquired Captain Trevisani.

"Yes Captain T. - it came from my mother," said Michael as he drew a deep breath.

The lumbering Captain then did something Michael had not seen before. He sat silently in his chair and appeared to be thinking. Really thinking. After several moments in silence, he spoke.

"Ya know, MG, I don't think this is gonna work..." started Captain Trevisani, then he continued.

"I mean... my dad sends me Playboys... your momma, excuse me, mother, sends you stuff like that. No... I don't think they're gonna hook up!" concluded the now stately Air Force Captain as if delivering a major Supreme Court decision.

Michael sat speechless for a moment. As he did, he had the presence of mind to thank God almighty for giving this jug-head some common sense and said:

"Yes, sir. I think you're right-on with that thought!"

Michael finally had something the two of them could agree on. In order to keep the moment fresh, Michael stood and retreated from his seat, excusing himself to meet with the alert "high" Jolly Green PJ, Sergeant LaPointe.

As "The Ghost" leveled at 10,000 feet for the cruise "over the fence" into Laos and into area Oscar - 8, Jerry worked with a frenzied pace during the only twenty minutes of smooth flight he would get before the action started. He quickly had his grease pencil markings set on both sides of the large Plexiglas canopy to help with azimuth readings once a target was

sighted. Next, he readied his cameras with film and set them within easy reach for the split-second shots he would have to make. Finally, he checked his battery operated tape recorder and lodged it between his left thigh and the side of his ejection seat. The pilot in "the pit" had multiple concerns while working the FAC mission. Besides the physiological stresses inherent with a high-speed fighter at low altitude and the constant threat of an enemy eager to kill you, Jerry had to contend with an "office" full of extra equipment. He had to have things ready at a second's notice, but secure enough that it would not thrash about the cockpit and beat him comatose - especially if negative Gs were encountered. During positive Gs, such as those experienced when pulling out of a dive, everything acts as if it is nailed to the floor. During negative Gs, similar to those one might feel when riding a roller coaster over the crest of a hill, everything - cameras, grease pencils, checklists, clip boards, water bottles, film canisters, dirt, and the pilots themselves - drives straight for the canopy with such force that it can destroy a camera and careen into a pilot like a well placed left hook to the face. Every Misty pilot and FAC pilot in general had his own system, and Jerry was busy implementing his.

Tom had his own game to play during the short cruise north. Their frag order was more specific than usual today with Seventh requesting Misty 31 depart Tuy Hoa north over Phu Cat Airbase and then Da Nang before heading northwest for their trip "over the fence" into Laos and the Oscar - 8 Area of Operations. Usually, Mistys had the run of Southeast Asia on their flights - doing what it took to maintain coverage of a certain area. As the war progressed, somebody at Seventh with hopes of a bigger dynasty to build, was able to encroach into the Misty's freedom. Like all pilots operating in Vietnam, the Mistys knew it was one thing for Seventh to dictate a plan and

another for the pilots to actually fly that plan. Tom knew on the ground this route would eat precious time and fuel they could use looking for targets, so his call to "Hillsboro" - the Airborne Command and Control Center he would be working with - came right on cue. Hillsboro knew the game as well and, more important, the crew's dedication to their various missions, so they were expecting it. Even if most of the world ignored it, there was a war on and those fighting it would rather take care of business and be there for their buddies. Tom was not interested in performing some useless navigation exercise like a student back home. Get airborne, get to the area ASAP, get the job done, and depart only when forced to - that was the goal, at least. Hillsboro was in a receptive mood this afternoon and Misty 31 was cleared their more direct route over Pleiku and headed toward Ubon, Thailand for a west entry into Oscar - 8 and clearance to work "KX-48Y" - the area in eastern Oscar - 8 encompassing North Vietnamese Base Areas 611 and 604. Of course, Hillsboro and Misty 31 did not discuss the route or the area of operations "in the clear" - in other words, plain English. Yakking away over the radios would be warmly received by the North Vietnamese listening in and would provide advanced warning to Misty 31's deadly reception party along the trail ahead. All locations and routes were coded, and the codes changed daily to prevent compromise. Secrecy or not, the NVA knew all too well Misty and rest of the U.S. Air Force would be there to make their day miserable if possible. Ten minutes into the flight and Misty 31 already had extra time to "play" in the area! Jerry acknowledged with a "Sierra Hotel" over the intercom as he unconsciously yanked his left shoulder strap tight again. Even though Misty 31 was the only Tuy Hoa bird airborne this afternoon, it seemed as though the rest of the U.S. Department of Defense was

operating and hell-bent on getting their licks in before poor weather shutdown the show. Maybe Hillsboro was too busy to argue about the route and the thought gave Tom hope they could sweet-talk an extra tanker and another hour from Hillsboro later. Time would tell.

Jerry was now set, and his "office" prepared for the mission and much anticipated secondary explosions when he pulled some black and white Polaroid photos from his breast pocket to study on the descent to 4500 feet. These pictures were shot the day before by another Misty working the area. The simple black and whites were of great value to pilots in noticing ever so slight changes to the terrain along the trail, especially near the various "choke points" between the mountains which encompassed the Troung Son Range bordering Laos, North Vietnam, and South Vietnam. The choke points were like stage doors to this combat theater - all players from the north had to use them to bring war material along the trail for discreet entrance into South Vietnam. The names "Mu Gia," "Ban Karai," and "Ban Raving" were etched into the minds of all combat pilots flying the skies of Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, these three names can also be found populating the hundreds of aircraft loss incident reports from the conflict. Area Oscar - 8 encompassed an area in eastern Laos within the Saravane Province - with Ban Raving Pass on the north end, stretching down the Troung Son Range to just beside South Vietnam's infamous A Chau valley. Route 92 was the main road running north-south and most of the terrain consisted of rugged, jungle-covered valley - perfect terrain to hide war material from the constant probing of "Misty-eyes." Oscar - 8 was the home of North Vietnamese General Vo Bam's 559th Transport Group forward headquarters - one of the most heavily defended areas outside Hanoi and one of the deadliest to American aircraft. An hour in

Oscar - 8 and both Tom and Jerry would be drenched in sweat. As if on cue, both pilots silently drained their first water bottles on the high-speed descent into the area.

