Author’s Note: Some have read my account and offered alternative wording or factual corrections. I have considered all these comments carefully and incorporated changes where I judged them to improve accuracy. But absent convincing evidence, I have not allowed my own memory to be trumped by someone else’s memory. Thus some may judge my story inaccurate – but this is the way I remember these events.

Preface

As I write this at the tail end of 2013, many of my memories of my time in Laos 43 years ago have faded, though a few remain sharp and colorful as if they happened yesterday. Having retired some years ago, with spare time to spread 70 years out on the table and assess my life to date (a potentially depressing exercise), I can’t help but envy the young aviation adventurer I once was. When people ask me if I miss flying, I have lately begun to reply that I miss being 25.
In 1970 I had just completed my Raven tour and embarked on a single-seat fighter career that would span another 25 years and thousands of flying hours in the venerable F-100, the A-7D, the RAF Harrier, and the A-10. By any measure I enjoyed quite an enviable flying career, but on reflection my six months in Laos as 24-year-old Raven 42 trumps all the rest in ways difficult to understand myself much less explain to others. I wish now I had paid more attention to the people and events around me. I desperately wish now I’d kept a journal as some apparently did. I also wish I’d spent a fraction of my pay buying 18 ct gold bracelets at Villy Phuong's rather than investing in $100-a-glass whiskey. But in those strange days it was logical and natural to do things that seem bizarre to me now.

Fortunately, as I prepare to write, I do not have to rely completely on my fading memories of those long-ago days. I kept my small green Government Issue BDA (bomb damage assessment) book listing details of each strike I controlled. I also found some hand-scribbled notes from the early 80s when I briefly considered writing and apparently abandoned the idea.

Looking back, I suppose I held my peace about my Raven experiences for a number of reasons. After Laos I found myself pretty busy helping win the Cold War. (Yet another one we may not have really won.) Also, I’ve always valued my privacy and it doesn’t come easy to share my memories publicly. Another reason old warriors tend to keep mum about their combat experiences is that people who haven’t been there don’t really understand what we are talking about. On top of all this there was the lingering concern that even though our escapades in Laos seemed to be widely known, the fact that we were in-country was for many years officially classified. And finally I suppose I felt that old demons are best left in the box. But my earlier reluctance to share my memories has been overcome recently as I have enjoyed reading the memories of other Ravens who have put pen to paper. Another motivation is that time may be short to leave a record of my part in those interesting times for interested readers – perhaps my grandkids.

In my experience the reflections of old soldiers tend to come across as self-centered and self-serving. Perhaps that is to be expected – especially in the case of the FAC (forward air controller) who was essentially a solitary warrior. We did not fly our missions in formations of witnesses to return from battle and sing our praises – or to rib us for our mistakes. Of course this was not the case with Raven escapades between missions, for
which there were often far too many witnesses only too happy to share. As I write I’ll try to resist embarrassing my former colleagues, living and otherwise.

From the anecdotes to follow I think the reader will find my experiences were in some ways similar but in other ways distinctive from those I have heard and read about from other Ravens and from Chris Robbins’ book, *The Ravens*. I dedicate my amateur writing effort to my fellow Ravens – especially those who sacrificed their lives to consecrate our worthy mission – and to the Hmong people whose survival was the real objective of our mission.

**Month-by-Month Raven Tour Overview**

July 1969 – My last O-1G flight in Vietnam was on 19 July. My first flight from 20A was on 29 July. I logged an O-1E and a T-28 flight which I presume were my local orientation rides. I recall the weather was pretty gloomy and the clouds clung ominously to the hilltops.

August 1969 – I begin earning my combat pay flying 40 sorties and 128 hours in the O-1E and F. My BDA book shows I put in 120 sets of fighters around the periphery of the Plaines des Jarres (PDJ). Pretty much every day flying except for a break 18-21 Aug – maybe due to monsoon rain. VP’s (General Vang Pao’s) “About Face” offensive officially started 15 August. I note that most of my August strikes were in the low hills just north of the PDJ working around to the eastern edge as the month progressed. This matches up with the general expansion of friendly control into the PDJ and beyond to the north and east as “About Face” began to have success.

September – I flew 134.7 hours and 46 sorties in the O-1A/E/F. Between 1-21 September I put in 109 airstrikes concentrated around the PDJ especially to the south side of Phou Nok Kok (PNK) as “About Face” offensive continued. Flight records show I had long break from 22 Sept till I flew again on 10 Oct. Seems quite a long time. Maybe this was when I went to the States to visit family. I returned to learn I was AWOL according to 56th Special Operations Wing (SOW). (Who the hell are they?)
October – Back in saddle on 10 Oct and flew 140.5 hours in 47 sorties. I put in 150 airstrikes, generally concentrated just north of the PDJ and south of PNK in support of Lulu and Black Lion (radio call signs of indigenous FAGs (forward air guides)). Also a number of strikes 10 miles north of LS-236 or 20 miles south of Ban Ban.

November – T-28 checkout at Water Pump 31 Oct - 2 Nov. My November flying was 60 hours / 21 sorties in the O-1 and 52 hours / 25 sorties in the T-28. I put in 81 sets of fighters. Strikes tended to be concentrated just west of Phu Nok Kok near Ban Ban in support of Black Lion, in the Ban Ban Valley and 20 miles south of Ban Ban attacking rice harvest.

December – I was at the site all month flying 24.5 hours / 8 sorties in the O-1 and 90.5 hours / 40 sorties in the T-28, including three sorties for 7.5 hours on Christmas Day. I put in 82 airstrikes on troops, bunkers, storage, mortar positions, AA guns, and trucks. Strikes were concentrated south of PNK and LS-10 at Ban Ban. Several strikes along Route 7 from Bird’s Head to the Fish’s Mouth. Made several forays to Sam Neua. Lulu, Black Lion, and Rocket Mobile were under increasing enemy pressure and heavily supported with strikes.

January 1970 – I flew 15 sorties / 40.5 hours in the Bird Dog and 48 sorties / 101 hours in the T-28. I did not realize until researching for this piece that most of my most interesting memories occurred in this final month of my tour. I put in 72 airstrikes. Most were in
support of sites under threat of attack, particularly Rainbow at LS-184 and Black Lion on PNK. Weather was bad much of the month. Flew my final Raven sortie on 29 Jan.

The Road to “Neverland” (In Vietnam we sometimes referred to Laos as “Neverland.”)

O-1 FAC to SEA (Southeast Asia) was my first assignment out of pilot training. I got my wings after a year and some 240 hours of undergraduate training at Laughlin AFB, Del Rio, Texas in September 1968. I was very fortunate that my instructor pilot (IP) in the T-38 was Maj. Roy Ripley (or “Loy Lipley” as the Takhli O’Club waitresses christened him). He wore a 100 Mission F-105 patch on the shoulder of his flying suit. He taught the same syllabus as every other IP but I knew I was getting my introduction to flying from a guy who had earned a special credibility in the profession I aspired to join. I wanted to be a fighter pilot since 7th grade. It was really the primary reason I wanted to go to the Air Force Academy. Assignments out of flying school were based on merit – order of graduation determined order of selection for the available aircraft assignments. Fighter assignments available to our class were one F-100, one Skyraider, one RF-4, a number of backseat F-4s. I graduated number 7 of about 50. The F-100, A-1, and RF-4 pretty much went 1-2-3. So I figured I would take a backseat F-4. But Roy took me aside and suggested I look at the other aircraft on the list. Down at the bottom were several O-1 Bird Dogs. He argued that the FAC was a key player in SEA. I would learn a lot about tactical ops and have a good chance at a fighter as a follow-on assignment. He thought I would have more opportunities as a FAC than as an F-4 backseater. At first I was somewhat astonished at his advice, but I had a lot of faith in Roy’s judgment and selected the O-1.

It did not take long to get through the requisite O-1 training at Hurlburt (Holly Field) and survival schools at Fairchild and Clark before I found myself in Vietnam in early February 1969. I spent the first six months of my first SEA tour as the province FAC in Tuy Hoa province, Republic of Viet Nam (RVN). For the most part I was the only pilot for a single O-1E flying from a small tin strip across the river from the huge and busy Tuy Hoa Air Base, home of a wing of F-100s. It was generally a low-threat combat environment with plenty of O-1E flying, a few airstrikes, minimal supervision, and lots of off-duty fun. Being unsure of statute of limitations I won’t go into too many specifics. I was 23 years old on my first operational assignment with essentially no immediate boss. Vietnam under those circumstances was a wonderful playground. As a FAC I had an airplane and a jeep. The only other guy with his own personal vehicle was the Tuy Hoa Air Base wing commander. The local Army nurses apparently thought this was a pretty big deal. I liked to hit the Tuy Hoa Officer’s Club and rub elbows with the F-100 pilots over a beer or two. I was especially impressed with the Albuquerque Guard (call sign Taco) who all had big personalities on the ground and were very professional when I worked with them in the air. I recall we had some fabulous beach parties.

