

# Chapter One

5/15/2010

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In addition to telling a few tall tales, my purpose for writing this mini-memoir is to address the astonishing ease and naivete' with which the United States entered the Vietnam conflict. As a young lieutenant and co-pilot, I was fortunate enough to have been given a bird's eye view of the beginning of the conflict. At the time, I was told by some of my more mature comrades that it wasn't much of a war, but it was the only one we had. The unstated admonishment was that I had better make the most of it while I could. In many respects, I did. For me, the war began as a great adventure, comparable to *Smiling Jack* and *Terry and the Pirates* of comic strip fame. Since then, I have come to some understanding of the terrible cost of the war in lives and treasure as well as the significance of the war and its implications for the United States and the many countries that were directly and indirectly involved.

The process by which the United States entered the war was almost seamless. There were no great debates in congress or in the news media. There were no bands playing as the troops marched off to war, just a CBS-TV expose' on what a wonderful time a handful of American troops were having in the bars and dance halls of Saigon. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was passed several years later when the United States had already committed itself to defend South Vietnam. However, even that was only the logical extension of a policy that took shape in 1954 after the fall of Dien Bien Phu with John Foster Dulles' formation of the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO). Political commentators dismissed the treaty at the time, and for many years afterwards, as a futile gesture. It proved to be anything but. On the basis of the SEATO agreement, we turned Thailand into a fortress with 10,000-foot runways covering the Korat Plateau adjacent to Indochina. The other Southeast Asian member of SEATO, the Philippines, became a great staging point. The strategy for the anticipated war had already been set. It looked a bit like the Korean War that had preceded it.

The title for this mini-memoir, *Chapter One*, is therefore a fitting one. It deals with my experiences during the first chapter in America's military involvement in Vietnam, a time when fighting the war seemed all too easy. The mistakes in policy that led to that involvement are clear enough in hindsight, but at the time we were blinded by a Cold War mentality. Our actions were an honest effort to stop Communism from sweeping through Southeast Asia and beyond. By preventing the collapse of a friendly government, we sought to stem the tide of Communism worldwide. Geopolitically, it was more successful than most Americans realize. How strange that it should have ended the way it did.

The memories I have recounted are mine. They may be different from someone else's, but in only a few cases have they been intentionally fictionalized. If they have gotten better with the telling, that is only natural. Names have been changed for the sake of propriety. The story begins with my arrival at Payne Field in North Carolina.

## Payne Field

It was July 1960. Payne Field was the hottest and most miserably humid place in the South. Not only was it hot, it was desolate. The buildings were old; air-conditioning was an unimaginable luxury. The paint was peeling from the clapboard siding. The grass was burnt out from too much sun and no rain. Dust and insects were everywhere. What little breeze existed just brought more hot air with it. The skin of the aircraft on the parking ramp was so hot that thermals could be seen rising from them. Except for an occasional figure passing from one building to another, the place looked deserted.

The duty day began at 7:15 a.m. and ended at 4 p.m. There were few flying hours and even fewer amenities. Supply didn't have replacement parts. It didn't even have replacement flight suits. Pilots and maintenance personnel wandered around the flight line in the early morning hours in tattered overalls, looking like homeless bums. Even toilet paper was in short supply. To be assured of its availability, the officers and men who frequented the base considered it prudent to secret a private roll in a desk drawer or locker. The clerk had long since run out of stationery and had to scrounge just to find a couple of sheets of clean, plain bond for monthly reports. When that was gone, the operations officer cut his brown paper lunch bag into a neat rectangle, flattened it as best he could, and used it to type a letter responding to a headquarters' complaint about reports being submitted late.

It was around this time that rumors began to surface about Air America recruiting pilots. The word was that it was some sort of contract flying service. No one seemed to know much about it. Occasionally, there was talk about Vietnam, an unknown place in Asia somewhere. Nothing more.

Suddenly, January brought with it a flurry of memos and directives. Training had to be more thoroughly documented. More precise proficiency standards were required. Joint exercises were being planned. Most importantly, supplies began to trickle into the base depot. Then, overnight it seemed, there were parts, fuel, flying hours, uniforms and even paper. There was a new president with a new administration in Washington. Some called it Camelot. At Payne Field, they called it heaven. Even flying the lumbering C-123, Provider, became a pleasure. (The manufacturer's name for the C-123 was more descriptive. Fairchild called it the Avatruck.)

## Mouse with an Attitude

Most organizations, large and small, find it advantageous to use a logo of some sort to represent themselves. It's an identity thing. The military is no exception. There are logos for almost every type and level of organization. These are normally worn as patches sewn to the chest or shoulder of a uniform. Many patches can be traced back to World War II, a time when this country was in a desperate struggle and the niceties of polite society were often forgotten in the heat of battle.

The patch that was handed down from World War II to the 88<sup>th</sup> Troop Carrier Squadron made up in attitude for what it lacked in sensitivity to the politically correct. Imagine a skinny mouse with a cigarette hanging from its lips and a giant martini in its hand. Around the edge of the patch was written in Latin (what else), "Bring on the damn cat." Many people who saw the patch couldn't help thinking that the mouse looked like a sickly Frank Sinatra.

Those of us who wore the patch didn't think much about it. It could have been worse. So when people occasionally commented on the patch, we'd just smile, make some stupid joke, and forget it. This approach seemed to work well enough until a crew ended up at a civilian airfield in the mid-west.

After spending the night at motel near the airport, the crew was eating breakfast at a small restaurant when a very proper elderly couple sat at a table next to them. It wasn't long before the couple began to ask questions about the squadron patch. Soon they became indignant. How could the U.S. military condone an image of such debauchery? The crewmembers remained polite, finished their breakfast and left, thinking nothing more of the encounter.

A month later, a command-wide dictum was received requiring that the designs of all squadron patches be submitted for review. A rather bland, unrecognizable, winged thing soon replaced the mouse. Early one Sunday morning, one of the crew members saw a preacher on TV who looked strangely familiar. Could it be? Was there a connection?

## Jack

Jack was an unusually good pilot. He was also an unusually big one. Not only was he big, he was strong. Growing up on a ranch in Texas had hardened his muscles and made an indelible impression on his behavior. However, like many large creatures, size tended to temper his mood. He was a truly gentle person, except when he drank.