Tom's mind momentarily filled with memories of another Misty he taught at Luke Air Force Base years earlier, Captain Lee Gourley. Lee, and fellow pilot, First Lieutenant "Scotty" Dotson, were hit by AAA while operating in Oscar - 8. Both were listed as Missing In Action, but as all crewmembers fighting in Southeast Asia already knew - surviving a shoot down and captivity in Laos was virtually impossible. If you were fortunate to survive being blown out of the skies over Laos, your captors were all too willing to even the score, especially the much hated FACs who daily frustrated the Communist aggressors. Ironically, the call sign Gourley and Dotson were using that day was "Misty-31," perhaps helping to bring Tom's friend to mind. Tom had worked Oscar - 8 numerous times before and, like all experienced combat pilots, he combed intelligence reports for anything of value to aid him in his own success - including the reports of Misty 31 from 9 August 1969. Tom recalled how they were single-ship as usual, flying along the southwest side of Route 92, when Lee reported they were "progressing to another location." Again, not giving any information to listening ears. Lee and Scotty had a scheduled 1040 Hours rendezvous with their tanker to take on fuel. When the failed rendezvous was reported to Hillsboro, another Misty immediately headed for the area to make a search for their fellow pilots. It was later relayed to Search and Rescue forces that another aircraft reported a radio transmission from Captain Gourley saying, "We've been hit; we're going to try to get out." The witness aircraft saw the F-100 disintegrate into flames following this transmission and reported one fully deployed parachute. The

witness aircraft headed for the chute and attempted contact on UHF 243.0, the military emergency guard frequency. No joy. All attempts at radio contact and a visual sighting failed throughout the SAR attempt. The search continued until sundown and again at first light the next day - still without a trace. The deep and dark forest below had swallowed the Super Sabre and its Misty crew completely. No burning wreckage, no emergency beacons, no chutes hanging in the tree canopy - nothing but ear-splitting silence. The visual sighting of one deployed chute from the witness aircraft gave search and rescue forces hope that at least one pilot made it out alive. Sadly, it also signaled that the other pilot, either Lee or Scotty, did not survive the hit and subsequent breakup. Of the one suspected survivor - why no contact? Was he dead or unconscious in his chute? A bad radio? Perhaps he landed right in the hands of his killers? The answers are buried deep beneath a thick and unforgiving jungle canopy. The soldier's "golden-BB" had struck again. Tom shrugged the thought off.

"Enough of that nonsense..." he chided himself.

Lee and Scotty would understand and, if they could, they too would chew Tom out for losing focus. There will be no "golden-BBs" for this Misty 31 as Tom pointed the Hun at the jungle and its deadly trail below. Tom and Jerry could raise their JW Red filled glasses to Lee and Scotty later - after they extracted payment for their friends.

"The Ghost" was now topping 420 knots as she screamed over the Dong River west of Saravane in south central Laos. Tom was by now into his combat routine - 4500 feet, 400-plus knots, and violently jinking every 5 to 7 seconds to avoid any AAA which might be headed their way. Tom spotted Route 29, the western edge of Oscar - 8, just ahead as both pilots listened to a

"Nail" FAC work a flight of "Gunfighters" in another area to the north. Tom informed Hillsboro they were switching to their discrete UHF channel to work their AO and gave a quick check of their time and fuel. All was as planned - they had an hour and five minutes to play before reaching their bingo fuel for the Yellow Track and air refueling. Before leaving Hillsboro's channel, Tom requested to switch air refueling to Blue Track and tacked a request for an additional hour in the area. Hillsboro was now back to its usual mood and answered with a formal:

"Have request, Misty - will inform departing."

Tom hated the hand-holding by Hillsboro, but he had to have the gas if he wanted the play time. Tom jinked left into 60 degrees of bank and spun the radio to his preset channel - broadcasting "in the blind" that Misty 31 was "on station, Kilo X-Ray - Four-Eight Yankee," to alert other friendlies of their presence.

This latest rendition of the "Tom and Jerry" show was headed toward an area just south of an intersection of roads, one of which was Route 92 - leading straight into NVA Base Area 611. Jerry's hand contained a series of photos as "The Ghost" rolled 60 degrees right, then level again. A few days earlier, a Covey FAC discovered what appeared to be a small group of trucks hidden under camouflaged netting adjacent to a tall grove of evergreen trees about one-half mile west of this intersection. The North Vietnamese became very skilled at deception while moving material along the trail - often employing wooden mock-ups of trucks and fake gun emplacements to deceive the always present "Misty-eyes" and their fellow FAC brethren. Was this a sweetheart target waiting to be nailed or a trap to ensnare the Americans? The Covey wisely noted the area and pressed on with his mission. He had not

drawn AAA while surveying the spot either, further heightening his suspicions. Besides, why park trucks on the edge of the tree line when another hundred yards would conceal them completely? This gig was not passing the "smell test." The Misty's continued the cat-n-mouse game the next day with their own probing and pictures. Perhaps the oncoming rain would force the NVA to play a card today. If General Vo Bam's 559th delayed moving until the rains came, the dirt roads would turn into a mud-encased mess and delay vital supplies even longer. Jerry's hunch from the Intel brief was that the real truck park was just east of the deception and south of Route 922, where the jungle flattened-out under a dense canopy for cover. Based on his photos, Jerry knew what was there yesterday. Any change - however slight in this remote area - would be the clue that something important was underneath. He would have his answer within minutes of entering Oscar - 8. The NVA were, indeed, planning on their move prior to the rains and Misty 31 discovered a shallow grading cut across a ravine on the north end of the suspected site. The photos confirmed there was no grading the day before and, with the sun high in the Laotian sky, Jerry spotted the sheer shimmer of oil floating on a patch of water alongside the freshly turned earth. Apparently, the NVA had hoped for the lingering fog to continue prior to the rain, giving the Communist truck convoy unrestricted access into Base Area 611. Misty 31 had virtually caught General Vo Bam's troops in the act. As Tom continued to jink in larger concentric circles around their discovery, they began to take AAA fire from at least two, maybe three, 37mm anti-aircraft batteries along the limestone ridge to the southeast. Coming out of a 4-G turn with both pilots grunting their M1 anti-G maneuvers; Tom moved his oxygen mask close.

