

Lloyd Duncan, Raven 42
Pakse, Nov 70 to Jun 71

I started my combat career in December 1969 flying OV-10s out of Nakhon Phanom (NKP), Thailand. My call sign was Nail 36. After two months I volunteered to go down to Ubon, Thailand, and flew missions over the southern half of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. Our mission was to find trucks and guns on or near the trail. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) protected the trail with lots of antiaircraft artillery (AAA)—primarily 14.5 mm, 23 mm, and 37 mm. We flew four-hour missions at 4,500 feet above the ground in a random pattern and used binoculars to look for the enemy. At first, getting shot at scared me to death. The tracers were like streams of death coming up to get me. After a while, though, I got used to it and even welcomed it. It was difficult to find active guns—but once they shot at you it didn't take long to find them. Then you could use the rest of the time on station making sure they didn't have a nice day. I would direct fighters to the target with smoke rockets, they would drop their ordnance, usually bombs or cluster bomb units (CBUs), on the target (hopefully). Once the laser-guided bomb (LGB) was introduced things changed quickly. The enemy stopped shooting at us during the day, because the LGB was so accurate and so deadly.

The year went by quickly and I wasn't ready to leave. Four of us from Ubon—Frank Kricker, Eric Erickson, Jim Withers, and myself—all volunteered to extend our tour and become Raven FACs. Frank, Eric, and I were assigned to the southernmost base at Pakse, Laos. Pakse was a small town on the Mekong River about 100 miles due east of Ubon, Thailand. We flew small unmarked Cessna airplanes—the O-1 Bird Dog and the U-17 (Cessna 185). The base was also home to a squadron of Laotian T-28s. The CIA also worked out of Pakse and used Air America H-34 helicopters, C-46s, C-130s, C-123s, and Helio Couriers. Continental Air Service also flew Pilatus Porters in support of the CIA. Our main area of operation was about 50-100 miles east of Pakse on the Bolovens Plateau. We flew out of several small dirt strips but the main one was Pakse Site 22 (PS-22). The CIA was in charge of operations at PS-22. We flew there to get gas, rockets, and intel of enemy activity. If I had the first go of the day, I would plan to arrive a little after sunrise and log a 10-12 hour flying day. The O-1 could not fly very high so we flew it at treetop level most of the time. The enemy could only shoot you if you flew right over them. In the OV-10 we usually flew 80 hours a month and had four days off in Bangkok. In the O-1 we flew 150 hours a month and had five days off in Bangkok. More on that later.

At Pakse, we all flew the O-1 and the U-17. Both were taildraggers. The O-1 was a two-seater (front and back) and the U-17 was a four-seater (two and two). The U-17 was not as good a FAC plane as the O-1 so we used it more for a spare and to fly to Ubon to get our mail and haul beer. The cargo area could hold about 20 cases of beer and we went through a lot of beer for some reason. One day, I think it was Larry "Pepsi" Rhatts, flew the U-17 over to Ubon to get the mail, etc. After landing he taxied to the parking area in front of Base Ops. He got out of the plane, walked to the tail, and pissed on the tail wheel. This was a common thing we all did in Laos and he didn't think twice about it. Well, the Ubon Base Ops officer (an Air Force lieutenant colonel) came running out of the building screaming at Pepsi—"Get your ass off my airfield and don't ever come back!!" We got no beer or mail that day.

Normally there were five Ravens assigned to Pakse. Frank and Eric were already there when I

arrived in November 1970. Joe Smith and Larry Rhatts were the other two. We stayed in a fairly nice house a couple of miles from Pakse and about a mile from the airfield. We had a cook, a maid, a gardener, and a night guard, who only had one leg. We all thought this was a big plus because he probably would not be able to “book” very easily if the bad guys showed up. We paid each of them about one dollar a day—500 Kip in Laotian money. I really liked our cook but also teased her a lot. After she cooked us a nice meal, she would always ask, “Sep Lai, boh?” (Very good, no?) I would reply, “Boh sep!” (No good!) Then she would scold me and say, “You number loy!” In Thailand and in Laos, if something was very good it was “Number One.” If it was very bad it was “Number 10.” Number Loy was number 100 in Lao and it sounded like my name—Lloyd.

