

Night Mission on the Ho Chi Minh Trail

By Mark Berent ©

It's cool this evening, thank God. The night is beautiful, moody, an easy rain falling. Thunder rumbles comfortably in the distance. Just the right texture to erase the oppressive heat memories of a few hours ago. Strange how the Thai monsoon heat sucks the energy from your mind and body by day, only to restore it by the cool night rain.

I am pleased by the tranquil sights and sounds outside my BOQ room door. Distant ramp lights, glare softened by the rain, glisten the leaves and flowers. The straight-down, light rain splashes gently, nicely on the walkways, on the roads, the roofs. Inside the room I put some slow California swing on the recorder (You gotta go where you wanta go . . .) and warm some soup on the hot plate. Warm music, warm smell . . . I am in a different world. (Do what you wanta, wanta do . . .) I've left the door open—I like the sound of the rain out there.

A few hours later, slightly after midnight, I am sitting in the cockpit of my airplane. It is a jet fighter, a Phantom, and it's a good airplane. We don't actually get into the thing—we put it on. I am attached to my craft by two hoses, three wires, lap belt, shoulder harness, and two calf garters to keep my legs from flailing about in the event of a high-speed bailout. The gear I wear—gun, G-suit, survival vest, parachute harness—is bulky, uncomfortable, and means life or death.

I start the engines, check the myriad of systems—electronic, radar, engine, fire control, navigation—all systems; receive

certain information from the control tower, and am ready to taxi. With hand signals we are cleared out of the revetment and down the ramp to the arming area.

I have closed the canopy to keep the rain out, and switch the heavy windscreen blower on and off to hold visibility. I can only keep its hot air on for seconds at a time while on the ground, to prevent cracking the heavy screen. The arming crew, wearing bright colors to indicate their duties, swarm under the plane: electrical continuity—checked; weapons—armed; pins—pulled. Last all-around look-see by the chief—a salute, a thumbs up, we are cleared. God, the rapport between pilot and ground crew—their last sigh, thumbs up—they are with me. You see them quivering, straining, bodies poised forward as they watch their airplane take off and leave them.

And we are ready, my craft and I. Throttles forward and outboard, gauges OK, afterburners ignite, nose wheel steering, rudder effective, line speed, rotation speed—we are off, leaving behind only a ripping, tearing, gut noise as we split into the low black overcast, afterburner glow not even visible anymore.

Steadily we climb, turning a few degrees, easing stick forward some, trimming, climbing, climbing, then suddenly—on top! On top where the moonlight is so damn marvelously bright and the undercast appears a gently rolling snow-covered field. It's just so clear and good up here, I could fly forever. This is part of what flying is all about. I surge and strain against my harness, taking a few seconds to stretch and enjoy this privileged sight.

I've already set course to rendezvous with a tanker, to take on more fuel for my work tonight. We meet after a long cut-off turn, and I nestle under him as he flies his long, delicate boom toward my innards. A slight thump/bump, and I'm receiving. No words—all light signals. Can't even thank the boomer. We cruise silently together for several minutes. Suddenly he snatches it back, a clean break, and I'm cleared, off and away.

Now I turn east and very soon cross the fence far below. Those tanker guys will take you to hell and then come in and pull you right out again with their flying fuel trucks. Hairy work. They're grand guys.

Soon I make radio contact with another craft, a big one, a gunship, painted black and flying very low. Like the proverbial specter, he wheels and turns just above the guns, the limestone outcropping, called karst, and the mountains—probing, searching with infrared eyes for supply trucks headed south. He has many engines and more guns. His scanner gets something in his scope, and the pilot goes into a steep bank—right over the target. His guns flick and flash, scream and moan, long amber tongues lick the ground, the trail, the trucks. I am there to keep enemy guns off him and to help him kill trucks. Funny—he can see the trucks but not the guns 'til they're on him. I cannot see the trucks but pick the guns up as soon as the first rounds flash out on the muzzles.

Inside my cockpit all the lights are off or down to a dim, glow, showing just the instruments I need. The headset in my helmet tells me in a crackling, sometimes joking voice the information I

must have; how high and how close the nearest karst, target elevation, altimeter setting, safe bailout area, guns, what the other pilot sees on the trails, where he will be when I roll in.