"We got their attention, Jerry. You wanna mark it?"

"You bet - a four-shot, just south of the ravine over to the upslope and southwest a hundred yards," was Jerry's reply as he simultaneously radioed Hillsboro through his G-induced grunts to request fighter support. Suddenly, the stakes in this combat cat-n-mouse rose significantly. One of the mice was fleeing the hideout!

"Holy cow, Tom! Look!" said Jerry as "The Ghost" completed a brutal turn to regain a visual of the site. They were about three miles south of the target area when, in the clear of broad daylight, came a North Vietnamese truck careening out of the newly graded patch and headed for Route 922 with all the speed he could muster. The driver must have been convinced that Misty 31 had spotted him and took the chance on fleeing rather than compromise the entire truck park. As testament to their enemy's deceptive skills, neither Tom nor Jerry had seen any sign of the truck on their initial passes.

"Hillsboro, Misty Three-One, looking for support - ya got any chicks on hold?" asked Jerry.

"Roger, Misty - got Striker flight - Four chicks - holding angels One - Four, off channel seven-six, and about seventy-five klicks, your side with two-zero to play - where you want 'em?" replied Hillsboro. What that meant in plain English was that Hillsboro told Misty they had a flight of four fighters, named Striker flight at 14,000 feet, holding off a navigation station, channel 76 (Ubon, Thailand), 75 kilometers from them and they would have 20 minutes of fuel to work the area.

"Send them to Ban Ban for contact," was Jerry's reply.

Ban Ban is a small Laotian town about thirty miles northwest of the action and would serve as an Initial Point, or IP, for Misty and the fighters to

get organized. Tom had pulled "The Ghost" through a tight loop now and was lining the errant truck into his sights. The truck never had a chance. With about one-quarter second on the trigger releasing several thousand rounds from their 20mm cannon, Tom shredded the hapless truck, sending it into the side of the road and producing a moderate secondary explosion. The voluminous black smoke signaled to the pilots he was carrying barrels of fuel. While Tom was putting the runaway out of commission, Jerry was clearing for deadly AAA shots from the gun emplacements spotted earlier. So much for only two batteries - Jerry now counted no less than six emplacements - all firing on them!

"Tom! Clear the shot off to the left, heading two nine zero degrees - we're taking fire from the east... *Brace, Tom, Brace!*" shouted Jerry over the intercom.

Tom pulled hard in his turn to the northwest and climbed above 5,000 feet to clear the deadly AAA fire. Amazingly, only one shot got close enough to rattle "The Ghost." The shot thundered deadly shrapnel behind and below them, sounding like rocks pelting a trash can as the Super Saber thundered away from its kill.

"Sorry, Jer. - couldn't let the bastard go," said Tom to his friend and referring to the now-destroyed truck.

"Nice work," was Jerry's reply as he keyed his mike calling for the fighters.

"Striker flight, Misty - you on station?" Jerry barked as he surveyed his suspected prize from a distance.

"Misty, Striker flight with ya, five out of Ban Ban - glad you could play today! We've got four each Mark Eight-Two and twenty mike-mike," came Striker's reply.

Jerry drained another water bottle listening to Striker's check in. They too were glad to be playing, but the small talk would have to wait. Tom - not wanting to telegraph their interest in the suspected park - cleared the area to the north, circling to the left, and buying time for Striker flight to reach Ban Ban. Now, it was Jerry's show.

"Striker flight, Misty. Target is a truck park southeast of Routes 92 and 922. Track one two five out of Ban Ban. You'll see smoke from a runaway on 922 about a mile northwest. Elevation five six oh MSL - high terrain east-northeast at thirty-one hundred feet. Surface winds light. Make your passes southeast to northwest and clear west, ya got thirty-seven mike-mike located to the east - at least six. How copy?" said Jerry.

"Copy all, Misty. Continue," from Striker lead.

"Bailout will be about two two zero heading off the target, Da Nang is nine-zero southeast for divert. No friendlies in the area. We'll be west toward your bailout. If there are no questions, we'll box it with some willie... Anywhere in the box, gentlemen," finished Jerry.

"All clear here, Misty - just call your mark," said Striker lead as he directed his flight toward their deadly business. Tom quickly had "The Ghost" headed back toward the site while Jerry alerted Striker flight they were rolling in on their mark. Tom brought the F-100 into a steep dive toward the target with reddish-brown tracers from the AAA appearing to the right - trailing above and behind them. Tom laid four willie pete rockets in a perfect box right where Jerry called them.

"Got your smoke, Misty. Lead's rolling in from one two zero degrees," called Striker lead.

As the lead ship finished his call and Misty 31 was executing a tight pullout to the northwest, a huge but muffled explosion occurred near Tom's two southern-most willie pete shots.

"Cleared in hot, Striker - guess you know where to drop," Jerry replied.

"Nice mark, Misty!" came the response.

One of the other Strikers now informed lead that he too, was taking fire from the east. Tom took the initiative at this point and told Jerry over the intercom he would work a pass from west to east between the Strikers and make a run at the guns firing on the fighters.

"Copy, Tom," was all Jerry said as he quickly gave Striker flight the plan.

"Striker-Three, call your roll-in. Misty will work from the west after number two and draw a bead on the gun - copy?" said Jerry to the fighters.

Tom was already in a tight turn to the east as Striker Two called he was taking fire on his run. Tom timed the maneuver perfectly. As Striker number Two pickled his 750 pound Mk-82 and unleashed another huge explosion, Tom and Misty 31 cleared the explosion from the west - straight down the throat of the firing 37mm gun! The now out of luck gunner was still chasing Striker Two as Tom pickled "The Ghost's" 20mm cannon for a fraction of a second before the gunner could react. As Tom pulled to the left and kicked his rudder hard to avoid being "back-stabbed" by the other guns, he could see hundreds of tiny sparklets ricocheting from the gun, followed by an ear-splitting explosion.

"Awesome, Misty. You nailed him!" said someone over the radio.