I lived in the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) compound on the edge of Tuy Hoa City just off the beach until there was a misunderstanding between myself and the US Army commander, who asked me to find somewhere else to bunk. I plead the fifth
on what the precise nature of the problem was and where I went to live subsequently. Suffice to say I had more fun in Vietnam than the US Army felt was appropriate.

After I had been in-country maybe five months a tall guy in a plain black flight suit came through on a visit. I had not previously known Karl Polifka. We sat in a private office and talked about cabbages and kings for a bit, and that apparently started the ball rolling that led me to be called down to Bien Hoa for a meeting with another mysterious guy, and fairly quickly I was out of the hot tub of Vietnam and into the blast furnace of Laos. I was an adventure-seeking bachelor first lieutenant with just over 400 hours and 300 combat sorties in the O-1E. I had inherited my nickname “Smoky” and my spirit of adventure from my adventurous father who had been one of the early Montana smokejumpers. I was about to get all the adventure I could wish for.

Mr. Greene, Forest Ranger

I recall vaguely the process at Udorn and Vientiane that other Ravens have described about the conversion from Air Force officer to civilian flying forest ranger (a weak cover story unlikely to protect us if captured by the Pathet Lao (PL) or North Vietnamese). They collected up my meager possessions and issued me a US Embassy identity card and sent me downtown to shop for the stylish flying or two-piece “walking suits” as they were called. I recall thinking that I hoped to do as little walking in Laos as possible and I initially opted for several one-piece flying suits in various muted colors. Within a day or two I mounted the ramp of a silver C-123 with two other young pilots (including Air Force Academy and Del Rio pilot training classmate Ed Gunter) and we were soon letting down through scattered clouds into the crater that contained the storied CIA base at Long Tieng or Lima Site 20 Alternate (I usually abbreviate as “20A”). Most Raven accounts talk about their first magic impressions arriving in Laos featuring the limestone karst formations rising out of the ground accented with green foliage. When I saw the movie “Avatar” last year the scenes of the floating mountains reminded me of this moment of arrival.
The layout of 20A has been exhaustively documented so I won’t repeat that here, but suffice to say first impression of this secret mountain airstrip is indeed something out of “Terry and the Pirates” or “Steve Canyon” comic book tales just as many have said. Ravens were not CIA employees, but the Agency apparently funded the operation in Laos with black program money to maintain the illusion the US was complying with the 1962 Geneva Accords provision that there were to be no foreign combat troops in neutral Laos. We were there because apparently the North Vietnamese did not get that memo. CIA employees like Burr Smith (call sign “Yellow Dog”) constituted the local US leadership at 20A during my time, coordinating US military support to Major General Vang Pao’s (often simply “VP”) Hmong army, the indigenous force opposing the Communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Army in Northern Laos (Military Region II.)

CIA (euphemistically, Controlled American Source or CAS) employees (case officers) constituted the ground advisors in the field with their indigenous counterparts while Air America and Continental Air Service contracted to provide airlift with a large fleet of various helicopters, short takeoff and landing (STOL) aircraft such as the Helio-Courier and Swiss-built turbine-powered Pilatus Porter, and larger cargo planes such as Caribous, C-46s, and C-130s. These highly experienced aircrews typified by pilots like Al Adolph were consummate professionals who made very complex air missions look easy. They could take a C-130 in and out of mountain strips barely suitable for the O-1! I saw examples of this with my own disbelieving eyes.

The Ravens, though in civilian clothes, remained USAF officers and as experienced FACs were needed to coordinate the substantial US airpower flying out of bases in Thailand dedicated to opposing the Communist takeover of Laos. As serving military officers there was a fundamental difference between us and the CIA personnel. Although some became acquaintances and friends eventually, generally it seemed to me an unwritten rule to avoid being overly familiar or curious when dealing with these guys. But now I really wish I had made more of an effort to get to know some of these dedicated and impressive people.

Besides the relatively large group at 20A (generally about 10 Ravens), smaller detachments of Ravens flew from the royal capital, Luang Prabang, the political capital, Vientiane, and in southern Laos from Pakse and Savannakhet. The Air Force code-named operations in the northern region of Laos “Barrel Roll” to distinguish from operations along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos, code-named “Steel Tiger.” I think the North Vietnamese main priority in Laos was to keep the supplies flowing south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. But they also wanted a communist Laos for a neighbor, hence their massive military effort in northern Laos where most of the population and traditional political capitals were. The US was essentially trying to prevent the fall of another “domino.” Regrettably, America tired of the war before the Communists and another domino fell.

I Begin Operations as Raven 42

Given the time to move in and get checked out I calculate I must have arrived at 20A around 25 July 1969 because Air Force flight records indicate I flew a three-hour O-1A flight on
29 July and another on the 30th. I think at least one of these was with new Chief FAC Bill Yenke. I also flew a one-hour T-28 ride on the 30th in Mike Cavanaugh's back seat. These were my in-country orientation flights with “old heads” who had arrived a few months before me.

My little green BDA book shows I directed my first strike as a Raven on 31 July 1969. Hobo 10 flight was two A-1s out of Nakhon Phanom (NKP) loaded with 10xMk82, 4xCBU14, 2xCBU24, 2xLAU32, 2xLAU59, and 200 rds 20mm. (Skyraiders were great for this close air support war – lots of time on target and lots of varied weapons on an accurate and rugged platform.) Target UTM (Universal Transverse Mercator coordinates) was UG 0044.4549, which plots out on the northern edge of the PDJ. Target type was not specified. Result of the strike was “NFSF” (nothing further [seen due to] smoke and foliage). There would be a lot of that in the next six months. Later when I began to put in a lot of strikes I would no longer take time to record the ordnance load in the BDA book. In fact I left out a lot of things I wish now I had recorded and our intel officer, Joe Bauer, would berate me for the paucity of my BDA reports. For example, leaving me a note on 30 Aug, “How’s about telling me what is in the flight, hero?” (That is, he wanted me to specify the number and type of fighters.) My reply next to his note: “NOT A CHANCE!” But I liked the long-suffering Joe and I started trying harder to record the data he needed for his reports.

When I first arrived the friendly ground forces (Gen. Vang Pao’s Hmong tribesmen supplemented with Lao and Thai government troops and some mercenaries) were in a defensive position after the winter and spring advances of the opposing Neutralist and Pathet Lao forces. I had assumed that this was a seasonal seesaw battle that had gone on since the 1960 coup that marked the beginning of this struggle for control of the Kingdom of Laos. But my research for this piece reveals that large force-on-force battles that would characterize 1969 were something new. Roger Warner’s book, Shooting at the Moon, describes VP’s “About Face” operation to take and hold the PDJ as something unprecedented for the guerrilla leader to aspire to. The pitched battle of Muong Soui (L-108) on the northwestern edge of the PDJ in June was fresh in memory of the 20A Ravens. When I arrived and began flying in late July friendly forces controlled only Skyline Ridge surrounding Vang Pao’s HQ at 20A and strategic hilltops around the Plain of Jars, thanks to airdrop resupply by CIA contract air support and airstrikes directed by Ravens on nearby enemy forces. (Another Raven recently told me some of the more remote sites such as LS-46 and LS-236 were also manned during this time.)

So the initial pattern of our Raven flying was to patrol within about 30 miles of base – generally to the north and east within and around the periphery of the PDJ. We would make contact with the various forward air guides (FAGs) at each friendly location and receive updates on the situation and satisfy their requests for airstrikes if we could. Ravens checked in with ABCCC (Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center, an EC-130, call sign “Cricket” during the day in our area) and received information such as altimeter setting and any enemy situation or weather that had been relayed to ABCCC by other aircraft. The ABCCC senior controller was the on-scene representative of the 7/13 Air Force commander responsible for operations of air forces based in Thailand – primarily the
USAF A-1, F-4, and F-105 fighter bombers supporting our operations in northern Laos. We would notify Cricket of our position and request for fighters and controllers aboard Cricket would direct available fighters to our rendezvous. There would typically be two to four Ravens airborne and linked on FM so if one of us had a good target or troops in trouble we would tell Cricket to redirect the fighters where most needed. There were times when there were few fighters available depending what was going on in other parts of the AO (area of operations) or theater, but during most of my tour Ravens seemed to have plenty of priority and plenty of fighters came our way. Our challenge was to find them worthwhile targets. This was a little difficult at first but in the last three months of my tour there were plenty of lucrative targets as the NVA mounted a major effort to reverse gains of Vang Pao’s successful “About Face” offensive.