I was in charge of ordering all the food for our group from the commissary in Vientiane. Once a week, an Air America C-130 would land and deliver the supplies that I had ordered. Our cook was really pretty good and we ate well. We also went downtown to a good Chinese restaurant on a regular basis. Each night after dinner, we would have a short meeting—about 30 seconds—and decide who had the early go the next day. Frank and I usually alternated every other day. I don’t know what the other three did. Actually, usually one of us was on a CTO (combat time off) in Bangkok, one flew to Ubon to get our mail and buy beer, and the other three flew between 6 and 12 hours, getting after the bad guys. On the days I had the early go, I would leave the house a little before sunrise, pick up my favorite backseater Pantee, get in the O-1, and head east to the Bolavens Plateau. It took about an hour to get there flying at 90 miles an hour.



Lloyd Duncan, Cambodian officer and backseater Pantee at PS-22

The main outpost/airfield on the Bolovens was PS-22. It had a 3000 foot runway and several wooden buildings that were used by several different groups. The CIA ran the outpost but there were also Lao Army, Lao mercenaries, Air America, Continental Air Service Incorporated (CASI), Ravens and sometimes USAF H-53s using it. Only the Lao Army and some mercenaries stayed there during the night. When I got there in the early morning, I would try

calling them on the radio but often there was no answer. If I got no answer, I would make a low pass over the field to have a look and see if anyone shot at me. If all looked normal I’d land and park. Sometimes the CIA guys were circling overhead—very high—waiting to see if all was safe. I was their guinea pig. One day late in my tour, I made a low pass and NVA soldiers—who had taken the outpost during the night—hosed me down with their AK-47s as I went by. I escaped unharmed, but if they had just let me land I would have been toast.

The “customers” at PS-22 were Dick Santos and Eli Chavez. They didn’t like you to use the term CIA—so we used “customer” or “the company” and that seemed to make them feel better. They were both tough guys and great to work with. Dick and another “company” man—Tom Briggs—were instrumental in my rescue and in saving my life. More on that later. Getting back to the “normal” operation—I would land at PS-22 and talk to the customer for the latest intel on the enemy and any requests they had that day. They often had small teams of mercenaries out looking for the enemy and wanted us to contact them and confirm their location. Actually, these teams were usually doing their best to avoid any contact with the enemy and were almost never even close to where they were supposed to be. It became a real cat-and-mouse game to find their real location. Later, the customer would just have these guys dropped off behind the enemy and let them walk back to camp. When they started yelling they were getting shot, we knew where they were and also where the enemy was.

In the O-1, we had a similar tactic. We flew low over the trees and when the enemy shot at us, we knew where to tell the fighters to drop their bombs. Every day on the Bolovens was different and it usually didn’t take us long to find the bad guys and start calling in airstrikes on them. One day, I was at PS-22 and USAF four-star general (commander of the Tactical Air Command) Gen. Momeyer was there—along with several colonels and another general. Gen. Momeyer asked to speak with a Raven FAC and I was the only one available. He asked me what I’d been doing and what I was about to do that day. I told him and then left to fly the mission. The next day we got word from our boss in Vientiane that Gen. Momeyer wanted to know if ALL the Ravens just “wander” around Laos looking for something to do. He also didn’t like the fact that a bunch of lieutenants and captains were running the war in Laos. I probably didn’t impress him with my long hair and sideburns either. Nothing was ever said to me again about that meeting.

One of my first missions as a Raven was on the Bolovens near another small strip/outpost—PS-38. The enemy had attacked during the night and were still in the area. I had a backseater named Kontee. He was dressed all in black and wore a black ball cap that said—Kill All Them-Come Back Alone. I’m thinking—man, this guy really gets after the bad guys. It didn’t take me long though, to realize that he was full of shit and a chicken-shit to boot. This day though, we had enemy and friendlies fairly close to each other and I was working troops in contact (TIC) with T-28 Lao pilots. I had a flight of two check in with CBU and rockets. The flight lead was the Lao commander Lt. Col. Khouang. I was new and didn’t know he was a weak fighter pilot. He had been flying H-34 helicopters most of his career. I briefed the target and told them not to fly over the friendlies. I marked the target and cleared them in hot. Col. Khouang came in over the friendlies and dropped his CBU a mile short of the smoke. All of a sudden people were screaming over the radio (in Lao) but I knew it was bad. I asked Kontee what they were saying. He shook his head and said, “We kill many many friendlies.” My heart stopped. I told the fighters to go home and landed at PS-38 to talk to the customer. It turned out that we didn’t kill anyone and only two men were slightly wounded. After that, I told all the other Ravens not to let Col. Khouang drop CBU anywhere near friendlies.