"Are the others firing?" asked Tom quickly over the radio - not concerned with the accolades.

"N-N-Nope," came the reply. Jerry jumped back in.

"Striker - you're cleared in hot. Misty is clearing north and west - let us know if you need us again!" Jerry said - looking to keep the pressure on.

The secondary explosions were intensifying with each pass as Jerry radioed Hillsboro for more support.

"Misty, we've got Gator flight of four coming off the Blue tanker. On station in ten - same IP?" said Hillsboro.

Excellent, thought both pilots. They had nailed another prize for the Mistys and Coveys, and everyone wanted to keep it going. Jerry called back.

"Affirmative, Hillsboro - have Gator call inbound - same IP."

Hillsboro acknowledged and asked them whether their bingo was still good. Jerry didn't miss a beat to query them.

"Understand for *Blue* Track, Hillsboro?" he shot back.

"Negative, Misty - *Yellow* Track... Yellow - call departing."

"Damn, I tried Tom!" said Jerry over the intercom followed by a simple "Copy" to Hillsboro.

Misty 31 continued to work their prize with Striker flight, then gave some of the fun to Gator flight - all while noticing the weather moving in from the west.

"Looks like those commie bastards may get some help fighting the fires tonight," said Tom to his friend in the pit.

"Happiness is a secondary explosion," said Jerry as he briefly looked to the picture of his family.

Twenty-five minutes later, Misty 31 gave Gator flight their bomb damage assessment and handed their work to a very excited Covey FAC. After a quick brief, they signed off tactical frequency and headed to the tanker.

Chapter Six

Service

Tom's leg was now free from the offending branch and tied with a choke-force knot to contain the bleeding. Besides the nauseating waves of pain overwhelming his every effort, Tom was near complete exhaustion and still some twenty feet in the air. His eyes had adjusted somewhat in the darkness, and he still reasoned he could cut his chute risers, tie them to the branch near his head, and use them to lower himself to the jungle floor.

"It sure beats sitting here waiting for Charlie to walk up and shoot me," he said sarcastically.

The thought reminded him to check and secure his .38 revolver - although Tom always believed it would be useless against a squad of AK-47s - good only for shooting one's self just prior to capture. He trusted his pencil flares to do more damage. Tom re-secured his equipment in what remained of his flight suit and survival vest - knife, survival radio in lower leg pocket - double check it is off - and pistol at the ready. Another setback! He had lost the two extra batteries he was carrying for his radio. One final and even more debilitating discovery - his water was gone as well.

"I'd give anything for a bottle of water right now..." Tom dejectedly intoned.

He reached up and yanked about 15 feet of loose riser cords from above, cut, and knotted them together. Next, he secured the knotted risers to the tree limb above him. One last chance to think this through.

"OK... this should work," he hastily reasoned.

Tom leaned forward and below him to reach for the seat survival kit straddled on the crotch of the bloody branch which almost took his leg. He narrowly escaped falling as he retrieved the seat kit - setting it beside him as he panted in the stifling heat and mist of the late afternoon jungle air. Tom thought he could drop the seat kit into the darkness and ascertain his height by listening to it hit the floor below. It was the only plan he could think of in his state. He took a moment to rest and checked his aching leg. A few deep breaths of warm, bloody, vomit-shrouded stale air. With his legs dangling into the abyss, Tom rolled his hips right to take the seat -

Snap!

The branch Tom was resting upon broke with a violent crack, sending him into the darkness below. As Tom fell, he had the presence of mind to jerk his right hand toward the risers he had tied moments earlier - his only hope of not breaking his neck in the fall. He caught the risers all right. On the way down, his grip only helped to intensify the burns on his palm from the rapidly moving nylon cords. He impacted the jungle floor almost flat against his back, knocking the wind from his already gasping lungs. Good news - the impact was not as harsh as he feared with the dense buildup of jungle matter cushioning his fall. Bad news - he fell into his earlier vomit! His fall from grace was punctuated in the form of the now-falling seat survival kit, which hit Tom's injured leg with a dull thud and splattered blood from the soaked lanyard above his wound.

Tom could only gasp from his dry, airless lungs as the pain convulsed along his crippled body. Thousands of gnats also arrived, adding to his misery while several filled his mouth as he gasped and gulped. He rolled to his left and curled into a fetal position - Tom's brain now working its subconscious magic to maintain homeostasis throughout the repeated trials. In a panic-driven spasm, Tom wrapped both hands around his leg wound and squeezed, trying to force the pain away. Only after several moments face down in the sub-jungle brush and many aching, gasping, vomit-flavored breaths later could Tom begin to release the frozen spasm and attempt to relax. Releasing his leg, he reached for the seat kit and then rolled off his good leg to retrieve his survival radio. As he fumbled to find the rotary ON/OFF switch - an engulfing burn started at his mid-calf and rapidly reached his grotesque wound.

Ants!

Tom had fallen on a mound of fire ants known to inhabit vast patches of jungle floor in Southeast Asia. They were not the least bit pleased at the sudden guest dropping in on their dinner of vomit. His mangled body flew into a rage against the attack - sending the survival radio, knife, first aid kit, the .38 pistol, and his own tortured limbs flying frantically in all directions. Despite Tom's cocky demeanor, he was not known for having a foul mouth - his size and skill were more intimidating. He considered foul language a weakness demonstrated by the "trash-talk" players he competed against in his basketball days. Now something snapped. As his body flew in all directions, so did the muffled flurry of hyperbolic offensive words and any sense of control Tom might have had as he swatted the tiny blood-lustful creatures. Once removed from his bloody, beaten, and nearly lifeless body, Tom

collapsed into the brush and dragged himself into a hollow a few yards away - staying conscious long enough to check for another ant mound - then into a pain induced slumber.

Jolly 12 flight was minutes away from establishing their orbit when King 07 called.

"Jolly One-Two flight... King Zero-Seven, over."

"King Zero-Seven... Jolly One-Two flight, go ahead," returned Captain Trevisani.

"Contact Sandy Zero-One on Uniform Delta... now please," came the sterile reply.