Normally, especially when a Raven was new, we flew with a specially trained FAG (called Robins) in the back seat who spoke reasonable English, was trained to use air-ground communications, and understood how to interpret the ground situation and assist his Raven to effectively support the ground forces. Like pilots, some backseaters were better at the job than others. We had our favorite backseaters and no doubt they had their favorite Ravens – as well as those they refused to fly with. My early introduction to flying in Laos was a “Welcome to the NFL, Rookie” experience the first week in August with “the ideal backseater.” (At the Raven reunion in October 2014 I met two Hmong who escaped Laos after the war and settled in the States. It was fascinating to learn they were operating in MRII during my tour – one recalls flying in my back seat when he was a brand-new Robin and the other was a ground FAG I probably talked to often during my tour. More detail about Robins and ground FAGs later.)

The Ideal Backseater

The O-1 was a tandem two-seater and we carried an indigenous forward air guide (Robin) with access to the FM radio to help coordinate our strikes with indigenous ground forces. I would find that these little guys varied in attitude, experience, and competence but were certainly a big help to a brand-new Raven. I had to admire their courage being willing to climb in the back with the likes of me experiencing my early missions in unfamiliar and unforgiving terrain and weather, to say nothing of hostile fire. I discovered these guys were keen students of their Raven pilots, and just as the backseaters developed reputations among the Ravens, the Ravens developed reputations among the backseaters. When you went down to the flight line your reputation determined if a backseater was available to fly with you or not. I guess I fell in the middle of the pack because during my six-month tour I flew about half my missions with a backseater. Upon reflection, the few times I got into serious trouble I was alone. It seems to me I seldom had a backseater when I flew the T-28 and later in my tour I was less likely to carry a backseater.

At any rate, as a brand-new Raven whoever was running things tried to take care of me with an experienced backseater. I regret I could not recall his proper name when I first drafted this but we called him Marshall Ky (I’ll abbreviate as “MK”) because he could have been the twin brother of the famous and handsome commander of the South Vietnamese Air Force at the time. (At the recent Raven reunion one of the Hmong told me
MK’s name was Yang Bee and he is apparently still alive somewhere in the US. I recall clearly being told this guy had long experience as a backseater, was very familiar with the local area, had phenomenal eyesight, and very importantly to me, was considered to be cautious to the point of cowardly. The perfect backseater, right? So we were patrolling at a conservative altitude just north of the PDJ on a relatively clear morning. My BDA book does not indicate the date but it was one of my first flights as a Raven. I’ve told this story so many times I remember the details fairly well.

I recall his words over the intercom: “Laven 42 – you fly to the low!” Hmmm. Well, why not? I maneuvered down to try to see what he was talking about. He continued to urge me to go lower and we ended up almost treetop level flying along a small road on the edge of a patch of forest. As usual my windows were latched open both for ventilation and to hear ground fire. MK had pulled my .30 caliber carbine from behind the seat and was firing at something out the left side of the aircraft – we were heading roughly west paralleling the road so he was firing north along the road into the trees.

Break, break. At this point my Raven buddies are asking themselves “.30 cal carbine? Are you serious?” Yeah well, as they know, part of our in-processing at 20A was to go through the extensive CIA “lending library” and choose personal weapons. I passed over AK-47s, Swedish Ks, CAR-15s, etc. and selected the lowly .30 cal carbine and a Colt .45 automatic pistol. I honestly did not expect it to make much difference if I ended up on the ground. Having said that, our weapons were not just for show – I recall a number of occasions when a group of us would walk over to the nearby firing range and burn through a few clips with our various hardware. While we are on subject of weapons, the tiny sleeping hooch I shared with Bob Passman and later Bob Dunbar was fitted out with a ready-to-fire Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) sitting on the floor pointing at the door. This huge weapon barely fit in the confined space between our beds and the door. Also we each had half a dozen frag grenades taped under the rails of our bunks. Our personal weapons were hung on the bedpost ready to hand. We were told there was some risk of hostile intruders so most Ravens were well-armed on the ground as well as in the air. This would factor into a later story.

Back to that morning in early August 1969 on the northern edge of the PDJ. I recall making several low passes at MK’s urging while he plinked out the back window and I strained to see what the hell he was shooting at. Then I saw it. I could hardly miss it. Under the trees beside the road facing us, the biggest PT-76 ever built. About 75 yards range – at eye level. I’ll carry to my grave the sight of the leather-helmeted chap manning the 12.7mm machine gun on the turret. I “calmly” (yeah, right) selected full afterburner (jammed my throttle full forward) and began to throw the airplane around the sky like a madman, which I technically was at that point. We accelerated rapidly from 60 to 63 knots (can you detect the mild sarcasm?). The language accompanying this action cannot be repeated in print and may well have been heard by the PT-76 crew. I instantly regretted that I would have to meet St. Peter so shortly after such an un-Christian outburst. But on reflection I think he would have understood. I had just gotten to Laos and I was going to end up in a flaming pile right here 40 miles north of my new home. At least the stupid bastard in the back seat was going to die with me. So we sat there in the sights of this PT-76 commander for what
seemed like an hour as the airspeed crept up toward 65 knots and I could see him hammering away. We didn’t get a scratch. I guess he was so excited to see this enormous O-1 in front of him he couldn’t shoot straight. Anyway I now worked to get my heartbeat down into the low 200s and had a few choice words for MK as I turned south for home. But this red-letter day wasn’t over.

20A sat in a kind of bowl or crater with a couple cuts through the high terrain encircling the site. We could use these cuts to sneak in under the frequent low cloud deck that sat ominously on the tops of the surrounding hills of Skyline Ridge. It was very important to know how to put your airplane into a low cut that would lead into the airfield. On advice from the experienced Ravens checking me out, I had selected what I thought was a distinctive tree stump as my guidepost to home in low weather. I intended to practice the low entry on good weather days but my opportunities so far had been limited. After the near disaster with the PT-76 I was bringing MK home. In keeping with the way this day was going I found the clouds were indeed onto the tops of the hills surrounding home base. I found what I thought was my tree stump and began to climb up the little valley. My faith in MK had taken a beating, but I still hoped he was familiar with the local terrain and would help me get us home. I talked on the intercom and turned to observe his features as we climbed closer to the clouds. I could not determine if he was happy or uneasy about the path we were on. I myself was very under confident and as the O-1 entered clouds, I pulled into a tight 180, again spicing up the atmosphere with some choice words, and descended out of cloud and back down to the base of the valley. Let’s look around a little more while working on that thundering heartbeat. I soon found another tree stump that looked much more familiar and fortunately led me safely under the clouds and into the crater containing the welcome airstrip.

I do not recall what I did next. I guess I did not beat the hell out of MK. I think we even flew together again but I was never again so naïve as to follow his advice. I am very surprised to find no mention at all in my BDA book of a live and firing PT-76. I certainly would have reported it right after changing my underwear. On the other hand, I would not have made a big deal of it with the other guys. I was a brand-new guy and the incident had a lot of potential for embarrassment unless I passed it off casually. That’s huge for a 23-year-old trying to play with the big boys like Mike Cavanaugh, who had taken me under his wing and who I had quickly recognized as the unofficial leader of a group that seemed to naturally reject leadership.