I only remember that we had four backseaters/interpreters. They were paid a dollar a mission by the U.S. government. It was common to fly 8-10 missions a day. At the end of the day, the Raven had to sign his book and note the number of missions flown. The four that flew with us were Pantee, Kontee, Nukeo, and Sihok. Pantee was really the only good one. He was reliable, smart,

brave, and never complained. He always carried an AK-47 and loved to shoot it out his back-seat window at the enemy. He was later killed, after I left. I've already said what I thought of Kontee. Nukeo was unreliable but he had very good eyes and could find the enemy—if he felt like it. Once we were flying along and I smelled something terrible behind me. I turned to see what it was and Nukeo was asleep with his boots off and his stinking feet resting on the back of MY seat. I can't remember what I did next but Nukeo never did it again. Later, he was with me when we were shot down and crashed in the trees. He saved my life for sure. Sihok was a great big guy—about 200 pounds I'd guess—and pretty worthless. We called him Shit Hook—which was not very nice but sort of fit. None of us wanted to fly with him because of all the short strips we flew out of and we weren't sure we'd be able to take off with him in the back seat. He did speak English though—which was something positive. One of the main reasons I liked the early go was because I got to pick Pantee as my backseater.

The Lao Pilots

The Lao T-28 pilots were an outstanding group of young men. Not only were they excellent fighter pilots—they were really good guys. All of them spoke four languages fluently—Lao, Thai, French, and English. The names or nicknames that I remember were Lt. Col. Khouang, Capt. Methane, T. C., Somnuck, Bira, Hollywood, Killerman, and Shit Hot. Some were better pilots than others but all were very good—except for the colonel (as already noted). For the record, the colonel was a very good man—just not a very good fighter pilot. Their call sign was Cobra followed by a color. All the flight leads kept the same color always, so you always knew who you were working with. They flew about 100 missions a month and were paid a dollar a mission by the U.S. government, in addition to their Laotian pay. They also sold the brass from the used CBU canisters and collected another 100 dollars or so a month. U.S. pilots, after dropping CBU, would always jettison the empty canisters before returning to base. The Lao pilots never jettisoned them because they were like money in their pocket. So every once in a while our runway at Pakse would be temporarily closed because someone landed with live CBU spilling out on the runway.

Of all the pilots at Pakse, Somnuck (Cobra Black) was by far the best. When I marked a target for him, he only wanted to hear “Hit my smoke.” He would then roll in and hit your smoke. One day, I found an NVA truck stuck in the mud while trying to cross a river. It turned out it was full of explosives. Somnuck rolled in and dropped a 250 lb. bomb that went through the cab of the truck but didn't explode. He had picked too low and the bomb didn't have time to arm. On his next pass, the bombs went off and pieces of the truck almost hit me orbiting overhead.

Most of the pilots had been trained in Thailand by USAF instructors, but only to fly in visual flight rules (VFR) conditions—good weather and visibility. When the clouds were low and visibility was bad they didn't fly. Fortunately, Pakse usually had good weather. One day, Somnuck came up to me and was very proud to tell me that he was going to Udorn, Thailand—“to learn how to fly in the cloud.”

The biggest character by far, of all the pilots at Pakse, was a wingman who called himself Shit Hot. In my experience, these types who thought they were shit hot were usually more shit than hot. I'll have to say though—this Shit Hot was pretty good. He was a loose cannon though, and hard to control. He was never made a flight lead, even though he was a very experienced pilot. About a

hundred miles from the target area he would start calling me—“Raven 42 this is Shit Hot calling you—how do you read?” I could hear him but because I was flying low he could never hear me from that distance. But he kept calling. Besides, this was a flight lead’s job. A wingman is not supposed to talk on the radio—except to acknowledge the flight lead’s calls to him. Shit Hot’s main goal, though, was to get to the target ASAP, drop all the bombs on one pass, and get back to Pakse and get ready for another flight. For him it was a money issue. Another day, another 10 dollars. When they checked in, all I had to do was tell them the name of the nearest town—usually Ban, followed by a name. They would then fly direct to you, drop their bombs, and head back. You had to really “sweet talk” them to give you more than one pass. I eventually started bribing them with cases of beer—if they’d give me three or four passes. That’s another reason we went through so much beer.