"Thought we were gettin' another weather brief," Captain Trevisani said with a sarcastic smile as he leaned toward Major Robinson, whose mood was more subdued.

"I think we're going in now," was Dutch's reply.

He was right.

"Jolly One-Two... Sandy Zero-One - how copy?" could be heard as Captain Trevisani channeled the receiver.

"Jolly flight..."

"Two."

"Sandy... Jolly One-Two flight... go ahead," replied Captain Trevisani. Sandy lead got right to the point.

"Welcome aboard Jolly. We're still working with alpha - no tally on bravo. Alpha appears NORDO now. He didn't check back in and Covey hasn't been able to reach him since. Jolly One-Zero... take-up the orbit and we'll call

if we find bravo. Jolly One-Two, break off and head to Rocket Ridge... you'll see me at your ten o'clock and I'll lead ya in. King is worried about the weather, but we should have alpha out soon. I have numbers three and four working upwind looking for bravo's chute... Covey spent the last half hour lookin' and trying to get alpha back up on the radio. We think he's unconscious. Sounded pretty beat up on the initial call. Area appears clean... we've had no visuals or return fire," said Sandy 01. "NORDO" is an aviation term for "No Operative Radio."

Major Robinson keyed the intercom and told Michael to prepare to go down for an extraction. Both he and Sammy were already prepared and waiting as they listened on the radio. Michael had just cleared his pockets of belongings and handed them to Sammy. He cleared everything - except his mother's card and his SAR instructions. Michael's KB-2 flight suit was also barren of combat subdued rank and name tag - he hadn't time to retrieve them from the seamstresses at the Da Nang Base Exchange. Under his survival vest, med-kit, and M-16, Michael was a "no-name, slick-sleeve" PJ!

"Jolly... stay angels seven for now... I'm at angels four and climbing... I have you in sight... I'm in a left to join..." said Sandy lead.

The advice to stay high was a precaution against any AAA which might also be present. At lower altitudes, even at top speed, the Jolly Green would traverse a AAA cannon fire zone for more than a minute - plenty of time for even a bad shot to blow them from the sky. Rocket Ridge was just a few clicks ahead - its two to three thousand-foot limestone karsts casting shadows before them. Major Robinson now had a visual on their Sandy escort and called it out for Captain Trevisani to pick up as well.

"Got 'em," said Captain T.

"We've got a visual, Sandy," declared Major Robinson.

Sandy 03 and 04 called back inbound and approaching the area as well - Sandy lead had them setup an east-west pattern, using the ridge line for cover. Sandy 02 would work opposite lead in a north-south orbit. All of them ready to pound the hell out of anything that dared move into the rescue area. Sandy lead then called again to Jolly 12.

"Jolly... I'll lay some smoke on the ridge above the chute canopy so you'll have the line. The canopy has dropped somewhat and gettin' hard to see."

"Copy all, Sandy - thanks," said Captain Trevisani.

"Jolly... once you have the chute, tell us what you need... As always, we're here for you. I do suggest clearing to the south for your tank drop... over," said the Sandy flight commander.

Once Jolly 12 had a visual on the SAR site, they would clear and drop their external fuel tanks - allowing the Jolly Green to be lighter and more agile for the rescue attempt and a quick exit should they begin taking fire. Her internal tanks were more than sufficient to keep her airborne for hours to come. Additionally, King 07 was refueling capable in the event either Jolly required additional fuel for the mission. The Sandy leader escorted Jolly 12 straight to Misty-alpha's chute and pickled a willie pete into the hillside, well above the downed pilot's position. Although the chute was in tatters and now only partially exposed, Major Robinson and crew called "tally" in unison with Sandy's signal shot.

"Sandy... Jolly has a tally and clearing south," said Major Robinson. As Jolly Commander, he would now do the talking. Switching to intercom, he continued:

"MG, be ready in two minutes."

Sammy and Michael were at the door and ready as he spoke.

As Jolly 12 broke into a hard left turn, they saw what remained of the F-100 Misty 31 alpha was flying. The valley floor below gave up little of the smoke from the impact and fire. Jolly 12 stayed high over the site, knowing insurgents would be headed to the site and eventually to the chute of Lt. Colonel Elliott.

"Sandy... Jolly One-Two... we're gonna drop tanks and use the northern tip of Rocket Ridge as an IP to alpha," stated Major Robinson and giving the Sandy flight an initial point from where the rescue chopper crew would begin their run to the chute.

Jolly 12's tip tanks fell silently to the valley below and disappeared into the jungle growth. Experience taught the rescue crews that the NVA and VC often stayed silent leading up to a rescue in the hopes of luring the rescue chopper in and attacking when it was most vulnerable - at hover and hoisting a crewmember aboard. As a precaution, the Sandy flight laid a number of tear gas munitions downwind of Misty-alpha to discourage any visitors.

"Copy, Jolly... we'll roll-in on your wing... Sandy Three and Four are set as well... call your turn," was Sandy lead's response. Sandy 01 then quickly switched back to guard frequency to call once more for Misty-alpha.

"Misty Three-One alpha... Sandy Zero-One... how copy!?" Still no response.

Jolly 12 went into a steep bank just past the Misty debris field for the sharp left turn and short flight up Rocket Ridge. Approaching the initial point, Major Robinson called the descent out of 7000 feet. Michael and Sammy gave one last check of the harness and jungle penetrator seat. With Michael set,

Sammy turned his attention to his side-mounted M-60 machine gun - ready to nail anyone who might encroach on his partner during the rescue. Again, Sandy 01 called for Misty-alpha on guard frequency.

"Misty-alpha... if you hear Sandy... pop your smoke... Jolly is inbound," said Sandy 01 as he called in vain. Still nothing but silence from the stricken airman.

Jolly 12 descended to treetop level and picked up speed - calling his IP and final turn left as Sandy 01 and 02 joined on either side of the helicopter. Just as Sandy 03 and 04 crossed in front of Jolly 12 and over Misty-alpha's chute, Major Robinson pulled the cyclic into his gut, bringing the massive helicopter to a hover just south of the chute, giving Michael a small clearing for the hoist ride in. Sandy 01 and 02 flew by in an impressive display of low level skill and incredible noise.