I had in the space of about an hour literally dodged a (lot of) bullet(s) and escaped deadly weather. This day was my first attention-getting experience with the variety of dangers that lurked close by. I realized this was way different than my experience in Vietnam. Six months of this kind of day would make for a very long tour. As it turned out there were not so many such days and I got better at managing the risks. Nevertheless, I was not to escape Laos scot-free. I doubt any of us did.
The 20A Ravens (July 69 – Feb 70)

I took a few notes about 25 years ago trying to list the Ravens who were at 20A when I arrived (late July 69) and when I left (early Feb 70). Don’t know if I recall them accurately but here’s my list with my best-guess dates:

### July 1969
- Joe Potter (Site Commander) Jul – Dec 69
- Bill Yenke (Chief FAC) Jul – Sep 69
- Mike Cavanaugh May – Oct 69
- Karl Polifka Mar – Dec 69
- Ed Lauffer Jun – Nov 69
- Bob Passman Mar – Aug 69
- Mike Byers Jun – Dec 69
- Jerry Greven Aug 69 – Feb 70
- Jerry Furch (Raven 71) flew with us when we were short-handed

### Jan 1970 when I left:
- Jerry Rhein (Site Commander) Dec 69 –?
- Tom Palmer (Chief FAC) Sep 69 –?
- Bob Dunbar Aug 69 – Dec 70
- Henry Allen Oct 69 – Mar 70 (KIA after 20A was attacked)
- “Moose” Carroll Oct 69 – Mar 70
- Tom Harris Oct 69 – Apr 70
- Bill Kozma Sep 69 – Apr 70
- Bill “Tiny” Platt Dec 69 –?
- Al Daines ? – Dec 69
- Craig Morrison ? – Dec 69

My notes and memories can’t place Craig Morrison or Al Daines there at 20A during my tour. However, Karl Polifka recalls Daines and Dunbar shared his farewell party and left with him in December, so I assume his recollections about that are accurate. But I am very surprised I don’t recall my Academy classmate Al Daines being at 20A for most of my tour. I suppose we were on different operations and break cycles.

### Daily Life at 20A

Several Ravens have described our daily life from their perspectives. I’ll give a few of my impressions while trying to avoid repetition.

When I got there the Ravens lived in a rather large old wooden house – I think single-story with some large common rooms and a kitchen and a communications room with secure teletype used to send our reports and receive information and orders from headquarters at Victor (Vientiane). My BDA book reminds me that USAIRA (the US air Attache) at Victor was code-named Sydney or Geneva over the shortwave comm link used for admin and logistics. 20A was code-named Athens and Luang Prabang (LP) was Dover. Udorn was
Cairo. This did not mean much to us as pilots – we never used these designations in the air. I just include it here because I thought it was a neat piece of trivia. (Karl Polifka recalled these differently – but this is what was written in my BDA book – and who cares, really?)

Our cook was an Air Force sergeant named Espinosa (Esp). We sorely missed him when he DEROS’d in September without replacement. More later on that. Suffice to say it is not only armies that travel on their stomachs.

Our living quarters were small rooms with bunk beds connected to the main part of the house by a long elevated covered wooden catwalk that ran outside along the back of the house. Because of (probably unfounded) security concerns, if you were on the catwalk after dark you were supposed to whistle or sing a typically American song until safely in your hooch. A bit later I’ll tell a story about this. The rooms were small and sparsely furnished but we mostly just slept there for a few hours each night. I believe my first roommate was Bob Passman and later Bob Dunbar. As I previously mentioned, our tiny room was armed like a small battleship and we almost hoped some poor unsuspecting PL would try to breech our layered defenses. In November or December, the Ravens would move into a new multistory cinder block house nearby with private bedrooms.

During my early months at 20A we would get up in the morning – I do not recall a particular get-up time but most of us were anxious to get out there and get to an airplane. We would eat breakfast – at least while Espi was there – and head for the flight line, usually in a utility or jeep-type vehicle as it was about 1/4 mile from the house. We would often be gone flying all day, typically logging about 8-10 hours in three sorties. Once we got back home we would toss our little green BDA memo books on the intel officer’s desk and head for the fridge and liquid refreshment. If a big operation was in progress, there would be more formalized comparing of notes and planning for tomorrow’s operations – but usually with a beer in hand.

I recall walking the short distance down the hill to VP’s residence and HQ for dinner fairly often although others have said this was a rare event. I recall very well the sticky rice we rolled up and dipped into some pretty spicy juice. I became practically addicted to that rice so I think I went over to VP’s for dinner fairly often and I had the impression Ravens were always welcome. The image I recall of these evenings was of dozens of people, Hmong and round eyes, sitting together on the floor around the huge tables covered with plates of exotic food and huge bowls of rice. Only VP got white rice – the rest of us got sticky rice – which was fine with me. Women would keep the plates and glasses full throughout the evening. Once in a while there would be a special occasion such as a farewell for one of the guys and the White Horse scotch and Lao Lao would flow as string bracelets were tied to the honoree’s wrist for good luck. I actually like scotch and I did my duty when the bottle came my way, but I think White Horse is an acquired taste that I never acquired. The gatherings at VP’s have been well described by others so I’ll just say they were always fun and I liked the native food and drink. More importantly, these evenings made me feel more empathy with the people we were supporting and more like an integral part of VP’s team.
Many nights after flying a long day we would just sit around and drink and talk to our fellow Ravens in our living room / bar. A favorite topic of conversation was after action reports from recent absences from the site or plans for the next. At some point in the evening there was dinner around the big table. I recall one evening that I asked for someone to pass me the salt or something and they passed me the salt and the pepper and the butter and the mashed potatoes and the meat and someone’s tableware – you get the picture. We all got a laugh but I never asked anyone to pass me anything again, nor did anyone else. If you couldn’t reach it, you didn’t get it. Finally, tired, well-fed, and a bit drunk, we made our way individually or in small groups down the long outside catwalk to our bunks.

There were always exceptions to this typical daily routine. A pilot might be asked to fly an airplane south to Udorn for maintenance. This was a chance to check mail and have some fun downtown in Vientiane and/or Udorn. I recall one occasion flying an O-1 with no door and multiple bullet holes down to Udorn. I taxied into the AIRA “Water Pump” apron, jumped out of the airplane, and asked the maintenance officer, Lt. Col. George Vogel, for the keys to his jeep. He was a crusty old guy (probably pushing 50) who worked miracles keeping our shot-up kites flying. He shook his head and griped as he surveyed his newest repair challenge but always came through with a timely repair – and his jeep keys. First stop was Base Finance to get paid. Some old guys will recall before the days of computers our pay records were on a big yellow sheet rolled up in a blue cardboard tube. Remember now? Anyway, since Ravens were in TDY (temporary duty) status we hand-carried these tubes and presented them to finance to get paid. One day I took the pay record out and studied it. I recently read one Raven’s account saying that we got no extra pay in the Raven program. I certainly did. The way it was done was the finance people checked every single box so that whereas normal monthly pay would have been about $500, I got well over twice that. But I sure plowed it back into the local economy quickly. Next stop was the Holiday Inn for a Kobe beef and rubdown. My circuit included Ben’s Jewelers and a browse at one or two tailor shops to replace wardrobe items. After a long night in the Udorn Club I’d finish up with a nightcap in the Air America Club, get a couple hours of sleep, and go pick up my freshly repaired airplane for the trip home. Later when I was flying the T-28 I would load about 25 cases of beer in the belly compartment before returning to 20A. The Jolly Greens would bring beer up when they sat alert at 20A, but we discovered they were getting rusty cans of Black Label for free and then selling it to us. So we cut out the middleman whenever we could.

About half the assigned pilots (we numbered about 10 pilots at 20A when I was there) were on leave at any one time. We all flew hard and at 10 or more hours a day it did not take long to hit the max allowable 135 hours for the month. This could happen by the middle of the month. (Some Ravens told me they did not recall this monthly flying hour limit but it is clear in my own memory.) Unless there was a critical op going, you had to stand down and usually you were allowed to go anywhere you wanted until the next month started your clock again. We would often sit around the Raven bar at night and talk about where we would go on our next leave. We mentioned exotic places like Sweden and Switzerland, and the alcohol-fueled plans could get pretty detailed and elaborate. We had a handy set
of TDY orders that in effect gave us government transportation to destination of choice in civilian clothes.

Despite all the grandiose plans I only managed to get to the States for two weeks in Sept-October timeframe. When I returned I found out the nice folks at 56th SOW at NKP considered me AWOL since I had not processed a leave application with the wing. I was genuinely surprised since NKP was completely out of my crosscheck. I responded with the usual Raven attitude – “What are they going to do, send me to Vietnam?” No, but you can expect a pretty lousy Officer Evaluation Report (OER). That in fact happened, but I certainly did not lose any sleep over the threat of a lousy OER at that point in my life. At some point I also got away for an enjoyable seven-day R&R to Sydney. Most of the other times, despite my best intention to get to Geneva or Copenhagen, I would typically blow a couple days in Vientiane, a couple more in Udorn, and I might even get down to Bangkok once or twice before my time and money ran out and I would have to hitch a ride home on the nearest silver bird. Downrange it seemed to be a constant party and reunion with fellow Ravens and other SEA warriors from various organizations all trying to live large and one-up each other. I clearly recall ordering a scotch at the Charoen Hotel’s Yellow Bird Bar in Bangkok, drinking half of it and leaving my last $100 bill on the bar. Today I’d like to have that $100 back to buy a new fishing pole. But back then I felt I had to uphold the image of larger-than-life big-spender Ravens. And at that point in my life saving money for future needs was not a priority.