Well, I got tired of Shit Hot calling me right after he took off so I came up with a new plan. I’d give him a name of a town I was near, that he wouldn’t know. I was having a beer with one of the other pilots one day and had a “brain fart.” I asked him how to say “fur burger” in Lao. Once I explained the term, he laughed and said “Hemoy.” So the next time Shit Hot called me and asked for my location, I told him, “I fly over Ban Hemoy.” He keyed the mike and laughed. Then he said, “42, you are very funny guy—BUT where you REALLY fly?” Another time, I was giving his flight a briefing on the target and was about to mark the target with a rocket, and Shit Hot says, “Already drop bomb!” It almost blew me out of the sky. Usually, as he rolled in to make his pass, he called, “Shit Hot in hot.” He didn’t this time and I was lucky he didn’t get me. Like I said—he was a loose cannon.

One more Shit Hot story. Every payday, he got paid about 200-300 dollars—which was a lot of money for him. Then about the 5th of the month, he’d ask me for a loan of 50 dollars. The next month he’d pay me back on payday and then hit me up on the 5th again for 50 dollars. I don’t think he needed the money—he just figured he might not have to pay me back some day. For fun, I got a hold of a ONE Kip note—very rare even then. Fifty Kip was a dime so that would make the one Kip note worth about a fifth of a penny. Later, when Shit Hot came to me for a loan, I’d pull out the one Kip note and tell him not to worry about paying me back. I still carry that one Kip note in my billfold. Shit Hot was killed in action a few months after I left.

The Gold Rolex

When I was in Thailand flying OV-10s, some of the guys bought big gold chains to wear around their necks. One guy had a 24K chain with a big round medallion attached that said “Fuck Communism” on it. I never bought any gold while I was in Thailand. When I got to Pakse, both Kricker and Erickson had ordered gold Rolex watches from Geneva, Switzerland and big 18K gold ID bracelets made by a jeweler in Vientiane named Villy Phong. At that time, 1970-71, gold was selling for 35 dollars an ounce. I decided to buy a Rolex and an ID bracelet—not because it was a good investment but I wanted to be cool like all the other Ravens. I bought a gold Rolex Day-Date for 350 dollars with the leather band and Villy Phong made the gold band for 250 dollars. I thought paying 600 dollars for a watch was absolutely crazy. I had a perfectly good Seiko that cost 30 dollars. It turned out to be a fairly good buy though, as the watch and band today would cost over 20,000 dollars. When I returned to the states and started flying again, I always wore the ID bracelet whenever I flew. I was superstitious about it. One of my sons wears the Rolex.

The Ravens of Pakse

I always thought we had a bunch of very unique characters at Pakse. But after attending several Raven reunions and meeting many others, I'd say our group was pretty tame and fairly normal human beings. All of them were "tigers"—aggressive, tough, skilled, and brave. I was excited and proud to be one of them. Frank Kricker was Raven 40. He was the oldest of our group at 30 years old but acted about half that—sometimes. He was funny and had a very infectious laugh. You could not be around him long and not laugh. He was sort of our boss (being the senior officer)—but wasn't really. If he was our boss, we didn't know it or admit to it. I don't know where I had heard it first, but I started calling him Ass-Eyes. It just sounded funny and it WAS funny. Pretty soon though, he was calling ME Ass Eyes. He was always holding out his finger—asking you to pull it. One day, he and I were in downtown Pakse at our favorite bar, sitting at a table having a drink. The owner had several young girls working for him and had two of them go join us. They sat down, Kricker held out his little finger, I pulled it and he cut this huge fart. Those girls screamed, jumped up, and ran out the door. It was totally rude and crude—but one of the funniest things I'd ever seen (or heard). What's really bad though—after things settled back down, the owner made those girls come back and sit with us. We left soon after that, but had a memory forever.

Kricker liked the ladies. He had one sleeping with him on a regular basis. I had the room next to him, separated by a thin wall. Some nights I didn't get much sleep. He decided to teach one of his girlfriends a little English. One night as I was sleeping she knocked on my wall and woke me up. She said, "Hey Loy!" I said, "What?" She said, "Fuck you!" A little later she knocked again—"Hey Loy!" "What?" "Up Yours!"