Jack was more than a problem drinker; he was a Jekyll and Hyde. After a few drinks, the gentle giant would become a wild man, smashing down doors and walls. Jumping off three story buildings was a regular event. Brawling and womanizing were the order of the day. These proclivities, considered harmless by some, came to a head one New Year's day.

The New Year's Day reception was a mandatory social event. Officers and their wives were expected to attend. Absences were duly noted and commented upon. Considering his hung-over condition, Jack shouldn't have been alive, much less at a reception. Nevertheless, the obligation to be present was too great to ignore. A couple of stiff drinks (hair of the dog) were needed, and Jack quickly proceeded to consume them and many more. By his third drink, he was feeling reasonably well and by his sixth, he was loud, belligerent, and ready. In spite of the efforts of several of his friends, he would not be contained. He noticed a tall, elegant woman in the crowd and began working his way toward her. As he approached her from behind, the crowd surrounding her faded away. Jack's reputation was common knowledge, and no one wanted to be present for a confrontation, especially one involving the commanding general's wife.

Without the slightest hesitation, Jack walked up to Mrs. Hewitt, slipped his arm around her waist and, as his hand slid down over the cheek of her right buttocks, asked in a whisper that could be heard a mile away, "How'd you like to (expletive deleted), Honey!" One can never tell. Under other circumstances, Jack's proposal might have been accepted. After all, he did have a certain boyish charm. As it was, his proposal was met with stone cold silence. The entire room froze. My wife and I were standing a short distance away and could literally feel the tension. Then quickly but very quietly the reception hall emptied. Mrs. Hewitt walked over to her husband and together they excused themselves from the few remaining guests and left. Within a matter of a few minutes, only Jack, a couple of bartenders, and silence were left in the ballroom.

Jack's discharge from active duty may have set a processing record. He cleared the base in less than 24 hours. Within a week, almost every record of his existence had been expunged. Within a month, it was as if he had never existed. Months passed and he was all but forgotten.

## Crossing The Big Pond

The C-123 was conceived in the late 1930's as a glider. With time, the design evolved but certain characteristics remained when it was finally produced in the 1950s as a two- engine transport. It was an airplane that was designed to crash. The nose section was structurally reinforced to keep it from collapsing upon impact. Fuel was carried in nacelle tanks and in external drop tanks that could be released just prior to impact to minimize the chance of fire.

To allow the C-123 to carry wide loads such as large vehicles, the fuselage had to be disproportionately broad and dumpy, sacrificing speed and range. The aircraft's principal mission was to carry heavy loads over distances of a few hundred miles to forward areas. Therefore, ferrying a squadron of these aircraft over the vast reaches of the Pacific Ocean to Vietnam in 1962 represented a considerable undertaking.

Preparations for the crossing began with the installation of two five-hundred-gallon internal fuel tanks and a fifty-gallon internal oil tank in the cargo compartment. One aircraft was further modified with a VIP module so that its cargo compartment would provide first class accommodations. The political character of the Vietnam conflict had already been anticipated. Congressmen and media representatives couldn't be expected to ride in a cattle car. The top of the fuselage was painted white, giving rise to the nickname of the White Whale.

The longest leg of the planned route was from California to Hawaii, about 2,400 miles. Aircraft were to cross in pairs on a trip that was expected to last about 15 hours. With an extra 1,000 gallons of fuel carried in their cargo compartment tanks, the aircraft were heavy, but not excessively so. The exception was the White Whale. With its VIP module, it was right at maximum recommended gross weight.

The launching point for the crossing was Travis Air Force Base, north of San Francisco. The White Whale proved Murphy's Law. As it took off, the fuel line on the right engine sprang a leak, spraying the hot engine with ultra high-octane gasoline. The result was an engine fire that could be seen for miles. The only way to stop the fire was to shut down the burning engine, but at maximum gross weight, that could have led to a precipitous loss of altitude. The answer was to reduce the weight of the aircraft by dumping fuel from the internal fuel tanks. To accomplish this, two large hoses were quickly extended out of the side troop doors and emergency valves opened. The flames from the right engine instantly ignited the hundreds of gallons of fuel being dumped from the hoses, creating a trail of smoke and fire that extended over a thousand feet behind the aircraft as it circled to land. It was a dazzling spectacle.

To the crew's credit, they handled the emergency well. As the aircraft rolled out on final approach and began to descend for landing, the crew shut down the right engine and closed the fuel valves. The fire went out. All that was left after touchdown were the scorch marks and several weeks' worth of repairs.

As we proceeded from one stopping point to another across the Pacific, comments on the flight of the White Whale made for good conversation and led to lots of tall tales about other aircraft being ferried across the pond. Occasionally, ground crews and bar girls would talk about a pure silver C-123 with miniature registration markings that had been there earlier. Everyone

seemed to know about it, but few had actually seen it, and no one had seen the crew.

## Wake Island

Wake Island is a very small triangular atoll in the Pacific between Hawaii and Guam. It is made up of three small coral islets with a total landmass of about three square miles. After it was reclaimed from the Japanese during WW II, it returned to its role as a refueling point on the long trip to the Far East. It had been a principal stopping point for Pan Am in the early development of commercial aviation and continued to be maintained by that airline for many years after the war.

Wake Island was a stopping point for the C-123's that were being ferried to Vietnam. It had a long runway, navigation aids, fuel, food, and sleeping accommodations. It also had numerous rusting remains from WW II. It seemed as if the entire island was surrounded with empty gun emplacements and concrete revetments. There was even a sunken ship that could be seen from the shore. Having seen these, a casual observer pretty much exhausted the attractions of the island.

Having spent the night on Wake Island, we left without regret for our next stopping point, Guam. It was my turn in the right seat. We climbed to 10,000 feet and headed west. For about three hours, the flight was uneventful. Then as we approached the point of no return, we noticed a trickle of oil from the right engine. Initially, it wasn't particularly alarming, but as time progressed, the trickle became a steady stream blowing across the top of the engine nacelle.

There were a number of options. It was obvious that the engine would eventually have to be shut down. Our diagnosis of the situation was that a piston was blown and was gradually eating up one of the cylinders. Eventually, the entire engine would disintegrate. A few calculations by the navigator led to the decision to return to Wake Island. It was still the closest point to land.