The other breaks in our daily routine were caused by weather. Fog and low cloud might keep us on the ground, although if the weather was OK in the target area and we expected to be able to get back on the ground later, we could take off in practically zero-zero conditions. We practiced this on good-weather days, hitting the stopwatch at brake release and noting the time to turn on course and the climb rate needed to clear the hills. But neither the O-1 nor the T-28 was equipped with sufficiently accurate navigation equipment, nor were there suitable navigation beacons or GCA (ground-controlled approach) for instrument recoveries at 20A. At one time or other we all landed after dark or in pretty marginal weather, but we had to make a visual approach or try to get to bases in Thailand.

Another weather phenomenon that had a big impact on us was the seasonal monsoon rains. I don’t recall exactly when these occurred, but there are several unexplained breaks in my BDA book that suggest we had two or three of these severe rains that beat down for several days and kept us in the building. You had the impression if you went outside the rain would literally knock you down. Anyway, the first day of rain provided a welcome break from flying and we caught up on our rest. As the rain continued to pound on the tin roof we partied a bit harder than usual knowing we would not fly the next day. The dart game would heat up. Ed Lauffer’s party trick was to catch darts with his hand before they hit the dart board. His arm soon looked like a heroin addict’s but he didn’t seem to notice. We set up the projector and watched whatever movie was on hand. I recall we had the “Ten Commandments” – but only the second reel. Oh well, we saw that about 10 times – and even played it backwards. By the third or fourth day, despite being pretty mellow I could detect impending disaster as I watched semi-naked men running around the house throwing darts at each other. We needed to get back in the air soon – where it was safe!
Periods of enforced downtime also allowed us to rub elbows with the other inhabitants of Alternate. The road from our house down to VP’s was lined with little shacks where families of the local Hmong lived. There may have been little shops or local food sources but I don’t recall this amounting to much. I think I recall kids playing in the road with homemade toys and wondering what future they and their parents would have. You saw few men or young boys – they were out on the remote hill sites – kids whose M-16 was as tall as they were and old men who had somehow managed to get old despite 10 years of constant war against Communist PL and NVA in Vang Pao’s little guerrilla army.

At the top of the flight line near the famous karst “barrier” were the control tower, the offices for airfield operations, and quarters of the Hmong T-28 pilots (call sign “Chao Pha Khao” pronounced chop-a-cow) with their ground crews and the Air America contract maintenance crews. We did not spend a lot of time in this area of the site, but sometimes stopped to pick up backseaters on our way to the Raven parking ramp mid-field on the east side of the runway.

Maybe 100 feet up the hill from our house was the CIA complex where the case officers and contract aircrew lived – I suppose pretty much like we did. We did not spend a lot of time up there – I think you had to be more or less invited for a drink or a briefing. But on several occasions I found myself either in the CAS bar or their briefing room. That must have been when we learned some of the old Air America and Continental Air Service flying tips that would help us survive. Someone took time to explain how to crash-land on a forested mountainside. This always stuck with me because the technique was not intuitive. The recommended technique is to dive your doomed airplane right toward the face of the mountain, building up speed to enable you to pull out of the dive as you approach the mountain and fly up the slope skimming the trees until you stall, hopefully gently falling into the tops of the trees for your best chance of survival. On the ground ops side CIA case officers would describe the situations at their respective locations.

“Good Times” Aug-Oct 1969

Despite not keeping a journal I could construct a rough framework of my flying activities each month of my tour by comparing the computer printouts from AF flight records with my BDA book entries.

Day-to-Day Flight Ops at 20A

I can’t recall if there was a formal flying schedule posted assigning pilots to tail numbers and takeoff times. There no doubt was. (Karl Polifka recalls they posted a schedule such that takeoffs were staggered about 45 minutes and provided between two and four Ravens airborne depending on level of activity.) Certainly after the first wave it was a bit of a free-for-all and we went wherever the action was and stayed on station as long as needed.

From time to time there were defined air-ground operations with actual typed-out FRAGs (fragmentary orders) listing fighters and TOTs (time on target), but most of the time we
seemed to be kind of on our own to grab an airplane for the day and go out and patrol our area – check in with ground troops and look for targets under workable weather. My BDA book indicates a pattern of working in a particular place for a day or two, then moving on. When the ground troops had no close targets we conducted VR (visual recce) along the main routes for enemy troop movements and supply convoys – occasionally hitting the jackpot. During the first month or two of my tour the ground situation was relatively benign. Good spring/summer weather enabled a lot of accurate bombing of enemy positions so the friendly forces were preparing for a seasonal offensive. We would soon have friendly troops on the PDJ and the various hilltops to the north and east of the PDJ would be manned with troops to observe and obstruct enemy forces attempting to approach on the main roads from Vietnam through the Ban Ban Valley.

Other sources cover the strategy and major shifts in battle lines over the pivotal year of 1969 in much more authoritative detail than I can since I was a bit player in this drama, but my overall impression was that our summer offensive (“About Face”) was very successful, but the territorial gains could not be sustained against the influx of determined regular North Vietnamese reinforcements and reduced US airpower effectiveness as the fall and winter weather closed in. I saw by my BDA book that my strikes followed a general geographical pattern beginning in the PDJ area in August and September, then reaching further north and east in November, then retreating back toward the PDJ in December and January.

Ravens got airborne with a basic plan – usually to make the rounds of the sites to see how they fared overnight. This became critical after November when all sites were under increasing enemy pressure. Three or four Ravens would typically be flying around talking to FAGs at the various sites and looking for good targets and airstrike weather. We would share this information with each other on our discrete frequency or we would hear other Ravens talking to Cricket and know who was where and what action they had going on. This allowed us to self-coordinate and cover the area efficiently. If the weather was dodgy we also monitored and position-reported on Air America VHF common frequency to minimize potential for midair collision with the many fixed-wings and helicopters flying between the sites – often in the clouds. So there was a lot of radio chatter if all three of our radios were in use. Even if we could not provide fighter support, we tried to cover the area calling in to obtain situation reports and provide encouragement to the guys on the ground manning the remote sites.

**LS-46 (UF 9591) “Edward M. Kennedy International”**

When we had time we would fly out to some of the sites to spend a little time on the ground with case officers, and I was struck by the remoteness of some of these sites. One that comes to mind is LS-46, well south and east of the PDJ about 30 miles due south of the Fish’s Mouth, kind of out there in the middle of nowhere. There must have been an infiltration route for enemy forces nearby to justify placing a case officer at the site. Early in my tour the case officers sometimes stayed on their sites for extended periods. Later as enemy pressure increased the case officers were usually flown home to Alternate to spend the night and then returned to the site the next morning. LS-46 (for reasons that will
become apparent in this story we called it “Edward M. Kennedy International” in memory of the Chappaquiddick incident) required a pilot to make careful approach and landing in the O-1, which was not really a STOL aircraft. The relatively short dirt strip at LS-46 climbed up the slope of a mound of high ground in the midst of a beautiful little valley. The pilot had to set up a straight-in approach, milk a little flap to control speed, plunk the bird on the first few feet of the strip, and let the bird slow as it climbed up the fairly steep hill. From short final the pilot was committed to land and if too fast or too high, the bird would roll to the top of the hill and over the cliff at the top end of the strip. The departure was a little sporty too. The aircraft would roll down the short downhill strip gathering just enough speed to stagger off the end and descend into the valley where you could then accelerate to climb speed. It was a bit of a test of flying skill so several of us used to go there just to say we’d done it.

One day one of our highly experienced number landed his O-1 at 46, but unexpectedly a huge water buffalo crossed right in front of him as he flared for landing, causing him to touch down too long to safely stop. The hapless Raven did the only thing he could do – locked one brake to ground loop before going over the cliff. However, his speed was still too high and the landing gear strut buckled. (I recently learned a CIA case officer, Jim Adkins, saw the whole thing and told me the pilot’s action probably saved his life and that of his passenger, John Jennings, another case officer.) Thus the designation Edward M. Kennedy International. A few days later I was amazed to circle the site and watch an Air America Caribou on the strip load up the broken Bird Dog and take off. Those guys knew how to fly.