Lloyd Duncan, Pepsi Rhatts, Dick Defer and Frank Kricker at Pakse

Another time, Frank was out at PS-22 about to take off. He prided himself in making the quickest turnarounds—from landing to takeoff again. He could land, get gas and rockets, and take off again in about five minutes. It took most of us 15 or 20 minutes minimum. This day though, he forgot to safe the switches to the rockets after he loaded new ones in the tubes. He jumped into the O-1, started up, and accidentally hit the trigger on the control stick. Eight 2.75 inch rockets went over the top (about three feet) of a multimillion dollar USAF H-53 helicopter. An Air Force colonel came running out of the ops shack screaming, “I want your name! I am going to court-martial your ass.” Not being stupid, Frank zoomed to the runway and took off, never looking back. He laid low for a few days—I think he went on R&R to Australia or something—and all was forgotten.

Time and space permits only one more Kricker story. He did go on R&R to Hong Kong, and soon after he returned, three large boxes arrived. Each of them had a Honda 100 motorcycle in it—unassembled. He had bought one for himself, one for me, and one for another Raven—Jim Hix. We hadn’t asked him to buy them for us, but were thrilled to get them. Frank was a motorcycle guru and had them put together and running in no time. I don’t remember what we paid for them, but it was a real bargain. We loved riding those Hondas.

Next there was David Erickson—but he only answered to Eric. There are too many Eric stories to tell also, but you’ll get a good idea of what he’s like and what he’s made of. Eric and I were good friends at Ubon in the OV-10. He grew up in Wyoming and went to the University of Wyoming. He was a wrestler in college and a very tough dude. I know this because he told me so. I know this—you did not want to pick a fight with Eric—no way. As a Nail FAC he volunteered for the last go of the day because just before dark, the enemy guns would start shooting and the trucks would start driving down the Ho Chi Minh Trail out of North Vietnam. Eric was pretty much fearless. He loved getting shot at and then making the enemy pay. I gave him no chance of surviving his tour. One day he landed back at Ubon and the entire nose of the airplane was gone—hit by a 23 mm round. He had fighters refuse to bomb his targets because the AAA was too intense—even though he was down there much lower getting hosed. One day he did get shot down. He ejected at low altitude and landed in trees. The next day he was rescued and there was a big celebration.

At Ubon, Eric had already been accepted to the Raven program, but was still flying OV-10s for a couple more weeks. He started to let his hair grow and grew some awesome long sideburns—as Ravens we wore civilian clothes and were supposed to look like civilians. One night at the Ubon officers’ club, the Director of Operations (DO), a colonel who was second in command of the F-4 wing there, came up to Eric and said, “Eric, when are you going to get a haircut?” Eric didn’t hesitate when he said, “Sir, I’ll cut my hair when you hit my smoke.” We all thought, Oooo—he is in big trouble now. The DO thought for a second and then said, “Fair enough.” That was a DO you could go to war with.

As a Raven, Eric didn’t change his ways. He often came back with bullet holes in his plane. He was finally told by “upper management” in Vientiane that if he took any more hits, he would be sent home. So he told our maintenance guy in charge of patching bullet holes—Stan Wilson—to stop reporting hits on his plane. Eric prided himself in flying in and out of very small air strips, strips that none of us would even think of going into. One day he flew into a very short field near the town of Paksong. I’m not sure why he did this. There were many rows of barbed wire strung

around the compound. As he tried to take off, his wheels hit the barbed wire and the plane flipped over. Eric got out and started to walk away but people were yelling at him to STOP! He was in a mine field. Eric was a very lucky man—and still is to this day.

One day he decided he would go up to see another Nail/Raven buddy—Jim Withers at Savannahket. They went to some bar and evidently an ex-U.S. Army Special Forces guy was there and he slapped a young bar girl. So Eric went up to the guy and asked him nicely (I'm sure) to stop slapping the girl. The guy stopped slapping the girl and began slapping Eric. He took Eric down to the floor and before anyone could pull him off he had almost gouged Eric's eyes out with his thumbs. Eric was grounded for weeks and was very lucky he didn't lose one or both eyes.