The aircraft commander turned the aircraft around, and the long trip back began. We continued on two engines for about a half hour during which I unsuccessfully attempted to advise air traffic control of our situation using the High Frequency (HF) radio.

Finally, the torque and RPM began to fluctuate. There was no choice but to shut the engine down. This we did successfully, using the mixture control for fear of a fire. I watched the prop twist into feathered position as the engine wound down. The next order of business was to attempt to maintain altitude. This proved to be more difficult than we had anticipated. The performance charts indicated the possibility of maintaining altitude and airspeed on one engine with cruise power settings. It soon became obvious that the data had never been tested in flight.

We were attempting to maintain no fewer than 115 knots with less than Maximum Except Take Off (METO) power, but in the process we were drifting down at the rate of a couple of hundred feet per minute.

There was no specific limitation on the length of time that an engine could be run at METO power, but we were hesitant to use such a high power setting for several hours. After all, it was the only engine left running and there was a lot of water between land and us. We concluded that we should lighten the aircraft as much as possible before considering higher power settings. We dropped the external wing tanks first. I activated the release system and watched the tanks clear the aircraft without incident. Then we dumped the fuel in the fuselage tanks out of the troop doors through hoses. Of course, opening the troop doors created additional drag for a short time. Next came anything that could be freed from the cargo compartment. The weight reduction did help, but our descent continued albeit at a reduced rate.

We were now at 6,000 feet and continuing to descend. At last, I was able to contact air traffic control. We gave our position, explained our predicament, and asked that the air-sea rescue Duck Butt (SA-16) stationed at Wake Island be scrambled to escort us. After an extended delay, we were advised that our request had been passed to Wake Island. We were encouraged by that news and envisioned an SA-16 appearing on the horizon in short order to join us for the remainder of our flight.

When after about an hour the SA-16 failed to appear, we queried air traffic control about its status. Again, there was an extended delay. We were then told that the cowling on one of the SA-16's engines had come loose when it attempted to take off. A repair had been made and the aircraft would be airborne shortly. We were at 4,000 feet.

At last we were able to pick up one of the navigation aids at Wake and were relieved to see our position confirmed. We began transmitting to the Wake Tower over the UHF radio and were able to establish two-way communications. Again, we attempted to determine the status of the SA-16 and were told that it was airborne. We immediately called the Duck Butt on guard channel and gave our position. The Duck Butt responded with its position. The navigator plotted the two positions and found that the SA-16 had already passed us and was well to the north. We were about to protest that the position given by the SA-16 didn't make any sense when its crew advised us that since we couldn't be found, they were returning to Wake Island.

We were now at 3,000 feet and able to hold altitude although the engine was running a bit hot. I opened the cowl flaps a few extra degrees. The engine temperature dropped slightly, but the extra drag reduced the aircraft's airspeed. We settled for the higher temperature.

At last, we saw a speck of land on the horizon. It was Wake Island. In short order, our problems with altitude were reversed. The aircraft was so light that descending for landing required such low power settings that the engine began to cool excessively even with the cowl flaps closed. On final approach and landing, the aircraft floated like a leaf.

Being on land again was a pleasant feeling, but the problem didn't end there. Getting the aircraft repaired was a major undertaking. The squadron's chief of maintenance was flown in to examine the aircraft. When he learned that the external tanks, chains, tie downs, and seats had been dumped into the ocean, he was less than happy. He didn't like the idea of changing the engine, either. The oil was checked for metal particles, and he grudgingly agreed that the engine would have to be changed. An engine, numerous maintenance personnel, and equipment would have to be flown into Wake Island.

It was a week before we could leave. It became a very long, boring week. During that time, we attempted to find the SA-16 crew. They were nowhere to be found. At last we stumbled into them. The conversation was anything but friendly. I was told in response to my complaint about their failure to provide escort that they were just as concerned about having to ditch as we were and just as likely to have to do so. The SA-16 was older and in far worse condition than the C-123. By all rights, they said we should have been escorting them. Furthermore, single engine aircraft were ferried across the Pacific all the time. No big deal and no big emergency. Strangely, no one remembered that the SA-16 was an amphibian, designed to land on water.

We were truly glad to leave for Vietnam.

## Eggs Sunny Side Up

I spent my first night in Vietnam at the Continental Palace in Saigon. The Continental Palace was a three-story building on a corner just a block or two from the Street of Flowers. It looked as if it could have been in the French Quarter of New Orleans or in a Humphrey Bogart movie. It had sweeping verandas with wrought iron railings and decorations. Instead of windows, rooms were surrounded with louvered French doors leading to the verandas. Numerous ceiling fans and mosquito netting were the principal protection from insects (of which there were many). To its credit, each of the hotel's many spacious rooms had a bathroom with hot and cold running water, but no air conditioning besides that provided by the soft breezes that blew through the louvered doors.

Although it was one of the older hotels, it did have an unmistakable charm about it. The much newer and more modern Caravel Hotel was just across the street, but it looked like just another hotel.

The bell cords in each room were one of the things that first attracted my attention. Pull the cord and a servant would appear almost magically. I felt like Aladdin just after he found the lamp.

There really wasn't much that I wanted except a good night's sleep. However, when I awoke the following morning, my first thoughts were of a good breakfast. I knew a small cup of very dark coffee and a roll would fall far short of satisfying my hunger. I craved eggs, sunny side up, ham, toast, lots of coffee, and grits. Lacking grits, I'd settle for fried potatoes. So, I pulled the magic cord. Within a minute a servant appeared in a white jacket. I told him what I wanted to eat. He acknowledged my order, bowed and left. I proceeded to shower, shave, and dress. As if on cue, a waiter appeared at the door, rolling a large wheeled tray. With a flourish, he set a table with tablecloth, silverware, serving dishes and a flower. He motioned for me to be seated, helped me with my chair, served my plate, and asked whether there would be anything else. I was awe struck but managed to dismiss him with an air of confidence.

The appearance of the meal was magnificent. The eggs were so perfect that they could have been painted. I cut one of the eggs with my fork and placed a substantial portion in my mouth. I had just begun to chew this delectable looking morsel when suddenly it hit me. The taste! It was awful. My first reaction was that the eggs had been fried in cod liver oil. In fact, they had been fried in refined fish oil.