"You're clear, MG - Go!" was barked over the chopper's intercom.

"PJ on the cable!" Sammy reciprocated.

Michael was riding the hoist as fast as Sammy could push the bulky motor. Sammy also checked for clearance on Michael's ride down, giving Major Robinson finesse commands. Major Robinson held his attitude steady and locked his eyes on the rising terrain before and to the right of their position.

"Left about five, sir," directed Sammy on the intercom.

Michael used about 200 of the 250 feet of hoist cable - coming to an abrupt halt in the elephant grass and rough scrub. He gave the thumbs-up to Sammy as the tall grass bristled under the huge rotors.

"PJ down and clear!" announced Sammy.

Pulling his M-16 rifle from his shoulder and ensuring he had not lost the .38 in his vest, Michael headed in the general direction of the chute - listening on his survival radio for any commands his crew may have. Michael quickly cleared the tall grass and disappeared from Sammy's view. Lt. Colonel Elliott awoke at the muffled sound of the Jolly's engine overhead and immediately searched for his .38, then crawled back to his burrow in defense.

"Tally on the chute," was all Michael gave on the radio as he bounded through the jungle under growth.

The Sandy two-ship formations flew by repeatedly with the loud whirl of their huge R3350 radial engines screaming just above the trees. The Sandy formation's weave around the scene was just right - allowing either Sandy two-ship the ability to unload their munitions quickly if trouble broke out. A few miles away, Zorro flight split into two flights - one flight of two with Jolly 10 in orbit and the other resuming the search for Misty 31 bravo.

Michael's eyes had difficulty transitioning from the bright afternoon sun to pitch black darkness - the scene only made darker by the now-growing shadow of the ridge line before him. Michael continued in a crawl as he recognized tattered parachute risers. A few yards further, he found alpha's survival radio and slipped it into his lower pocket. The smell now reached his nostrils - a combination of vomit and blood mixed and laying low in the damp air along with decaying vegetation. Once under the immense jungle canopy, Michael realized how little of the chopper's engine noise he could hear. The sudden muffling of noise and the darkness adding to a growing sense of isolation. Even the Sandy escorts and their large engines seemed miles away as they continued overhead. Pressing onward, Michael came face to face with a middle-aged man whose face was blackened and blood stained - only his

eyes and the top of his pointed pistol reflected the faint shafts of diffuse light coming through a small spot in the canopy. Michael dropped to the jungle floor, gun ready.

"Misty-alpha!... Misty!" called Michael.

In silence, Lt. Colonel Elliott dropped his weapon amid a huge sigh. Michael was on top of him as Tom finished his exhale. The sight took Michael aback. Michael fought the impulse to wonder how this pilot was even alive.

"Jolly - I have alpha - I'll have to carry him to the seat. He's conscious but badly injured," said Michael on his survival radio.

Lt. Colonel Elliott attempted to speak, although in a hushed and garbled tone.

"How... how... is bravo?" he heaved.

Michael was now quickly unrolling field dressing from his medical kit and prepping a morphine syrette.

"How's bravo?" Tom asked again as he began to experience the morphine draining the pain from reality.

"Sir... don't talk. Bravo is being worked by another Jolly right now," he replied as he worked to secure Tom's leg and get him out of there.

Michael had no idea of the fate of Misty-bravo, but he had to tell him something. "I don't know sir," did not seem the least bit appropriate right now. Michael grabbed his radio and told Jolly 12 he was preparing to carry alpha to the hoist. Sammy, surveying the jungle canopy, replied:

"MG - look about ten paces north of the chute - is that closer for ya?"

Michael rolled on his heels and spotted the area of weak light - the only light around - and realized they could go up from there. It would have to be the penetrator seat though - the litter would not make it.

"Jolly... I've got it... You're cleared to drop at that point... alpha will be ready in two," said Michael as he resumed his work on Tom's badly distorted and grotesque wound with the distant noise of a Sandy flight cruising past.

"Sandy - Jolly is moving about seventy-five paces north for the extract," called Major Robinson to the formation.

"No problem, Jolly."

Major Robinson was now perilously close to the up sloping tree tops as he edged the Jolly into position. Soon, the seat penetrator crashed through the foliage and came to rest about twenty feet from Michael and Tom. The moments ticked away as all listened for word from Michael. Calm as ever but sweating profusely and choking on swarms of gnats, Michael secured his M-16 around his head and shoulder and looked to his patient.

"Jolly... we're headed to the seat," said Michael, then securing his radio.

Sammy was at the ready to pull them up slowly through the foliage, then as fast the hoist would bring them the rest of the way.

"Ya ready, sir?" inquired Michael.

"Let's get out of here, my friend," came the broken response.

Michael's adrenalin lifted Tom easily as they inched their way toward their assent and salvation, GI-style. As Michael continued through the dense jungle undergrowth carrying Tom, the adrenalin gave way to exhaustion in the intense heat and humidity. Michael was carrying the downed pilot, the M5 med kit, the M-16 rifle, survival vest with his .38 and Misty-alpha's .38, his helmet, and his own weakened frame - stepping carefully and prodding the dark floor for anything which might topple him and his valuable cargo. With

only a few feet to go, Michael began to hear through his helmet the pops and pings of gunfire coming from above their position.

His pace quickened! As the survival radio erupted with calls from the Jolly above, Michael fell face first in a heap at the base of the penetrator seat. Just then, two large explosions erupted about 100 meters up the slope - evidence that Sandy flight was suppressing the unwanted visitors. Sammy's M-60 aboard Jolly 12 added to the weapons melee.

Tom had the seat strap through his arms as Michael released him and lifted his good leg on the pull-out flap of the seat. The small arms fire became even more intense with two more explosions just beyond their position. Michael never hesitated in his next action. He placed his helmet on Tom's badly beaten head and called for the extract - knowing he would be left for some time before the SAR force could return.

"Pull us up... pull up!!!" Michael yelled over his survival radio. The M-60 machine gun aboard Jolly 12 went silent as the hoist line quickly brought up the slack.

"Get on this damn seat, kid!" Tom shot to Michael.