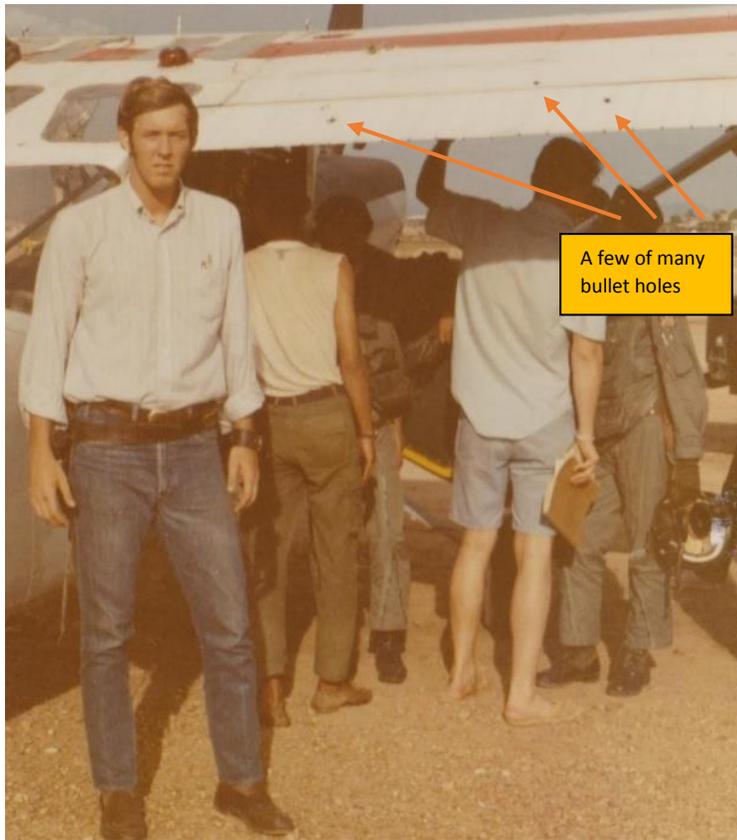
Larry "Pepsi" Rhatts was different by most people's definition, I would guess. He was funny—very funny—but always sober. He drank no alcohol—only Pepsi Cola. He played the accordion. How many guys do you know that play the accordion? He played it well, too. He always wore a Forest Service uniform to fly in and had a whistle attached to a shirt pocket. I never asked why. He carried an eye patch with him and would sometimes taxi in to the parking ramp wearing his eye patch. Are you getting the picture? Most of us carried an AK-47 or AR-15 in our cockpit when we flew. Pepsi carried an M-79 grenade launcher. I would say he was a little goofy maybe, but when it came to doing the job—getting after bad guys—there was none better.

He was flying over me directing air strikes and keeping the enemy away from me when I got shot down. I would not have survived that day had he not been there. I watched him fly in tight circles just above the treetops with enemy tracers just going behind his tail. He shot his M-79 at the bad guys—keeping them away until the fighters arrived. He is my hero—for life. After the war, he went back to Laos (even though it was controlled by the communists) to help his Laotian friends. He married a most wonderful Laotian woman, moved back to the U.S., and now works as a male nurse at a hospital in Tacoma, Washington.

Next, there was Joe Smith. That was his real name. Joe was different—just like we all were—but not the same. He was quiet and sort of a loner. He loved to disagree with you on any subject. If you said you thought the enemy were bad people and needed to be taught a lesson, he would argue the opposite. Because of this, some of the guys didn't like him. I liked him. He was an excellent FAC and really got after the enemy—just like the rest of us. He prided himself in being able to fly the O-1 longer than any of us. I'm not sure how he did it, but he could fly about 30 minutes longer than the rest of us. I didn't much care how long I could keep it in the air because I was usually out of rockets long before I was out of gas. One day, Joe was running on fumes and had to make a quick stop for gas at an outpost about 20 minutes north of Pakse. He called on the common frequency that he was on final and an Air America plane took the active and took off. Joe had to go around. During the go-around, the engine sputtered and then quit. He tried to bring it around and land the opposite direction but there was not enough runway. He came to a sudden stop when the trees at the approach end took both wings off his airplane. Joe was not hurt, but the incident gave the boss a reason to fire him. He was gone in a few days.

Joe was replaced by a guy who had been flying up north at Luang Prabang—Frank Birk. Frank was not just different—he was scary different. He was a fellow Air Force Academy (AFA) grad and if Eric Erickson was fearless, Frank was his "daddy." Frank flew where no others would fly. We

even stopped asking him where he flew—we didn't want to know. The amazing thing was—he always came back. Usually he came back with a plane full of bullet holes. No backseater wanted to fly with him, and I didn't blame them.