Welcome to Vietnam. Everything tastes like fish oil.

## Pigs and Chickens

The mission at Danang was to resupply the Special Forces camps that bordered the Ho Chi Minh Trail along the Laotian – Vietnamese border. To do that, a detachment of C-123s was stationed at Tourane, later renamed Danang Airfield. Two A-26's and several AT-28D's were already present when we arrived.

Danang was a peaceful little place at that time. Tents had already been erected a short distance from the flight line to house air and ground crews. A couple of tents had been connected to form a dining hall. A large hanger and water tower remained from the Japanese occupation during World War II. A large concrete pad was found where a building had once stood. It was immediately designated as the site of the Officer's Club. It was later learned that the Japanese and the French had made the same decision.

A routine was soon established. Each morning, the C-123s would be loaded with live pigs, chickens, and ducks that had been stuffed into baskets plus rice, vegetables, barbed wire, ammunition, and even pierced steel planking (PSP). Most of the supplies were placed on sheets of plywood so that they could be slid along the skate-wheel conveyer tracks that were wired to the cargo compartment

floor. Groups of baskets and bundles were attached to small parachutes. The objective was to assure that the protein was still alive when it reached the ground. There was no provision for refrigeration (or much of anything else) at Special Forces camps.

There was even live protein on the hoof. As we gained experience in the operation, we became increasingly ambitious to the point of attempting to drop a live steer. It wasn't a very big steer. Really, not much more than a calf, but it made a big impression on everyone.

As the time for departure approached, several French trained Vietnamese paratroopers and a radio operator would join the crew. Shortly after takeoff, the radio operator would connect his radio to the aircraft's HF antenna with alligator clips and begin trying to contact the camp for which the delivery was bound. Once contact had been made, the paratroopers would begin untying the load in preparation for the drop. Next, the cargo door would be opened and the ramp extended. The aircraft would begin its descent below the mountaintops into the particular valley in which the camp was located. A flurry of activity would lead to the first plywood pallet being positioned on the ramp and the static lines for the parachutes being connected.

Communication with the camp was usually confused because of the need for instructions to be translated into Vietnamese by radio operators who spoke French but rarely spoke more than a few words of English. The odds were that the presence of a crowd of Vietnamese on the drop zone (usually a clearing in the center of the camp) would prevent release of the load on the first pass. This would also eliminate any element of surprise, for which the Vietcong in the surrounding area were always appreciative.

Drops were made from three hundred feet, just high enough to assure the parachutes would open and low enough to make Vietcong small arms fire effective. Timing was critical. The areas into which the drops were made were tiny. A second's delay between the signal to release and the crew's pushing the load off of the ramp could amount to the load missing its intended target by hundreds of feet. If the load fell outside the camp, it would frequently fall into Vietcong hands.

Experience and numerous missed drops soon led to crews using both the jump lights and the emergency alarm bell as a signal for drops. With the air rushing into the ramp and cargo door and the sound of the propellers biting the air as the throttles were advanced and the aircraft leveled off, the additional noise of the alarm bell was deafening.

Inevitably, once the load was released, people would rush onto the drop zone in an attempt to catch the bundles and baskets. It was a wonder that they weren't killed. Often the baskets would break loose from their chutes and crash to the

ground. The livestock that survived would run in all directions with Vietnamese troops scurrying behind. After all, it was their dinner that they were chasing.

After the food had been dropped, supplies such as ammunition, barbed wire and occasionally PSP (Pierced Steel Planking)\* would be dropped. Ammunition was carefully packed and dropped with chutes. That wasn't the case for barbed wire and PSP. Parachutes were expensive, so these items were allowed to freefall. It was a sight to behold. Roles of barbed wire would bounce through the camp like giant golf balls, often smashing into huts and buildings. The PSP was a far greater hazard. Once in the air, individual sheets would break free and begin rotating like the blades on a food processor. A sheet of PSP could cut through a building as if it was so much soft butter.

As soon as all the supplies had been dropped, the plane would begin to climb to a higher altitude again. As a precaution, the ramp would be left down until well clear of the area. The Vietcong would seldom fire on an aircraft with the ramp down as they assumed that additional drops were to be made. Since they were frequently the beneficiaries of these drops, they didn't want to seem inhospitable.

The ultimate experience was dropping a cow. The cow was the last item to be delivered and was accompanied by a handler. The cow was blindfolded and tied to the ramp until the last possible minute. The handler would then release it and allow it to stand. The cow was walked in a circle several times in an effort to prevent it from knowing the direction of the ramp. Then as the aircraft began its final descent, it was walked to the edge of the ramp and the static line for its parachute was connected.

By this time, it was late in the morning and the air was turbulent with thermals. Amazingly, cow and man stood on the ramp impervious to being pitched up and down by the motion of the aircraft. A minute before the drop, the red light was illuminated. Shortly after, the aircraft began to level off and the engines and props roared as the throttles were advanced. This was the crucial moment. The green light was turned on, the alarm bell sounded and its handler gave the cow a swift kick. As its front hooves went off the ramp, it did what came naturally. A stream of feces and urine poured forth. Propelled with the force of the aircraft's 120-knot wake being sucked through the rear cargo door, it was distributed over the entire interior of the aircraft all the way to the cockpit windows. Months later, small specs of feces could still be found decorating the interior of the aircraft.

According to later reports, the cow survived with only minor injuries to be the main dish at a celebration later in the week.

\* Pierced steel planking (PSP) comes in long sheets that can be locked together to cover earthen surfaces. Its primary use is as a temporary covering for runways and parking surfaces, although it makes good building material for almost any earthen structure.

# Fish Sauce

Not every mission involved dropping food and supplies into isolated camps. In some cases, we just moved people, supplies and equipment from one place to another. One of the more interesting of these missions required that we transport groups of Montagnards\* from their home territories to training centers where they would acquire modern weapons and be taught how to effectively defend their villages.

The first time I ever saw a Montagnard, a group of them were being escorted across the tarmac to our waiting aircraft. My first impression was that they were naked. They wore nothing but black loincloths over their very dark skin. The headman could be distinguished from the rest. He wore a bowler hat and a vest (plus his loincloth). They carried very little: small spears, blowpipes, an occasional ancient rifle, and small clay bottles. I asked one of the Americans who was with them what was in the bottle. His reply was, "It's sauce for their rice." "Fair enough," was my mental reply and I thought little more of it. Additional groups were brought to the aircraft until we had a full load of close to 60 of Montagnards.