I went in to LS-46 a number of times and spent some pleasant time with the friendly case officer whose call sign was Swamp Rat and whose name I could not recall when I first drafted this piece, but subsequently learned was John Jennings. More on him later. I have in my collection a photo he must have taken of me offering a snack to a curious water buffalo that hung around the site. These were the “good days” when we were succeeding militarily, the weather was pleasant, and the case officers were relaxed. We felt safe on the ground at the remote sites and had spare time to enjoy the stark beauty of the countryside. That would all change too soon.
Mike Cavanaugh's Farewell

I think it was early October, it was Mike Cavanaugh's farewell party and we still lived in the old house. I recall I was rooming with Bob Dunbar and as previously described our little bunk room was bristling with weapons against potential ground attack.

A going-away party was reason to hit the sauce harder and longer than usual, and certainly this would be especially true when we said good-bye to Mike Cavanaugh, who I considered the informal leader of our little dysfunctional family. My notes recall the evening featured a songfest of truck-driving ballads to the guitars of Mike Byers and Moose Carroll. I especially loved their rendition of “I turned 21 in prison doing life without parole …” I recall I had the dawn patrol next morning so I slipped out of the party a few hours before my scheduled takeoff, which I considered prudent and reasonable, and I was not the first to retire to bed. One of the quaint traditions of the Ravens was to creep into a party pooper’s room and pour a cold drink on him as he slept. The idea being to encourage him to return to the party and deter others from committing this protocol violation in the future. On this occasion Mike apparently noticed I was MIA and decided to give me the remedial treatment. Since I felt I had performed my social duties adequately, I decided not to play the game. As I lay on my bunk (I can’t recall if my roommate Bob Dunbar was in his bunk or not), I heard the telltale creak of someone approaching on the wooden catwalk. Whoever was on the catwalk was not observing our unwritten rule about whistling or singing an American tune after dark. I have previously described the extensive arsenal packed into our small hooch room.

My .45 hung in its holster on my bedpost. I quietly pulled it and cocked the hammer. The room was dark and the early morning was pitch-black. As the creaking stopped just outside the door I could hear rather than see the enforcer of party protocol (I did not yet know who) slowly open the door a crack. At that point I placed two rounds in the door frame about head high. I saw Mike’s face in the muzzle flash – a very white face with huge white eyes. He quietly changed his mind about the drink and began to slowly back down the catwalk the way he came. His problems were not over. Karl Polifka in the next hooch was aroused from a sound sleep and appeared behind Mike prepared to cut him in half with his sawed-off shotgun. I never did hear any more about that from Mike although we’ve talked a few times over the years. I guess in his mind that was just another typical day of all kinds of people shooting at him and usually missing. As I look back on that incident today, I know that two pistol shots in the early-morning hours within 100 yards of the CIA sleeping quarters in one direction and VP’s house in the other direction would not escape notice and concern. But I don’t recall anyone – including Mike – saying anything to me about it.


During the second half of my tour the military situation began to turn around. The NVA poured into Laos in strength and the weather deteriorated with the approach of winter. The gains of “About Face” were increasingly threatened.
In early November I was checked out in the T-28 by “Water Pump” IPs at Udorn. My AF flight records reflect a lot more time and sorties in this checkout (five sorties and 8.7 hours) than I remember. My recollection is we did a pattern ride, an instrument ride in the back seat under the hood, and a range ride to show me the guns and rockets. I recall the ground school was a 30-minute chat with an IP over a glass of whisky and then we retired to the Holiday Inn for a rubdown. I guess it was adequate and I had a ball flying the T-28 for the next three months. Karl Polifka would soon leave in December, leaving me and Mike Byers the only T-28-qualified guys at the site to fly our two birds – sweet.

Jack Hudson’s Rescue

Sometime in November on a crisp clear morning I took off on the dawn patrol in the T-28 and checked in with Cricket to be told an A-1 was flying south in the PDJ with prop failed to full decrease. I was given the Skyraider’s frequency and established contact. I soon saw him to the north of me coming my way, slowly descending. He told me the airplane should have enough power to hold altitude at some point and asked the lowest he could descend and still get south to the Thai border. The PDJ was roughly 4,000 feet elevation and there was higher terrain to the south. It soon became apparent he would not get south of the PDJ, and I picked a suitable bailout location for him. This was a fairly large grass-topped hill near the southern tip of the PDJ. He was a little skeptical. “I was bombing here last week, Raven.” But time was up and as I sat on his wing I watched the Yankee extraction system work perfectly. The pilotless Skyraider slowly rolled and descended into the terrain a few miles south.

Meanwhile I observed the pilot’s chute carry him across the top of the hill and down the side where he hung up in the trees. He made radio contact on guard and reported he was OK. I had previously talked to a “Greenie” (H-34) heli pilot who was in the vicinity and by now standing by to come in and pick up the downed pilot. Trouble was they were ill-equipped to pull a pilot out of trees. By now we also had a Jolly Green on scene observing the effort and he insisted the H-34 disengage and “let the professionals handle it,” or something to that effect, which I recall pissed me off. But we let the Jolly come in and he pulled the pilot out and flew him the short distance to 20A. I returned home to meet the rescued pilot and it turned out to be my old Academy cadet wing commander – Jackson L. Hudson. He awarded me his (“combat loss”) .38 which was kind of a tradition in these circumstances and we had a nice chat before the Jolly hauled him home to NKP.

The Thanksgiving Rice Campaign
In late November we were trying to disrupt the enemy rice supply by attacking the harvested stacks of rice in the Ban Ban Valley and another smaller rice-growing area about 10 miles south of Ban Ban. We learned that rice was a difficult target. You could bomb the stacks and scatter the rice, but we learned they would collect the scattered undamaged grains. We considered some kind of poison but settled on napalm as the most practical means. The problem was the rice was in well-defended areas and finned napalm dropped from a dive just plopped in a small fire as opposed to the impressive splash you got when unfinned nape was dropped from a low-level pass.

So on Thanksgiving Day about 1430 in the afternoon I was directing a flight of Skyraiders (Zorro 52 and 53) with napalm against stacks of rice in about the center of the Ban Ban Valley. They were dive-bombing from fairly high altitude and the results were poor. I wanted them to try low-level delivery and decided to show them that there was no AAA in the area. I set up for a low pass from north to south trying to have a dramatic effect by having my shadow closely approach my airplane. I recall I even dropped a little flap. As I was about to transmit, “see, no problem,” there was a problem.
About the time I heard the 12.7 open fire from about 300 yards east of me, the round entered the left side of the engine cowling, blew off part of a cylinder head, and continued out the right cowling, leaving an impressive exit wound. Oil immediately began siphoning along the side of the fuselage. I hope I didn’t whimper over the radio but I probably did. I was about 10 miles east of Phu Nok Kok, Black Lion’s hilltop stronghold, so my first instinct was to climb and head east. I asked the A-1s to tag along which they did, no doubt chuckling to themselves about my foolish stunt. I was not chuckling. But the Bird Dog was behaving very well considering the abuse she had suffered. I was intently scanning the few engine instruments for any sign of impending doom and saw none. I continued to climb and cruise southwest toward and then over the PDJ and finally to Skyline and home, the Skyraiders a reassuring presence throughout my anxious trip. (See picture of intrepid author and wounded Bird Dog.)

My first reference to targeting rice was 22 November 1969 at UG5366 in the Ban Ban. I directed midmorning strikes by Firefly 22 (two A-1s) and Gator (two F-4s) and awarded BDA of four tons and two tons of rice respectively. I directed 15 sets of fighters on rice targets in the Ban Ban between 22 and 28 Nov. On 5 Dec I recorded a VR report “about 20 stacks rice in Ban Ban – pretty dispersed.” That was my last reference to the rice campaign.

