

Aircraft Down

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One by one, tonight's crew emerged from the crew bus. Loaded down with their combat helmets and equipment, they walked slowly to the rear of my airplane and started to climb aboard. Smitty was rear gunner tonight, and slapped me on the back as he strolled by. I turned quickly to push him back on his shoulder, moving just in time to avoid being hit by his swinging helmet. We were playing a strange version of tag it seemed. Playfully, I stuck out my middle finger. He smiled as he threw his gear onboard and jumped inside. I was surprised to see Captain Halpin suited up and standing with the crew. Apparently there was a mix-up in the schedule and the crew was in need of a TV, so Halpin just volunteered, even though his tour was over. These guys loved their job and they really loved each other. Captain Halpin should be sitting in the O-club sipping a beer before taking his Freedom bird home, but instead he volunteers for a combat mission. Watching the young Captain jump on the ramp grabbing his gear, I remember wondering, *Are we going to go through the whole water ritual again when they return?*

"Chief, we're ready to start number three." The voice was crisp and clear in my headset. I was now standing in front of my aircraft just off the nose, as John Rhett pulled a fire bottle alongside.

"Number three is clear," I replied.

"Starting number three," said Captain Ramsower. I had definitely drawn a good crew tonight, I thought, as we went through our engine startup. The Captain and I had done our preflight walk-around as usual, and he was pleased with how the aircraft looked.

With two engines running, we marshaled him out of the revetment. John and I jumped into the back of the line truck and we followed 044 down to the arming area. I could feel the heat from my gunship's two running engines as we followed behind in its wake. Once in the arming area, I dismounted the truck on a run. As I moved toward the left front of the aircraft, I could see the TV camera following me. The guys in the booth have found their first target. I gave the camera lens the thumbs up as I passed by. John stood by with the fire bottle, ready for anything. John and I usually rotated the duties. Sometimes I would stand by with the fire bottle while John did engine start. Now plugged back on interphone, I cleared the pilot to start the remaining two engines. John followed me closely with the extinguisher. With all this jet fuel and ammunition on board, the last thing we want is a fire of any kind. Quick reflexes would save lives and equipment. We had to be ready for anything.

"Spectre one-three, is ready for takeoff chief," said the captain. "Roger," I replied, "Good luck and good hunting." Moving swiftly, I unplugged myself from the aircraft, coiled up my interphone cord and moved out in front of my AC-130. With the headphones still on my head to dampen the roar of the engines, I gave the pilot a crisp salute and thumbs up. He nodded his helmet, gave me the thumbs up and saluted back as he began moving out to the runway. As the gunship moved past me, with its left wing tip actually passing over my head, hot air from her turbines enveloped me. I leaned into the blast of hot exhaust holding on to my hat. I looked away for a moment to avoid the sting of tiny particles to my face. When I turned around again, I could see the gunners in the back adjusting equipment and moving around. I noticed Smitty standing by the 40 mm guns and gave him the peace sign. He flipped me the bird along with a smile. Seconds later, my gunship roared down the runway lifting into the twilight sky. I watched for a moment as it made a gentle left turn, disappearing into the mist. The low rumble of her turboprop engines were now obliterated by the roar of two F-4's streaking over our heads in full afterburner.

I never saw Smitty... my gunship... or the others again.



The author with Spectre 044

After takeoff, I rode back to the snack bar and joined the other crew chiefs. They also had just launched their gunships. More ground crews gathered in the twilight as the remaining Spectres were sent into battle. We often boasted among ourselves as to which of us owned the best gunship. Our competition was friendly and only strengthened our pride in our individual aircraft. We were part of an elite group and we knew it. Of course mine was without a doubt, the best gunship in the Squadron. A few hours later, I was on the flight line under the lights of the revetment, helping another crew chief work on his airplane. Suddenly, the line truck pulled up to the ramp with a screeching of tires. The line chief saw me and waved me over to the truck. "Your aircraft is down," he said.

"You mean its been hit again?" I asked.

"It's worse than that," he said, "Come with me."

I jumped down off the ramp of the other gunship and came around to the passenger side of the truck and slid inside.

"Zero Four-Four was struck by two SAM missiles," he said. "Your aircraft has crashed! Search and Rescue are moving to the scene right now. The F-4 escort pilots saw it happen. They heard a few emergency beepers and are standing by." By this time, we had found John Rhett in another revetment and were now headed to Squadron Operations where we could monitor the search and rescue. I was numb. I could not believe this was happening.

In Squadron Operations, they were gathered around the radios listening to the conversation between the fighters and the rescue helicopters. I stood there in a daze listening to the radio chatter. The F-4's now running low on fuel would return to Ubon. Two others had been dispatched to replace them. There was still no word on survivors. Numerous fires were on the ground, but no signs of life. Then, the word came down that a number of beepers were heard again. Was it our guys? Or were the North Vietnamese trying to lure our rescue crews into an ambush? I was stunned!

We left the Squadron Operations Center and walked to the F-4 revetments to meet up with the pilots who had seen it happen. Our squadron's Commander was already there.

According to the pilots, the AC-130 was in a valley a few miles west of Tchepone, Laos. The gunship was working over targets in the area. Visibility was about four miles with scattered clouds at 6,000 feet. The aircraft was illuminated by the full moon to the west, a gunners' moon. Triple-A was moderate, nothing unusual, until the fighter pilots saw a SAM launch from their port side. It rose up in an arc headed for the AC-130. As the gunship rolled right to avoid the first SAM, two more were fired at it from different locations. There was no way out! They were bracketed. The escort pilots agreed, he took a hit on the right wing inboard engine and an explosion and fire resulted. As the gunship started to drop down, another explosion occurred and something large and flaming was seen to separate from the aircraft.

"There was no mayday call," said the Phantom pilot.

"What about the beepers?" I asked him.

"We heard a couple very distinctly," he responded, "but all we could see down there in the darkness were fires on the ground."

Numbness set in as Rhett and I wandered back to our revetment. Just as we rounded the corner, we witnessed the line truck unceremoniously pulling away with our ground power unit in tow. One side of the revetment cradled a lonely fire bottle, just like the one next to us. Otherwise, the area was empty. The revetment suddenly looked huge and ghostly. We stood in silence for the longest time. I walked all around inside the revetment, trying to wish my airplane back. Every stain, every tire mark had a sudden significance. It was eerie. I can't find the words to describe how we felt. I was hoping it was all a dream and our AC-130 would appear from around the corner, putting an end to all this. John and I realized we were forged together in tragedy. Ours is a bond that will last forever.



The lost gunship