I was amazed that the Montagnards would enter our "great metal bird" without apparent fear or foreboding. They were very orderly and stoic about the whole process. We went through the normal drill associated with starting the engines and began taxiing for takeoff. The noise of the engines in the cargo compartment was very loud and would become almost deafening as we began our takeoff. Yet, none of them seemed bothered by it.

The trip to their destination took a little over an hour. We parked and opened the ramp and door. The Montagnards and their escorts deplaned while we left the engines running. In another hour, we were back at Danang. It was only after we parked on the maintenance ramp that the pilot and I realized that there was a horrible smell in the cargo compartment. It was sickening. Skunk would have smelled better. One of the Montagnards had set his clay bottle of sauce on the cargo floor. Apparently, the vibration of the aircraft had broken it.

"What to do?" The loadmaster decided that the best solution would be to have a fire truck hose the cargo floor down. The crew chief agreed. I thought that would be the end of it. It wasn't. The smell was slightly reduced but far from gone. Another discussion led to the decision to remove the floor panels around the area where it was believed the bottle had broken. That area was then hosed again. The smell was further reduced but still sickening. There was little else that could be done. We would have to live with the smell and hope it would fade away. Months later, it still could be detected at a hundred paces.

\*"Montagnard" is a general term used to refer to the tribal people who lived in the mountains of Vietnam. Long standing conflicts over land with the Vietnamese had forced them into the mountains from more fertile soil.

# Water Skiing

The war was being fought on a six-day week, and there was little to do at Danang besides fly. Recreation soon became an issue. Some of the crews played bridge, others played poker. Visiting the town was an interesting experience once or twice, but it got old soon enough. Marble Mountain with its Buddhist shrines was a genuine tourist attraction, but not worth repeated visits. There were also a beach and a small harbor beside the town. A great idea was born.

Why not pick up some equipment from special services in the Philippines and go water skiing? In a matter of a few weeks, an aircraft returning to Danang from Clark AB brought all of the needed equipment. The boat, skis, and other equipment were placed at a small dock in town. All that was needed was a ride into town and a few Piasters (local currency) to buy gasoline to fill the tank on the outboard engine.

I had been water-skiing once or twice before and thought that it would be a hoot. So, together with a couple of other enthusiasts, we journeyed into town and took the boat out for some skiing. It was great. The water in the harbor was fairly smooth and not particularly cold. After several of us had the pleasure of skiing, someone in the boat said that they heard something. We paused, but couldn't hear anything, so we continued until someone else heard the same sound. We stopped and waited. Sure enough, we could hear the crack of occasional gunfire. Could it be directed at us? We never saw a round strike the water near us but concluded that caution was in order. Since the gunfire seemed to occur primarily when we were pulling a skier, we might not have seen a round strike the water for all the wake and spray.

We took the boat back to the dock and returned to the base. We didn't want to sound like a bunch of wimps, so we only casually mentioned our suspicions to the base recreational services officer. He seemed to just shrugged it off. We later learned that he had taken the matter quite seriously. A week later, we learned that insurgents had caused a disturbance in the town. Far from being the boring place it appeared, a lot was going on beneath the surface.

Ignorance can be a blessing at times. In our case, it could have been a curse. Having little if any appreciation for the recent history of the area and the deep emotions involved in the ongoing conflict, we had played the role of imperialist playboys to the hilt. Obviously, we had rubbed some of the local folks the wrong way.

# Oops

As the C-123 aircrews began to settle into a routine at Danang, they encountered several Americans in civilian attire at the airfield. They were assigned there to fly two A-26's. The A-26's were left over from WW II and the Korean conflict. They had been pulled from the bone year (storage) at Tucson and minimally reconditioned. They actually looked quite impressive with multiple 50 Cal machine guns mounted in the nose and napalm canisters hung under the wings.

The A-26 crews spent most of their time at the officers' club; such as it was, waiting for the phone to ring. The phone was hung on a tent pole in the center of the club. The only calls that could be received were from headquarters in Saigon. When the phone rang, it was usually time to scramble. Two crew members would run across the compound and down to the flight line, hop in a waiting aircraft, start it and be gone in a matter of a few minutes. They would usually be back in an hour or two with their munitions spent. The bomb racks would not remain empty for long. In short order, the aircraft would be fueled, rearmed, and readied for launch.

Since the aircraft carried no markings, we asked few questions and were told few lies. Therefore, when one of the A-26's failed to return, little attention was given to the matter. It was assumed that the crew had been instructed to land elsewhere and would return to Danang in due course. After a few days passed, word circulated that the aircraft had crashed and the crew had been killed. One A-26 and one crew remained and continued to fly missions at a fairly regular pace. A couple of weeks passed and the same thing happened. The aircraft did not return and was later reported to have crashed. How strange?

It was stranger still when we learned that the wings had folded on both aircraft as they attempted to pull up from bomb runs. In the rush to recondition the aircraft and place them in service again, no one had thought to check the wing spars for corrosion, a common problem with aircraft hastily manufactured to meet the attrition rates of WW II.\* Oops!

\*A number of thoroughly reconditioned and slightly modified A-26s saw service later in the war. They performed extremely well.

# A Shau

A Shau is located on the Laotian border to north of Danang and south of Khe Sanh. The DMZ was slightly further north. The importance of A Shau during the Vietnam conflict was its connection to the Ho Chih Minh Trail. A Shau along with Khe Sanh were interdiction points even during the French presence. A Lui, an abandoned French landing site, not more than a mile north of A Shau along the valley floor, attested to its long and prominent role in the conflict.

The crew on which I served and several other crews were tasked with shuttling in and out of the PSP field at A Shau to rotate South Vietnamese troops that were stationed there. Specifically, it was our job to take fresh troops from Danang to A Shau and return with the troops that were being replaced. We would continue to do so until the rotation was complete.

Landing at A Shau was no picnic. It was located at the south end of the A Shau Valley. It was necessary to descend into the open north end of the valley and fly a circling pattern along the edge of the mountains to make a final approach for landing to the north. (The aircraft could not make a sufficiently steep climb to clear the mountains if landings and takeoffs were made in the other direction.)