"Go... just go! I'll be all righ..." was all Tom heard as the hoist pulled him through the faint opening. Sammy was back at the M-60, laying suppressing fire for the hoist ride to the chopper. Sandy 03 and 04 flew by dropping more tear gas CBU canisters with Sandy 01 and 02 right behind. Zorro 1 and 2 were now in the fray dropping hard ordinance at the crest of the ridge and igniting small fires along the way. Sammy glanced down to check on Michael and Misty-alpha.

"MGs not there... he's not on the seat, dammit!!!" yelled a distraught Sammy. He returned to his gun and sprayed the jungle canopy where he saw

the twinkling of gun muzzles - enemy bullets were pinging around the Jolly's side entrance and exposed hoist cable.

"Call when clear, Sammy," came the calm and impassioned voice of Major Robinson. He followed with "Sandy... Jolly, we've left one down there..."

"Hoist clear!" broke Sammy over the intercom.

"Our PJ is still on the ground... we're clearing left with alpha... cover our turn," continued Major Robinson as bullets frayed the Plexiglas canopy in front and below them.

Captain Trevisani was also returning fire from his seat - the attack coming from all sides in an attempt to cripple the Jolly and destroy it. Sammy continued to fire until he braced himself for the slow climb and shallow turn with Lt. Colonel Elliott hanging below by about fifty feet. Several seconds later, Sammy had Lt. Colonel Elliott by the harness and pulled onto the floor. The site of alpha's condition startled him. He thought their "save" was shot on the hoist ride up until Tom spoke in an excited tone - his blood drenched eyes now wide open.

"I told him to climb on... He told me to go... just go! ...that kid's got a BIG brass pair, my God!!!" exclaimed the relieved, perplexed, and exhausted lieutenant colonel.

Major Robinson called to King that alpha was aboard, and they were clearing the area without - repeat - without their PJ.

"Roger, Jolly One-Two... you're are cleared RTB... Sandy Zero-Three will escort. Jolly One-Zero... remain in orbit. Sandy Zero-One... say status," said King 07.

"Low on ordinance with one-point-five hours fuel on board," replied Sandy 01.

"Roger - continue sanitizing area with Zorro flight. We can move Jolly One-Zero along Rocket Ridge... concur?"

"Affirmative, King," said Sandy 01 as he grunted through a tight turn.

Sandy flight continued to lay anti-personnel ordinance above and below Michael's position while attempting contact on his survival radio frequency. Michael watched the hoist take Lt. Colonel Elliott clear of the trees, amazed that only days from "snake school," he would get to put that training to use. He slipped his rifle from his neck amid the chaos of gunfire above him and turned to evade his attackers as he was jumped by several men - a rifle butt smashing into the right side of his skull.

The mood aboard Jolly 12 was frantic yet subdued. Lt. Colonel Elliott lay prostrate on the crew compartment floor as Sammy checked MG's field medicine handiwork. No additional bleeding. Sammy then quickly and carefully moved him to the litter and strapped their guest securely to the floor of the rapidly climbing and turning Jolly Green Giant helicopter. As Sammy finished attending to Misty-alpha, he noticed his name tag - "Elliott" - subdued and barely visible through the blood and salty sweat covering what remained of his flight suit. Even in the hectic moment, the irony of gaining one "Elliott" and losing another had not been lost on Sammy. His thoughts were now back to the aircraft - Jolly 12 had taken several hits - most were .30 caliber AK-47 rounds. A slight fuel leak had developed above the Jolly's side

entrance and fuel streaked toward the aft rotor section. Sammy gave a quick wave to their escort, Sandy 03, and finished with a thumbs up - pointing to the now slumbering USAF pilot strapped to their litter. Hydraulics and electrics checked good and gave Sammy a brief pause to crack a smile. This would be the only positive emotion aboard Jolly 12 as his thoughts quickly returned to MG. As Jolly 12 leveled at 10,000 feet, Sammy pressed his intercom switch for the status report.

"Major R. - all secure in back. I can see one small fuel leak starboard side - aft of the doorway - seems to be sealing now. Our passenger is sleeping and stable," reported Sammy.

"Thanks, Sam," said Major Robinson.

He was in no mood to talk. As Operations Officer for the 37th, he would have to deal with the possible loss of another crewmember, his personal sense of loss for MG, and the difficult task of briefing his Squadron Commander on this "save." He stared straight ahead - his eyes on the distant coast and South China Sea.

"It looks a bit lonely back there," added Captain Trevisani.

Unlike Major Robinson, Captain T. wanted to talk and found a clumsy way to bring up their loss to a disconsolate Sammy as he peered back through the cockpit bulkhead. Sammy was now kneeling next to his passenger, staring blindly and thinking of MG when he turned toward the cockpit.

"Too lonely... I sure hope MG can stuff that tall, lanky kid's body in a hole where those bastards won't find him!" replied Sammy over the intercom.

Nobody would dare entertain the possibility that MG was captured, much less, killed at the SAR site. They were all fighting to keep from thinking

it. No one wanted to voice the emotion now tearing through the pit in their stomachs.

To Major Robinson, Captain Trevisani, and Sammy - as well as all those aboard Jolly 10 - who were veterans in the rescue business, MG's loss was too much like Airman First Class Charles D. King. It was a little less than a year and a half-ago, on Christmas Day, 1968, that Airman King rode the hoist down from his rescue chopper in an attempt to recover an F-105 pilot, Major Chuck Brownlee. Major Brownlee was shot down over Laos and Airman King and his crew from the 40th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron in Thailand volunteered to get him. An attempt was made the previous night, but was called off due to darkness. The NVA and VC again waited, like today, to pounce upon their prey as the Jolly was most vulnerable - at hover and hoisting survivors. Airman King located Major Brownlee and carried him to the hoist. Once his pilot was secured - all hell broke loose. Airman King was hit immediately but still called to his friends above.

"I'm hit - I'm hit. Pull us up!" was all the rescue chopper heard.

Airman King was not on the hoist - he called for the pull up to save his crew above. The hoist cable snapped while attempting to extract the downed pilot - tragically leaving both rescuer and rescued on the ground amid a hail of gunfire. There is no doubt among the crew that Airman King's call saved the helicopter and her crew from being shot down - as was the sad case today.