Some months earlier in anticipation I had secured a C-ration can of turkey from the storeroom and stuck it in my footlocker. On this day I carried it with me in the cockpit intending to celebrate with a turkey “feast” at some point during the day. Early that afternoon I had my foolish run in with the 12.7 but was back over the Ban Ban by 1530 when I put in Zebra, a flight of two F-105s, and then held Backache, a flight of four F-4s, high and dry while I opened and ate my can of turkey. They held somewhat impatiently while I relished my turkey dinner, then we struck at 1630 leaving four tons of rice and two structures burning.
The General’s Aide

I can’t recall exactly when the following events happened, but they coincided with a rare visit to 20A by a USAF general in the wake of congressional hearings on the expanded operations in Laos. That would make the timeframe late November or December 1969. Chris Robbins relates the story involves Maj. Gen. Robert L. Petit, 7/13 AF commander at Udorn, coincident with departure party for Polifka, Dunbar, and Daines. My own recollection was a little different than the Robbins account, but in view of convincing evidence I’ve adopted some but not all of the more commonly accepted version of events. Chris Robbins relates the incident as part of the evening farewell party, but my own pretty clear recollection is a little different. We were all aware of but not overly excited about the arrival of a USAF general at the site that day. It was afternoon and I had landed after buzzing the field in the T-28, which I heard later really impressed the general. I was drinking in the CAS bar with a case officer my notes refer to as “Big John.” (This might have been John Jennings, the case officer usually at LS-46 – call sign “Swamp Rat,” who I probably knew better than I knew other case officers.) Robbins’ account refers to the case officer as “Igor.” So who knows for sure? I don’t recall if anyone else was in the room except John and me but I’ve already proven how memory plays tricks so I could be mistaken. Karl Polifka told me he was present. Some old notes I scribbled down in the early 80s (10 years after the event) relate that Gen. Petit’s aide appeared in the doorway looking a bit overawed and apparently not accustomed to traveling in civilian clothes. In an uncharacteristically friendly gesture, “Big John” asked the young man in for a beer. I winced as he drew himself up and replied stiffly, “I never drink on duty.” I sensed rather than actually saw a huge hairy arm cross the room like a striking rattler, seize the startled martinet by the shirt collar, and propel him effortlessly across the room into and through the window. All this happened in the blink of an eye. I glanced out the window to see the dazed but apparently undamaged body sprawled on top of Floyd’s bear cage with a surprised and delighted Floyd reaching up to explore his prize. As we turned quietly back to our beers we noticed General Petit standing in the doorway. Presumably he had witnessed the episode and a pregnant pause told him the ball was in his court. To his everlasting credit he cleared his throat, flashed us a nervous smile, and said, “I believe I’ll have one of those beers!” That’s the way I remember it. Subsequently word got around about the general observing, “You look like a bunch of Mexican bandits.” So on a fine December morning those of us available posed for the famous “Mexican Banditos” photo out front of the Raven house. Hopefully someone sent the general a souvenir copy.
“Banditos” taken in front of Raven house at 20A in Dec 1969. (William E. Platt Collection)
Back: Jerry Greven, Hank Allen, Moose Carroll, Joe Bauer, Tom Palmer, Will Platt, Tom Harris. Kneeling: Bill Kozma, Joe Potter, Smoky Greene. There are also four of our support troops in the photo I regret I cannot name.

**Moose goes MIA**

I think it must have been sometime in early December when Terry “Moose” Carroll got very ill and had to be evacuated to Udorn. Here’s how I remember that event. We were living in the new house by then so we had private bedrooms. Our dedicated cook Espi had DEROS’d some time earlier and the interim cook was either gone or unable to keep up with the job. For some time we had reverted to fending for ourselves individually and more often than not dinner after a long day of flying was a couple cans of beer. It was not a good situation and I’m surprised looking back now that something wasn’t done by the adult supervision. I think we were too tired to complain. Another factor in this episode was that the Ravens did not have a rigid flying schedule or systematic personnel accountability. So one morning we finally missed Moose and started a search. We found Moose in his bed with pneumonia – near death. He was urgently carried to Udorn in a Porter, where he soon recovered and came back to fly with us as I recall. Moose can straighten me out if my memory is faulty as he is fortunately (and no thanks to his Raven buddies) still alive and kicking. One positive outcome was that Moose’s condition focused attention on our lack of a dedicated cook and we soon had two excellent Thai cooks. I recall after they arrived I began to fly back to 20A to lunch on their excellent sandwiches rather than chance the roasted buffalo meat when we refueled and rearmed on the PDJ.
Another Moose and Me Story

New Year’s morning 1970 I rose with the chickens – no doubt still a bit tipsy, and took off in an O-1 with backseater “Scar,” a quiet but competent little guy – one of my favorites as I recall. I don’t think we were aloft very long – somewhere over northern PDJ – when I suddenly felt ill and barfed out the left window. In an O-1 the backseater gets the full impact driven by a 60-knot slipstream. I looked back apologetically to see Scar peering scornfully over his splattered map, “Oh, Laven 42, you numbah ten!”

We soon landed at L-22 (“Lima Lima”), an old French strip in north-central PDJ where I tumbled out on the ground and rested my head against a main wheel. Scar wandered off to commiserate with other local troops and I assumed he would find his own way back home to 20A later in the day. Not 15 minutes after I landed, Moose Carroll’s O-1 appeared on short final and he too landed and tumbled out on the ground for a combat nap. My BDA book shows I put in four sets of fighters between 0950 and 1040 at UG 6642, which is south of Fish’s Mouth about eight miles northeast of LS-236. I have to assume this was after a period of recovery under the wing of my O-1.

Trucks!

Analyzing my BDA book I see only a few mentions of vehicles as targets. Ninety percent of our focus during my tour was on close support against troops and bunkers. But I recall an intel brief we got at some point from a very impressive gentleman on the CIA side, who we were later told was a colonel who had defected from the NVA. When we were told that, I recall thinking if they are all as sharp as this guy no wonder they are kicking our ass. Anyway, he made one point in his briefing that stuck with me. He said the road structure in the vicinity of the Fish’s Mouth (far-eastern Ban Ban along Route 7) would support about 1,500 trucks. And that if we killed 1,500 trucks one day, there would be another 1,500 trucks using the same roads the next day. Encouraging. Anyway, I don’t recall when we got that briefing or if it was factual. And I may have the 1,500 number wrong – I just recall it was a surprisingly big number. But for most of my tour Ravens did not find many of the alleged 1,500 trucks when we patrolled that area. Then in October we got a new guy, a former Nail FAC named Henry Allen. And as a Steel Tiger Nail, Henry was an expert truck finder and killer. I don’t recall if he gave us any formal schooling on how to find trucks, but he began to find them and so for the first time we knew for sure they were really there. (After drafting this story I subsequently learned Moose Carroll was in the same category as Henry – an accomplished truck finder and killer from the Nails. Shows we either did not know or have forgotten things about each other from those days.)

On 8 Dec my little green book lists three airstrikes on several trucks at UG 7367, which plots out at the Bird’s Head in the Ban Ban Valley on Route 7. I seem to recall these trucks were in the open, and I suspected they were already destroyed or at least damaged from previous strikes or they would not have been exposed during daylight.

On 26 Dec my BDA book notes: “Found 3 trucks on [Route] 61. 12 actual found and 8 destroyed.” This was about noon at UG647964, which is about 10 miles northwest of the...
Bird’s Head. I think this was my breakthrough on finding and killing trucks. Just after lunchtime I was conducting VR from the O-1 north of the Ban Ban. My mental image is of a road running beside fairly thick trees on one side. I flew along the road looking across the road into the trees, using binoculars from some distance since this was a well-defended area. I thought I spotted something unnatural – a single truck tire. I took a closer look and sure enough I could make out the tire was attached to a well-camouflaged truck off the side of the road. I called Cricket for air and put Kingfish, four F-105s, on the truck. After lead dropped I checked and found his bombs had blown camouflage off several more trucks parked close by along the road under the trees. We had a convoy! The flight finished expending their bombs along the road and I awarded BDA of one truck destroyed and two damaged. I had to leave the area but reported the target to Cricket and on our Raven common frequency so another Raven could take over. Eventually eight trucks were confirmed destroyed at that location.

On 12 Jan I was conducting VR on Route 7 west of Ban Ban. I located a truck and called for air. I put in Mantis, two F-105s, at 1315. I saw what I reported as a “POL secondary” (POL means “petroleum, oil, and lubricants”) in my BDA book and awarded BDA of one truck destroyed. I was low on fuel so I handed the target off to Raven 41 and returned home for fuel and rockets. I returned later in the afternoon and put three more sets of fighters on the same target area – killing several more trucks. This was my last attack on trucks. The remainder of the month we focused on enemy troop targets as all our forward sites came under heavy pressure from the enemy.

**Dead Stick on the PDJ**

In January my BDA book reveals I began putting in a lot of strikes near LS-184 about 80 nautical miles north of 20A. Rainbow was the call sign of the resident case officer. As you look at the map, Rainbow and Kingpin sat between some minor road arteries running generally south through the mountains toward the PDJ from the North Vietnam border. There was obviously a lot of NVA troop and supply movement around and past the position, and this intensified in December and January. Looking at the map, these sites were a long way north of the rest of the war focused around the PDJ and Ban Ban. Due to the distance I usually liked to have the T-28 to patrol in Rainbow’s area, but one day I was in the O-1 and was putting in strikes late in the day. I can’t pinpoint the precise day the following episode happened but it was one of two or three days in early January. As usual Rainbow had nearby enemy and I was putting in critically needed strikes. And I overstayed my welcome.