He was the calmest and coolest and most aggressive of all of us. He was a warrior's warrior and as far as I could tell he had no fear of death. He always sounded very calm and matter-of-fact on the radio. One day I heard him talking to "Hillsboro" (the C-130 ABCCC that controlled all the U.S. aircraft in the area). He asked them if they had any fighters (with ordnance) available. They said that they did and asked what the target was. Frank said, "Well, I've got a couple of tanks driving down this road and I'd really like to drop some bombs on them." I nearly died. None of us had ever seen tanks in our area—let alone going down the road. Hillsboro sent him a bunch of fighters but I don't remember if he killed them or not.

The Bullet Hole Counting Committee at Frank Birk's Airplane

Another day, I was working some fighters just east of Frank. We usually let each other know where we were and what we were doing on our FM (Fox Mike) radio. All of a sudden I got a frantic call from Frank and I knew he was in big trouble. His call was, "Raven 42, 45 on Fox Mike!!" I replied, "What's wrong?" He said, "I'm on FIRE!!" I was about 10 minutes away from him and told him to head towards Pakse and I'd try to catch up to him. I caught up to him about five minutes out of Pakse, and checked him over. He had 12.7 mm bullet holes all over his plane. The "fire" turned out not to be a fire. He had taken a 12.7 round through the fire extinguisher (bottle) attached to the back of his seat. It had exploded and filled his cockpit with smoke. He made a good landing at Pakse but a little longer than normal as he had no brakes. There were 27 bullet holes in his plane but not one hit him. His backseater took a round through the leg, but was otherwise OK. Frank completed his tour and became a test pilot at Edwards AFB. Sadly, he was killed testing a new airplane. The Air Force named a new test facility after him.

Eric Erickson got out of the Air Force when his tour was up but stayed right there in Laos. He was hired by CAS to fly Pilatus Porters. Soon after he left Pakse, we got a new boss—Major Dick Defer. Dick was much different from most of the majors I knew. He was a “light your hair on fire and go after ‘em”-type guy. His problem at first, though, was he didn’t know what he thought he knew and what he did know he didn’t need to know. You know what I mean? We called him The Dufe, but not to his face. He was a super guy though and really stood up for us “Dufes” when we got in trouble. He always had our back and we liked him a lot. On one of his first missions with us, he took off in an O-1 and got lost. It was easy to do in the O-1 and in Laos. It took a while to get



familiar with our area. Somehow he ended up flying over the Ho Chi Minh Trail at 500 feet and 90 knots. He survived that day—but just barely. He landed back at Pakse with a huge hole in the left wing of the O-1. Much of the wing was gone and I couldn’t believe it could still fly. The O-1 was a very tough bird. He had taken a 23 mm round through the left wing. I don’t think he ever talked about the incident after that.

One day, Pepsi was working north of Pakse near the river where some enemy trucks had stalled trying to cross. He had called me about it so I headed up there to help him blow up trucks. When I reached the target area, Pepsi was gone and not returning my calls. There were T-28s ready to go in so I put them in on the trucks. One of the T-28s was hit by a 12.7 mm gun and headed home. Soon after that I got stitched by the same gun. Four holes in the left wing. I thought, this guy is good and it might be smart to let him and us live to fight another day. It turned out Pepsi had taken a round in his radio and couldn’t warn us about the gun. When I got back to Pakse, Dick jumped all over my ass for not staying and killing that gun. I told him that the gunner was having too good a day and would soon be an ace if we weren’t careful. I told him that I decided we should all live to fight another day. Dick didn’t like it, but later told me I had done the right thing. Just after I was shot down and left, Dick was moved up north to 20A to be their boss. After hearing some 20A war stories at reunions, they definitely needed some “adult” supervision up there. Dick wrote me several long letters while I was in the hospital in Denver, Colorado, telling me what was going on. Then one day I learned that he was killed in action in northern Laos. He was a “leader by example”—and that’s what I wanted to be someday.

The last Raven at Pakse (during my tour) was Jim Hix. He was another AFA grad and I would say he was a little more normal than the rest of us. He was an excellent FAC, totally dependable, and since he had been at 20A, he knew a lot about the guns that the enemy used on us. He was sometimes referred to as Honda 3 since he got the third Honda that Kricker brought back from Hong Kong. We often rode in formation down to the local bar for a “cold” Guinness Stout after flying. It was my good fortune that Jim Hix was flying the day I was shot down. The enemy was

everywhere, lots of 12.7 mm guns were shooting at us, two T-76 tanks were in the area, and enemy mortars were pelting our troops. It was a “war.”