Our approach patterns made us easy targets for small arms fire, but to my knowledge none of our aircraft suffered significant damage. Touchdown had to be on the money; the runway was short and slippery. If an aircraft had the misfortune to run off the far end of the runway, the crew and passengers would find themselves in a minefield. However, landing and takeoff were not the principal hazards of the operation.

The South Vietnamese troops were the real hazard. To get the arriving South Vietnamese troops to leave the aircraft, it was necessary for a South Vietnamese officer to threaten to shoot anyone who did not promptly exit the aircraft. It was an ugly scene, with some of the South Vietnamese soldiers hiding and cowering around the airplane. Inevitably, while departing troops were being brought to the aircraft, other South Vietnamese soldiers would attempt to stow away, even hiding in small spaces under the cockpit floor. On several occasions, just as we were closing the cargo ramp and door, a soldier or two would rush the aircraft attempting to get on board before an officer could stop them.

I was stunned at these acts of apparent cowardice, insubordination, and threats of summary execution. The situation was beyond anything I could have imagined. Unable to deal with the real drama of the moment, my thoughts shifted to matters I could comprehend, such as possible damage to the aircraft if a South Vietnamese officer actually shot one of his soldiers. The repercussions of such an event were also a source of concern, not to mention disposal of the body.

We finished the shuttle in good time and didn't even miss lunch at Danang. As we ate, we talked about everything from sports to souvenirs. No one even mentioned the events at A Shau.

## Dawn Patrol

It was dawn. We had just returned from a night mission\* and were sitting in an outdoor restaurant on the roof of the Majestic Hotel in Saigon. The morning was

clear and relatively cool, although the temperature was beginning to rise. It was going to be another unbelievably hot and humid day.

Without giving it much thought, we noticed three P-51's flying in the area. After a couple of minutes, it dawned on us that the aircraft were flying in a racetrack pattern. We were at one end of the pattern; the presidential palace was at the other.

Each aircraft in turn would dive at the palace; then pull back up into the pattern to be followed by the next aircraft. It should have been immediately obvious to us that the P-51's were dropping bombs, but it wasn't. We couldn't hear anything that sounded like an explosion and we couldn't see any smoke. We were incredulous when it finally dawned on us that the palace was being bombed. Why would anyone want to do such a thing? We didn't have a clue. (It was only much later that we came to understand a little about the political situation.)

After multiple passes had been made by the three P-51's, a gunboat anchored in the river near the hotel fired a few rounds at the aircraft. By then, they were already heading west. We learned later that President Diem had not been injured in the attack. Some members of the general public were disappointed that Madame Nhu (known for her vitriolic tongue) was also spared any injury.

Having witnessed an attempted coup with little comprehension, we decided to get a little sleep. Without further ado, we went to our rooms and were soon fast asleep. After all, we'd been up all night.

\*Night missions were few in number, but as time progressed more and more military planners became aware of the C-123's presence in-country and began generating requirements for its use. One of those requirements was dropping flares to illuminate outposts that were under attack at night.

## A Fancy Landing

Many of the combat missions in which I participated while in Vietnam involved airdrops. A major exception came at an assault field north of Saigon. It was about 2,500 feet long and composed of slippery red mud. The jungle and unfriendly insurgents surrounded it. Our support came from an A-26 that would occasionally spray the jungle with its machine guns and an aerial port team headed by John Night, big, black, pet cigar and missing teeth.

Aircraft would shuttle between Ton Son Nhut and the small field delivering supplies and equipment. Each time an aircraft began its approach for landing, the insurgents would send up a few rounds and then in short order be sprayed with machine gun fire from the A-26. To the best of my knowledge, the insurgents never hit one of our aircraft, but they did disrupt our activities and caused our approaches to become progressively steeper.

When our turn came, our final approach was sufficiently steep to cause slightly excessive airspeed and a touchdown a bit far down the runway. As the wheels

settled into the mud, the pilot reversed the props. One prop reversed, the other didn't. The aircraft began to twist and started sliding sideways in the mud and then backward toward the end of the runway. The pilot quickly brought both throttles into forward thrust range and, by the grace of God, we stopped just short of the trees. Without missing a step, the cargo door was opened and the ramp lowered. As the cargo was unloaded, John Night entered the aircraft and walked up to the cockpit. His only comment was, "Getting a little fancy, aren't you." The pilot just smiled. In a couple of minutes, we began our return flight to pick up another load. It turned out to be a long day.

## Serious Business

If we were under any illusions about our indestructibility, those illusions were soon shattered. Resupplying Special Forces camps along the Laotian border required flying in the mountains. The standard warning given to all crews is to avoid flying up blind valleys. In other words, avoid flying in valleys that don't have a known exit. However, in a country that has so many mountains and valleys, it is all too easy to mistake one valley for another.

Apparently, that is what happened to another crew. In an attempt to find a particular Special Forces camp, they had flown up the wrong valley. It was a dead end. When the crew suddenly encountered the end of the valley, they found that it was too narrow to allow them to turn around and the mountains too steep to climb over. Their desperate effort to climb out of the valley did have one benefit. When the aircraft hit the side of a mountain, it was in a controlled stall (very low airspeed). That the crew survived is a tribute to the design of the aircraft. Nevertheless, the pilot was knocked unconscious and his legs were crushed. The others suffered lesser injuries and were in shock. The co-pilot was able to find his way out of the aircraft, but then collapsed from a concussion and became delirious.

The jungle literally swallowed the aircraft. Its crash didn't leave a noticeable scar on the mountainside. When the aircraft did not return to base, a search was initiated. Almost a week passed without a sighting. Finally, the crash site was located, a rescue team was inserted, and the survivors were extricated.

The pilot did survive but lost the use of his legs. The other crewmembers recovered in time. Those of us who were in Vietnam at the time took notice, but it was only through the accumulated experience of many accidents that a key lesson was learned: automatic locator devices are essential for effective rescue and recovery of aircrews and passengers. It is unreasonably optimistic to expect crewmembers to take an active role with their own rescue after a crash. Military (and I hope civilian) transport aircraft are now equipped automatically activated crash site locator beacons.

