

THE GENERAL

By Jeff Noecker, Gunner, 16th SOS, 1970/71

The mission day started out pretty much as usual except that it was my turn to go out and preflight the guns. This got me back to the squadron a tad late for the mission briefing. As I was walking toward the door to the briefing room, I was met by this old guy in a sterilized flight suit asking where the briefing was for Spectre (call #). I showed him where it was and we went in. As you recall, we occasionally had someone fly with us for an orientation flight and, given his age, figured it was a Lockheed or LTV tech guy or just someone out for a joy ride on the world's best airborne six shooter. During the briefing and preflight, I never gave the old guy much thought. When we got to the flight line, I suspect that they had him up on the flight crew deck during interior preflight and preparation for take-off as that was the norm in order to keep visitors out of the way. We headed out to the trails and, after we started attacking the first set of trucks, I see this guy heading towards the back of the airplane. I was working the #4 40mm at the time. Remember how far out the back of the gun the rammer shoe would come during recoil? We were always VERY careful to keep our hands away from there during firing as it could take off a hand and never slow down. There was also the issue of an expended brass round headed out of the back of the gun at the speed of heat as the gun was firing. Well, the old guy comes back to the gun to take a closer look. He bends over and sticks his face to within an inch of the rear opening of the gun. The gun is firing so I put the clip of ammo in my left hand and reached out my right to prevent him from getting any closer and to warn him of the danger. Between the clip of ammo in my left hand and the gun firing, I kinda slipped and my right hand pushed him backwards, rather than merely stopping him. Also, he was leaning over the 55 gal brass drum which meant he wasn't in a "stable" position. Between that and my push, he went backwards, tripping over an open 40mm can, and went unceremoniously to the floor. Whoever was passing ammo helped him up (gun still firing) but he went forward and back to the flight deck. It was an hour or two later when the pilot announced that we were diverting to NKP. The next thing out of his mouth was for the gunners to watch out for the "General" as he was leaving the flight deck and coming aft. I looked at the other gunner and said "we got a General on board"? He shrugged his shoulders and said he didn't know. Well, at 23 years of age, 1+1 never equaled 2 for me so I started making myself look presentable so I could meet the General (whoever he was) and get some points. I looked forward and

saw a figure climbing down the ladder and stopping to talk with the front gunner. Then he proceeded to the rear and, as he got closer, I noticed it was the little old man I put on his ass. He glared at me like Methuselah and I thought I was gonna turn to stone. He kept on going to the ramp, got a load of IO talk, and headed back to the flight deck. I just knew my career was over and that I'd be in Leavenworth for assaulting a general. The hour or so that it took us to fly to NKP was the longest, most miserable, hour of my life. After we taxied to base ops at NKP, he came aft again to get off the airplane. As he approached, I "hid" behind my headset, and pretended I was doing something to the gun. This had goes up to my shoulder and turns me around. It's the general. He puts out his hand and starts pumping mine with an enormous grin saying, "That was the most fantastic (yada yada yada) thing I ever saw"! My mouth dropped to the floor. I composed myself and tried to apologize for pushing him. He said something like "that's OK son. I was pretty pissed at first and told the pilot what had happened. He said I shouldn't have been so close to an operating weapon in the first place and that I was lucky you didn't toss my ass out the ramp". Talk about a sigh of relief! If the barometric pressure was 29.92 when we landed, it was WELL above 30.00 when I exhaled. Come to find out, he was a three star, Vice-Commander, PACAF, and was on an inspection tour of some kind. His presence in-country was classified cuz they didn't want the North to know a high ranking officer was flying over the Trails. Too tempting a target I guess. At any rate, one of the things I learned that nights was that "dodging a bullet" doesn't always mean evading a stream of 37mm. Given my behavior, I often wonder how I managed an entire AF career and still retire as a Senior NCO.