The Rescue of Raven 42

In late May of 1971, things were heating up on the Bolovens. The NVA were getting ready to attack. A few days before the attack by hundreds of NVA, the CIA made a very important and smart decision. They secretly brought a large group of Thai Army troops into the outpost at Paksong. For days I watched the Thai troops string rows of barbed wire around the compound and dig trenches outside the wire. They put sharp punji sticks in the trenches and covered them up. The NVA attacked at night—expecting the Laotian troops to “get out of Dodge” as usual.

The next morning, as I was flying over the outpost, I saw huge piles of dead NVA bodies stacked outside the wire. The Thais lost two dead and a few wounded. Had the Thais not been there at Paksong, the NVA would have been in Pakse in a few hours.

Then, on the 7th of June, the enemy attacked again at Paksong. I had the early go and when I got overhead, the Thai commander called me and spoke to me in perfect English. I flew 12 hours that day and was shot down about an hour before sundown. Hix was in charge of killing the guns and Pepsi was trying to keep the enemy away from me. It took a while, but Hix got every gun in the area and no one else was shot down. It allowed the Air America helicopter (H-34)—flown by two Thai pilots—to hover over me and rescue both me and Nukeo. Had Jim Hix not been there that day to work his magic on those guns, I would not have been rescued. A full account of my rescue is written in a book by Tom Briggs—*Cash On Delivery*. It’s a very accurate account as Tom got most of us who were involved to relate our memory of it.

Tom was one of the “company” guys at Pakse but I didn’t know him very well. He worked with Laotian special teams that were sent out to gather intel on the enemy. I only knew him to say hi. He was on the ramp at PS-18 when word came that I’d been shot down. He was standing next to the H-34 when it started up to go get me. Tom can’t explain why he did it—but he just jumped on that H-34 as it was about to lift off. After the pickup, Tom saw that I was in bad shape and had lost a lot of blood. He squeezed my left leg above the wound, which slowed the blood loss, and told the pilots to radio back to PS-18 to tell them I would need blood. When I arrived at the field hospital at PS-18, I had already lost three-fifths of my blood (according to the doctors). Several guys had lined up and given blood before I arrived and the two Filipino doctors stopped the bleeding and filled me back up. It looked like I was going to live—a miracle for sure.

The other man who played a major part in my rescue was my backseater, Nukeo. There would have not been a rescue without him. As I said earlier, I didn’t think much of Nukeo, but he stuck with me that day. Some might say he didn’t have a choice—but I think he did. First, we crashed through trees after the engine quit. He was not injured. The front of the plane was crushed around my legs and my left leg was broken. I was able to pull my right leg out but not my left. Nukeo pulled the metal away so I could reach down and pull my boot and free my leg. He then helped me out of the plane and tried dragging me away from it. After a short distance, I told him to stop. It was too painful. My survival vest—with the emergency radios—was hanging over my seat in the O-1. We were supposed to wear the vest but it was very hot and most of us hung it over the seat.

Nukeo went back to the plane and got my vest and handed me the radio. I tried to call but it didn't work. I was not thinking clearly. Nukeo reached down and pulled out the antenna on the radio and it worked. I talked to Pepsi and told him the situation. He directed the H-34 to my location. Nukeo put the sling over my head and then rode it up with me.

There is one more guy who played an important part in my rescue—Dick Santos. Dick was the “customer” at PS-22 and we were friends. He heard that I was shot down, so he had a CAS pilot fly him to my location in a Pilatus Porter. He stayed high and out of the way, and observed. He kept quiet, but it was getting dark and he started worrying about it getting too dark to make the rescue. So he broke in on the briefing to the H-34 pilots and told them to go get me—NOW. They did—and the rest is history. So it turned out to be NOT my day to die. The Good Lord and a bunch of his “helpers” (who all did their parts perfectly) got me through that day.

Final Words

In the OV-10 (as a Nail FAC) most of the guys were “tigers,” really aggressive and also great warriors. A few, however, disappointed me. Usually it was the higher-ranking pilots—majors and lieutenant colonels. Sometimes I was embarrassed at how poorly a few of them did their job—usually because they seldom flew a mission. As a Raven FAC, I was never embarrassed or disappointed by the way my fellow Ravens went about their duty and did the mission. In fact, I marveled at how most did their dangerous job on a daily basis. They were the bravest and craziest men I have ever met. Of all the things that I have done in my 70 years of life—I am proudest of what I did and who I did it with—when I was a Raven FAC in Laos in 1970-71.