## Cheap Charlie's

When we were in Saigon, the question we frequently asked was, "Where to eat?" Cheap Charlie's got my vote on numerous occasions. It was a small restaurant near the Caravel hotel that featured Chinese cuisine. The food was excellent, the price was definitely right, but the place was filthy. The floors were hard packed dirt, and the walls and tables were covered with a film of grease and grit. To keep the cockroaches from running up on top of the tables, the legs were set in cans of kerosene. We should have all died of some horrible disease from eating at Charlie's. To my knowledge, no one ever suffered the slightest intestinal distress, except from overeating.

There was also a French restaurant on the Street of Flowers that enjoyed an excellent reputation. I have never had French Onion Soup before or since that could even come close to being as good. But again, there was the issue of sanitation. One glance at the kitchen and the cockroaches that patrolled the premises was enough cause grave concern. Nevertheless, not a complaint was heard about even the slightest form of indigestion.

For those of us who were a bit squeamish about where we ate, there was one place that we felt sure would be safe. That was the restaurant at the top of the Rex Hotel. The Rex was a contract billet that served American style food. In theory, it was comparable to eating at an officer's club. So, one evening when spaghetti was on the menu, I ate my fill and then some. Within a couple of hours, I was in serious distress. I have never felt so sick for so long in my whole life. Vomiting and diarrhea left me so weak that I could barely get out of bed. I thought I was going to die from some form of poisoning. After a couple of days, I recovered. I was much thinner and wiser. Eat what the natives eat the way the natives prepare it, grease and cockroaches notwithstanding.

## The Philippines

From time to time, aircraft require fairly extensive maintenance. While deployed squadrons can accomplish minor miracles of repair, they aren't manned or equipped for heavy maintenance. In the case of Vietnam, that meant that a crew would have to fly the aircraft to Clark Air Base in the Philippines to have the necessary work performed.

Clark was a major installation even before World War II. By the beginning of the Vietnam conflict, it had become famous as the site of the big BX (base exchange). There wasn't much that the exchange didn't carry from cameras, jewelry, and china to sporting equipment and clothing. All the wealth of Asia seemed to be on display.

The military personnel assigned to the base lived very well. The difference in the standard of living of the Americans and the natives was quite pronounced. It was common for officers who were assigned to the base with their families to employ maids, houseboys, and guards to assure their comfort and safety. Even a low ranking enlisted man was rich in comparison to the local population.

The adjoining town was Angeles City. It is understandable that in the presence of such wealth as was displayed by the Americans assigned to the base, the local residents became envious. Angeles and the many Filipinos who worked on the base became famous for the ingenuity of the crimes they committed. The crime of choice was, of course, theft.

Most of the time, theft and other petty crimes were little more than an annoyance. However, they could take on remarkable proportions. The most frequently told tale is about the theft of a flight line fire truck. It was a huge, eighteen-wheel, dark blue vehicle that carried hundreds of gallons of water and fire suppressant foam. Stealing it from the base represented a real challenge.

Obviously, it couldn't be stolen like a car. It was too easily recognizable to sneak it off the base. The gates to the base were guarded and the truck was kept in a fire station where numerous firemen lived and worked. Taking it apart and removing it piece-by-piece just wasn't practical. It was simply too big.

The answer was an excellent example of thinking "outside the box." Always interested in maintaining the best possible relations with the surrounding community, the base had taken to providing a helping hand in the event of local emergencies. Therefore, when a fire broke out in a collection of houses a short distance from the base, no one was surprised when several base fire trucks responded. It didn't occur to the guards on the gate that flight line fire suppression vehicles were not intended for such use. All the fire trucks were painted blue and all were in a line. Instead when this lumbering giant rolled toward the gate behind the other fire trucks, it was waived through without further thought.

The big surprise came a few hours later when the other fire trucks returned. No one knew what had happened to the flight line fire truck. In fact, no one had seen it. It eventually became obvious that it had been driven through town and down the main highway toward Manila. A few months later, it was learned that the Manila airport had acquired a new fire suppression vehicle, identical in all but color to the one that had been stolen. When airport authorities were confronted over the matter, they produced a bill of sale from an unknown individual. Under Philippine law, that was all that was required. There is no provision for the restoration of stolen property, if it can be shown that a third party bought the property in good faith. This aspect of Philippine law seemed a bit too convenient.

Nothing more could be done but to lodge a hollow protest through diplomatic channels.

There are claims that this amazing feat may have been topped some years later when an entire house was stolen from the base. However, persons making such claims often ignored the fact that the house had yet to be constructed. It was a prefab kit, waiting to be assembled. A piece of cake compared to stealing a flight line fire truck.

## Knowing MacArthur

It was a time of transition. The older Filipino employees on Clark Air Base were reaching the age of retirement. It wouldn't be long before younger employees would replace them. The older employees had experienced World War II and the Japanese occupation of the Philippines. They may not have loved America before the occupation, but they most surely did when it was over.

General Douglas Mac Arthur, the man who ended the Japanese occupation, said he would return. When he did, he became a hero of Homeric proportions in Filipino eyes. Therefore having met him, having been associated with him in some way, or even having shaken his hand became a badge of honor for many Filipinos.

There was an elderly, rather distinguished looking employee at the Clark Air Base Officers Club who served as the doorman. Each time some new face would appear at the club, he would welcome them and then introduce himself by saying, "I knew General Mac Arthur." It was said with same level of reverence that one could imagine the apostle John using to say that he knew Jesus. No other comment was needed. The significance of his entire life was summed up in that one statement.

Many a young pilot benefited from the deep gratitude that the Filipinos felt for their liberation. One of those beneficiaries was Jack. Just as he had disappeared without a trace from Payne Field, so he reappeared at Clark. He was now flying C-123's for Air America under a government contract. How Air America acquired a surplus C-123 is unknown. Just where the aircraft was stationed remained unspoken, but from time to time it required major maintenance, and arrangements had been made for that maintenance to be performed at Clark. Frequently, Jack had to spend several days waiting for the necessary work to be accomplished. He usually spent a large portion of that time at the Clark club.