Then, in the blackest of black, he lets out an air-burning flare to float down and illuminate the sharp rising ground. At least then I can mentally photograph the target area. Or he might throw out a big log, a flare marker, that will fall to the ground and give off a steady glow. From that point he will tell me where to strike: fifty meters east, or 100 meters south, or, if there are two logs, hit between the two.

I push the power up now, recheck the weapons settings, gun switches, gunsight setting, airspeed, altitude—roll in! Peering, straining, leaning way forward in harness, trying so hard to pick up the area where I know the target to be—it's so dark down there.

Sometimes when I drop, pass after pass, great fire balls will roll and boil upward and a large, rather rectangular fire will let us know we've hit another supply truck. Then we will probe with firepower all around that truck to find if there are more. Often we will touch off several, their fires outlining the trail or truck park. There are no villages or hooches for miles around; the locals have been gone for years. They silently stole away the first day those big trucks started plunging down the trails from up north. But there are gun pits down there—its, holes, reveted sites, guns in caves, guns on the karst, guns on the hills, in the jungles, big ones, little ones.

Many times garden-hose streams of cherry balls will arc and

curve up, seeming to float so slowly toward me. Those from the smaller-caliber, rapid-fire quads; and then the big stuff opens up, clip after clip of 37-mm and 57-mm follow the garden hose, which is trying to pinpoint me like a search light. Good fire discipline—no one shoots except on command.

But my lights are out, and I'm moving, jinking. The master fire controller down there tries to find me by sound. His rising shells burst harmlessly around me. The heavier stuff in clips of five and seven rounds goes off way behind.

Tonight we are lucky—no "golden BB." The golden BB is that one stray shell that gets you. Not always so lucky. One night we had four down in Death Valley—that's just south of Mu Gia Pass. Only got two people out the next day, and that cost a Sandy (A-1) pilot. "And if the big guns don't get you, the black karst will," goes the song. It is black, karsty country down there.

Soon I have no more ammunition. We, the gunship and I, gravely thank each other, and I pull up to thirty or so thousand feet, turn my navigation lights back on, and start across the Lao border to my home base. In spite of an air-conditioning system working hard enough to cool a five-room house, I'm sweating. I'm tired. My neck is sore. In fact, I'm sore all over. All those roll-ins and diving pullouts, jinking, craning your head, looking, always looking around, in the cockpit, outside, behind, left, right, up, down. But I am headed home, my aircraft is light and more responsive.

Too quickly I am in the thick, puffy thunder clouds and rain of the southwest monsoon. Wild, the psychedelic green, wiry, and

twisty St. Elmo's fire flows liquid and surrealistic on the canopy a few inches away. I am used to it—fascinating. It's comforting, actually, sitting snuggled up in the cockpit, harness and lap belt tight, seat lowered, facing a panel of red-glowing instruments, plane buffeting slightly from the storm. Moving without conscious thought, I place the stick and rudder pedals and throttles in this or that position—not so much mechanically moving things, rather just willing the craft to do what I see should be done by what the instruments tell me.

I'm used to flying night missions now. We "night owls" do feel rather elite, I suppose. We speak of the day pilots in somewhat condescending tones. We have a black pilot who says, "Well, day pilots are OK, I guess, but I wouldn't want my daughter to marry one." We have all kinds; quiet guys, jokey guys (the Jewish pilot with the fierce black bristly mustache who asks, "What is a nice Jewish boy like me doing over here, killing Buddhists to make the world safe for Christianity?"), noisy guys, scared guys, whatever. But all of them do their job. I mean night after night they go out and get hammered and hosed, and yet keep right at it. And all that effort, sacrifice, blood going down the tubes. Well, these thoughts aren't going to get me home. This is no time to be thinking about anything but what I'm doing right now.