"That Others May Live."

Some in this war gave a lot - many PJs gave all - so "That Others May Live."

Neither Airman King nor Major Brownlee was heard from again...

Sammy had to break the grim thoughts, and he keyed his intercom again.

"Did ya know our guest's name is Elliott - just like MG's? Lieutenant Colonel no less. We'll have to ask MG if he has any field grade brass as a long lost relative!" It felt good just to talk about talking to MG again.

"Yea - he's been holdin' out on us!" replied Captain Trevisani.

As the rescue ship cruised back to Da Nang, attention again turned to the SAR frequency and the stage just departed by the crew of Jolly 12. Hoping against all odds for good news. Jolly 10, Sandy 01, and Sandy 02 were now joined by another two-ship of A-1Es, Spad 08 and 09, arriving from Da Nang. No beeper is heard from Michael's survival radio and hope is still waiting for contact from Misty 31 bravo. One must never relinquish hope. The PJ and Misty-bravo are hiding in their own ways with hostile troops all around, but safe. Misty 31 bravo did clear the stricken F-100F - he was just knocked unconscious on his parachute landing. Both will signal soon. Both of them.

Soon.

Hope.

Hope of rescue. Hope of survival. Hope of seeing - of sharing a laugh, a beer, another day. Life always moves toward hope, and this SAR task force held its aerial vigil in hope. They'll call soon...

The personnel aboard King 07 also had hope - and the growing presence of rain just beginning to enter the area. Not the usual springtime thunderstorm bulldozing its way along the air currents but a slow and lumbering blanket of cloud and rain placing a mantel over today's scene. Spad 08 and 09 joined the diminishing fight with Sandy 02 and continued to return

fire anywhere along the ridge - silencing small groups producing the sparkle of tracers now being fired at them. Sandy 01 joined Jolly 10 over Rocket Ridge and called King 07.

"King Zero-Seven, Sandy Zero-One... how copy?"

"Go ahead, Sandy."

"Looks like we'll be I-M-C soon. We'll keep Jolly about thirty more and release 'em to you... copy?"

"Copy Sandy. Break... Jolly... are you N-R-S capable?" inquired King 07. Nightfall was approaching as rapidly as the rain, and a *Night Recovery System* aboard Jolly 10 would buy the SAR task force precious minutes if contact were made. Unfortunately, those minutes would belong to fate.

"Negative N-R-S, King," came the dejected reply from Jolly 10.

Undeterred, Sandy 01 interjected:

"Jolly - most of the hostiles have moved north and east around the ridge. We can bring you in from the south and cover if you'd like to take a look."

"Let's go, Sandy. I'll clear right and stay at angels four, then descend inbound... copy?" came Jolly 10's enthusiastic response.

"We'll be waiting for ya, Jolly - Godspeed," added Sandy 01.

Jolly 10 broke into a tight right over Rocket Ridge - traversing the northern end of Misty 31's debris field and pointed directly at the SAR site in a rapid descent to treetop level as Spad 08 and 09 lit into the hillsides with all they had. Sandy 01 clover leafed over the ridge and strafed in a west-to-east pattern as Jolly 10 slid the massive workhorse to a hover. Squatting under the roaring M-60 machine gun was Sergeant LaPointe, searching the jungle below and unloading his M-16 as well. The insurgents were still there. The side of

Jolly 10 lit up in a flash of twinkling lights - one of which hit the Plexiglas side canopy and sprayed pulverized plastic throughout the cockpit.

Still, she held steady.

For more than thirty seconds, the proud Jolly Green Giant stood her ground. A war horse arrayed in battle - bellowing exhaust and hot iron from her side. Taking blows all around her. No joy. At the last possible moment, Sergeant LaPointe called his search in vain.

"Negative tally, boss... negative... dammit!" his dejection painted in irritation and vanishing suspense.

"Jolly clearing right, Sandy... no joy."

King 07 wasted little time in calling a halt to the vigil.

"Sandy Zero-One and task force, King Zero-Seven... SAR task force halted. All parties R-T-B for first light effort... say status," came the sterile call from the Rescue Command aircraft. The Sandy flight, the Spads and Zorros called Ops normal and returned to their respective bases. Only King 07 and Jolly 10 remained on frequency.

"King Zero-Seven, Jolly One-Zero requests A-R en route to Da Nang," asking for an aerial refueling for additional fuel after the long ordeal.

"Roger Jolly, we're inbound on your heading, angels seven... Call with a visual," replied King and followed with "Covey Five-Six, task force R-T-B for first light - the area is yours..."

Covey 56?

"Where was Covey, boss? I thought they left the area two hours ago!?" an exasperated Sergeant LaPointe shot over the intercom.

Covey 56 and Capt. Charlie Brown had departed two hours ago. He landed in Pleiku, refueled and picked up a Special Forces "Covey-rider" for

radio relay further north in Laos and to direct air strikes against the NVA attacking our troops at Dak Seang, just thirty-five kilometers away. He and his Covey-rider volunteered to provide an electronic watch as long as weather would permit. Be it Major Taylor's comic or Captain Brown's painted "Snoopy" nose art - Charlie Brown and Snoopy were still in the skies over the Vietnamese Central Highlands!

Thirteen hours behind and nine thousand lonely miles from the limestone karsts of the South Vietnamese Central Highlands, Tess Elliott kneeled in prayer before the Virgin Mother and the Child-Savior. The Asian sun was setting amid the cloudy horizon of western South Vietnam. In contrast, this same sun was just beginning its ascension and the advent of a new day over Nashville. She had just completed her prayers after Holy Mass - imploring the heavens above to care for her only child. Mother to mother. Child to Divine Child. Tear to sorrowful tear. Having no idea as to the faraway events on this Friday of the Easter Octave.

A rescue helicopter is launched to save a downed aircrew over Vietnam. One crew member is rescued, but the Pararescue Jumper is captured! This story chronicles the daring rescue, the apparent disaster, and the multi-service effort to save the captured airman.

Perfect Day - The Last Misty

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/4379.html?s=pdf>