As if it knew that the officers' club at Payne Field had been the site of Jack's downfall, the Clark club sought to make amends by an unbelievable degree of forbearance. It seemed that no matter what he did, it was overlooked or forgiven. Likewise, there was a degree of reciprocity in Jack's behavior. Having suffered

banishment from the military for his indiscretions, Jack seemed to appreciate the kindness he was shown and behaved with a previously unknown degree of discretion in response to the cajoling of the club staff.

It wasn't long before Jack was considered to be a really solid citizen.

## A Fitting End

After I returned from Vietnam to Payne Field and was about to settle into a normal routine, I was notified that I was selected to attend Squadron Officers School at Maxwell AFB. Shortly after arriving at Maxwell, I encountered one of the natural hazards of being a transport pilot. Hemorrhoids.

Transport pilots sit for extended periods of time as their aircraft grind their way through the sky. Circulation is cut off at key points of the posterior and eventually leads to that dreaded ailment: hemorrhoids. Hemorrhoids vary in size and level of discomfort but for the most part, they are simply tolerated. However, from time to time, a classic case of hemorrhoids is visited upon one individual or another. This was just such a case. They were so large, protruded so far, and were so painful that little imagination was required to envision that they were dragging the ground. There was a genuine hesitancy to step backwards for fear of stepping on them!

Sitz baths and ointments are the most common treatments. However, for a truly grand case, surgery can be the only answer. The clotted vein must be removed in a specialized operation that requires the services of a surgeon.

After an extended period of serious personal discomfort, I had no alternative but to accept the diagnosis of the flight surgeon. Surprisingly, a qualified surgeon was among the medical personnel who were present at Maxwell. A date and time were set for the operation. I appeared at the appointed day and time and was turned over to the mercies of military medical practice. After being relieved of my clothing and dressed in a backless robe, I was taken to a small partitioned area with a raised table. I was instructed to lie across the table on my stomach. The center of the table was then raised so that my posterior was lifted well above my head and my legs spread well apart. The cheeks of my buttocks were then pulled apart with tape and I was left to await my fate.

After about 15 minutes a corpsman entered the room, explained that the surgeon had been delayed, and left. Time passed. Embarrassment turned to boredom. After an additional half hour, a short man with a balding head and horn-rimmed glasses entered the room. Without bothering to greet me, he grasped the uplifted cheeks, spread them apart, paused momentarily, released them, and exited the room. Another extended delay followed. Finally, another corpsman entered the room and said, "He doesn't want to do it." I asked, "So, what am I supposed to do?" The corpsman just shrugged and left the room.

Fifteen minutes later, I was presented with my clothing and told I could leave. When I asked what treatment had been prescribed, I was told, "None." The surgeon had seen me and signed the appropriate forms. Therefore, I was cured. I left dragging my hemorrhoids behind me.

In many ways, it was a fitting end to my first experience in Vietnam.

## Garbage

I had many opportunities to visit South Vietnam prior to the Tet Offensive of 1968. None of them were particularly inspiring. In addition to being a military mess, the war had become a bureaucratic one, too. Just how precarious our situation in Vietnam had become didn't dawn on me until late 1967, when I saw garbage stacked in the streets of Saigon like cordwood.

At one time, Saigon had been a beautiful city with wide avenues. One of these was the Street of Flowers. Its name came from the large number of vendors of cut flowers who set up little stands on the center and side islands of the street. These were gone in late 1967. In their place was garbage, not just little piles of garbage but towering walls of garbage. Garbage was everywhere. The city was so completely surrounded and cut off that even the garbage could not be removed. It was a city under siege.

I left with a deep sense of foreboding. The Tet Offensive was launched a couple of months later.

## TET

The last time I was in Vietnam was the night of the Tet Offensive in 1968. I was an additional crewmember (ACM) on a C-130. The unsettled atmosphere at Ton Son Nhut led us to spend the night on the base, a wise decision. We left at dawn the following morning. Our cargo was a load of coffins filled with dead Korean soldiers to be delivered to Seoul.

As we flew north over Vietnam in the dawn light, we talked by radio to several radar stations. The fighting had been fierce, but we had held our positions. Enemy losses appeared to be extremely high. We continued north and eventually landed in Hong Kong. The first person to meet the aircraft was not part of the airport staff, but a French newspaperman. The first questions from his lips were, "Has South Vietnam fallen? Were we the first evacuees?" He was terribly disappointed when we told him that the government of South Vietnam was far from falling.

## Street Without Joy

I read *Street Without Joy* by Bernard Fall in 1962, either just before leaving Vietnam or shortly thereafter. The book describes the French effort to regain their position as a colonial power in Vietnam after World War II and how they were exhausted and demoralized in the process. The book was quite popular at the time, and several people asked me what I thought about it. My reply was typical of many young men in the military, "That couldn't happen to us." So much for the gift of prophecy.

## The Hickam O' Club

Over the years, I visited the Headquarters of Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) in Hawaii many times. The Officers' Club at Hickam AFB took on the special character of being one of the last watering holes on American soil for the many crews flying aircraft to Vietnam. We all tended to be a bit loud, and I'm sure we were an annoyance to those persons assigned to the base for extended tours. Yet, it was one of the last places we could all congregate.

What struck me when I returned to the Officers' Club at Hickam in the late 1970's was that its appearance had not changed over the years. It looked just the same as the first time I saw it. Possibly because of that quality of sameness, the place brought back vivid memories of persons who by then were long deceased. I know better than to say the place was haunted, but it felt like it.

I was a little concerned over my reaction to seeing the Hickam Officers' Club until I had the opportunity to help host a very proper scholar and churchman who was visiting a local university near my home. He had agreed to come a considerable distance to give a series of lectures on the condition that we arrange for him to visit Rick's Lounge in Fayetteville and Fort Bragg where he had trained with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne during the Vietnam conflict. Sadly, Rick's was gone, long since closed as part of an effort to clean up notorious Hay Street.

Local community members considered Rick's and many similar establishments to be a disgrace. There is no doubt that they had a certain sleazy quality. Yet, hearing my visitor talk about the occasions when he and his comrades had visited Rick's led me to believe that the city fathers of Fayetteville had made a terrible mistake. They should have built a monument to Rick's, a place of remembrance for all who passed through its doors, shared a few good times, and then went on to fight a war for which many of their fellow citizens condemned them. Who knows, a few of those spirits in which I don't believe may have found rest there.