I call up some people on the ground who are sitting in darkened, blacked-out rooms, staring at phosphorescent screens that are their eyes to the night sky. Radar energy reflecting from me shows them where I am. I flick a switch at their command and

trigger an extra burst of energy at them so they have positive identification. By radio they direct me, crisply, clearly, to a point in space and time that another man in another darkened room by a runway watches anxiously. His eyes follow a little electronic bug crawling down a radar screen between two converging lines. His voice tells me how the bug is doing, or how it should be doing. In a flat, precise voice the radar controller keeps up a constant patter—"Turn left two degrees...approaching glide path...prepare to start descent in four miles."

Inside the cockpit I move a few levers and feel the heavy landing gear thud into place and then counteract the nose rise as the flaps grind down. I try to follow his machine-like instructions quite accurately, as I am very near the ground now. More voice, more commands, then a glimmer of approach lights, and suddenly the wet runway is beneath me. I slip over the end, engines whistling a down note as I retard the throttles, and I'm on the ground at last.

If the runway is heavy with rain, I lower a hook to snatch a cable laid across the runway that connects to a friction device on each side. The deceleration throws me violently into my harness as I stop in less than 900 feet from nearly 175 miles per hour. And this is a gut-good feeling.

Then the slow taxi back, the easing of tension, the good feeling. Crew chiefs with lighted wands in their hands direct me where to park; they chock the wheels and signal me with a throat-cutting motion to shut down the engines. Six or seven people gather around the airplane as the engines coast off, and I unstrap and

climb down, soaking wet with sweat.

"You OK? How did it go? See anything, get anything?" They want to know these things and they have a right to know. Then they ask. "How's the airplane?" That concern always last. We confer briefly on this or that device or instrument that needs looking after. And then I tell them what I saw, what I did. They nod, grouped around, swear softly, spit once or twice. They are tough, and it pleases them to hear results.

The crew van arrives, I enter and ride through the rain—smoking a cigarette and becoming thoughtful. It's dark in there, and I need this silent time to myself before going back to the world. We arrive and, with my equipment jangling and thumping about me, I enter the squadron locker room where there is always easy joking among those who have just come down.

Those that are suiting up are quiet, serious, going over the mission brief in their minds, for once on a night strike they cannot look at maps or notes or weapon settings.

They glance at me and ask how the weather is at The Pass. Did I see any thunderstorms over the Dog's Head? They want to ask about the guns up tonight, but know I'll say how it was without their questioning. Saw some light ZPU (automatic weapons fire) at The Pass, saw someone getting hosed at Ban Karai, nothing from across the border. Nobody down, quiet night. Now all they have to worry about is thrashing through a couple hundred miles of lousy weather, letting down on instruments and radar into the black karst county and finding their targets. Each pilot has his own thoughts on that.

Me, I'll start warming up once the lethargy of finally being back from a mission drains from me. Funny how the mind/body combination works. You are all hypoed just after you land, then comes a slump, then you're back up again but not as high as you were when you first landed. By now I'm ready for some hot coffee or a drink (sometimes too many), or maybe just letter writing. A lot of what you want to do depends on how the mission went.

I debrief and prepare to leave the squadron. But before I do, I look at the next day's schedule. Is it an escort? Am I leading? Where are we going? What are we carrying? My mind unrolls pictures of mosaics and gun-camera film of the area. Already I'm mechanically preparing for the next mission.

And so it goes—for a year. And I like it. But every so often, especially during your first few months, a little wisp of thought floats up from way deep in your mind when you see the schedule. "Ah no, not tonight," you say to yourself. "Tonight I'm sick—or could be sick. Just really not up to par, you know. Maybe, maybe I shouldn't go." There's a feeling—the premonition that tonight is the night I don't come back. But you go anyhow and pretty soon you don't think about it much anymore. You just don't give a fat damn. After a while, when you've been there and see what you see, you just want to go fight! To strike back, destroy. And then sometimes you're pensive—every sense savoring each and every sight and sound and smell. Enjoying the camaraderie, the feeling of doing something. Have to watch that camaraderie thing though—don't get too close. You might lose somebody one night and that can mess up

your mind. It happens, and when it does, you get all black and karsty inside your head.

I leave the squadron and walk back through the ever-present rain that's running in little rivulets down and off my poncho. The rain glistens off trees and grass and bushes, and a ripping, tearing sound upsets the balance as another black Phantom rises up to pierce the clouds.

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