A word here about the range and endurance of the O-1. In Vietnam we generally were equipped with the O-1G with a fixed-pitch prop and we usually flew about 2.5-hour missions. Northern Laos presented a different challenge. Distances between base and target areas tended to be much greater and the need to loiter in the target areas to sustain friendly positions with air support was a priority. The elevations and altitudes we flew were generally much higher than in Vietnam and climbs ate more fuel. So we all soon learned tricks to extend the range and endurance of our Bird Dogs, probably from the Air America and CAS pros. At 20A we were equipped with more capable O-1Fs that featured
variable-pitch props, although the engine and fuel capacity were essentially the same as the “A” models. Some claimed we applied the same technique as Charles Lindberg used to cross the Atlantic – that is, advancing full manifold pressure, increasing prop pitch, and then leaning mixture till the engine begins to run rough and then enriching the fuel mixture just a tad. If you do it right, you can almost see the prop turning out the front window and the bird will stay airborne well over four hours. We had to manually switch fuel flow from one wing to the other every half hour or so to keep the wings balanced. When you got a bit low you exhausted the fuel in one wing and switched to the other as the engine started to die. You knew then the remaining wing contained all the fuel you were going to have to get home. So if you have been following along and doing the math, the O-1 could fly about 4.5 hours at about 65 knots covering almost 300 miles. Of course you would use more fuel maneuvering and putting in airstrikes. Some Ravens reading this will claim they could get more out of the O-1 but most would agree that’s about right. The thing is that a miscalculation on the short side could lead to a dire situation.

Anyway, back to LS-184 and hitting enemy troops near the site late on a January afternoon. As evening approached, if we had serious enemy activity we would hand off our targets and ground frequency to the arriving NKP Skyraiders who covered the night shift – call signs Zorro or Firefly. As I completed handoff to the A-1 flight my engine sputtered and I switched to my remaining wing fuel and pointed the bird south. After a short time I began to realize the remaining fuel was not going to get me the 75 miles I needed to reach home. I hoped I could make it another 40 miles to the PDJ before the engine quit. I came up on “company” frequency and broadcast my position and a request for any available assistance. Within minutes I was relieved to have a CAS Huey flying in loose formation off my right side. At least the weather was good, but the sun was getting low as the PDJ came in sight. Now at that time we still technically “owned” the PDJ but all bets were off after dark. I was at a few thousand feet above the ground and just entering the northeastern PDJ when the engine sputtered and quit. Fortunately, there are several old French airstrips in the northern and eastern PDJ. I lined up on one – not sure which exactly – and anyway I could
no longer be too choosy. I recall the strip was near the eastern edge of the Plain. Even overloaded with radio equipment the O-1 glides pretty well, and I don’t remember the landing being too rough. I did not have a backseater. I was understandably nervous about being on the ground in the eastern PDJ with night rapidly approaching.

The Huey did not land but hovered about 10 feet off the ground about 50 yards south of me. I gathered my weapon and map bag and began to move toward the helicopter. I assumed he would land and pick me up and we’d come back tomorrow for the bird. I briefly thought maybe I should torch the airplane to prevent it falling into enemy hands, but fortunately rejected the idea because I then saw someone kick a 50-gallon drum out the side door of the hovering Huey. A moment later I recognized the drum kicker as “Yellow Dog” (Burr Smith) standing in the door, and I could imagine him smiling as the pilot pulled collective and rapidly peeled off in a climbing turn to the south and home. I was somewhat astonished – and not smiling. All of a sudden I was alone (I hoped) on the PDJ in gathering twilight with an empty Bird Dog, a .30 cal carbine, and a 50-gallon drum full of AV gas. Could be worse, but could be a helluva lot better.

I rolled the drum over to the O-1 and then pondered how to transfer at least a gallon or so of gas into the top of the right wing. Time was getting to be a factor. I inventoried my available tools and pulled my .45 automatic and without a lot of thought put two holes in the top of the barrel. Looking back at that moment I imagine a lot of really bad things could have happened – but they didn’t and a stream of fuel began pouring on the ground. The next challenge was how to capture the fuel and get it up and into the wing tank. I had a flying helmet and a canteen and I honestly don’t recall which I used. But I somehow got enough gas into the bird to fire it up and fly 25 miles south to Skyline and home, landing in pretty dark conditions. I imagine I slunk quietly into the house, thoroughly embarrassed and hoping against hope that Burr Smith had kept the incident to himself. Since my BDA book does not refer to the incident I presume I kept it to myself, but I know better than to think the episode went unnoticed by the leadership. And it was yet another incident late in my tour that reinforced my conviction that I was running out of luck.

“Taking Hits”

Many war stories revolve around the interaction of airplanes and guns designed to shoot them down. People tend to be fascinated by this aspect of the business and certainly there was a fair amount of AAA, or more simply AA, on the ground in Laos. Despite numerous references in my BDA book to rounds fired and tracers observed there were a relatively few occasions when my airplane was actually hit. I think I probably took a below-average number of hits compared to other Ravens. Fred “Magnet Ass” Platt was off the chart. He could get hit walking to his airplane. I recall late in my tour (Robbins says it was 11 January) Fred flew into 20A one morning with a really beat-up old O-1G from Victor and jumped into our newest O-1F. I swear he wasn’t gone 30 minutes before we heard he was shot down. Chris Robbins’ book goes into a lot of detail about the incident and Fred’s subsequent adventures as a renegade patient at the Udorn hospital. I seem to recall I visited him there and accompanied him on his infamous excursion to the Udorn O’Club in his neck
brace and hospital PJs. But a lot of brain cells have been put out of their misery since then and I may have imagined it all.

Anyway, I felt like I saw a lot of AA during my tour but did not actually get hit much. Most of my hits occurred during the final two months of my tour. My experiences with AA tended to be concentrated along Route 7 from Ban Ban to the Fish’s Mouth where Route 7 entered North Vietnam, at LS-184 north of Ban Ban, and up at Sam Neua. Of course you could encounter smaller 7.62 (AK-47) and 12.7 (.50 cal) weapons almost anywhere.

As FACs we were no doubt high-priority targets for AAA gunners, but we also believed that they would hold their fire to conceal their position unless they were pretty sure they could kill us before we were able to bring fighters in on them. Once the jig was up and the enemy realized we knew where they were, they would open up in a desperate attempt to prevent the coming airstrike. In my experience during the airstrike itself, the enemy seemed more inclined to fire at the attacking fighter bombers rather than the FAC directing the strike. During December I made several trips to Sam Neua where there were plenty of guns of all sizes very willing to open up but I never was actually hit while up there. My BDA book shows I did VR there on 6 Dec reporting that I saw rice, personnel, military supplies and POL, caves, and probable truck parks. I would visit this reputed PL HQ located near the North Vietnamese border some 100 miles northeast of home and put in strikes several times in December.

My BDA book notes I took hits on only four occasions. None of these hits brought the aircraft down before I was able to safely land at 20A:

28 Dec – “Took 2 hits small caliber” during F-4 airstrike on bulldozers in eastern Ban Ban Valley.
27 Jan – “took 2 hits 12.7 [.50 cal] at UG670670” [Ban Ban Valley near the Bird’s Head].
29 Jan – during the TIC at LS-184 (Rainbow) – “Took hit thru canopy before strike. Broke TIC. Friendly captured hill.” [upon landing we found rear seat cushion shredded by 12.7 and several small-caliber hits on the wings and fuselage].

I took a hit on a fifth occasion on the T-28 prop not reported in my BDA book but described at the end of this segment.

There were a number of occasions I saw AA but was not hit. Reports of seeing AA guns firing showed up frequently in my BDA book during December and early January. There were about a dozen entries in my book, and I note the locations for every one were in a fairly compact area along Route 7 between Ban Ban and the Fish’s Mouth.

The 23 mm AA piece was a spectacular weapon – the many white puffs of airburst reminded me of popcorn. These guns typically had twin barrels firing bursts of maybe 50
-100 rounds. Seems to me 23 mm was normally set to airburst about 4-6 thousand feet above the ground. The airburst pattern was awesome to see – especially at night. I recall after I returned the States and attended a fireworks display how certain fireworks were so similar to 23 mm that the sight and sound actually frightened me into a cold sweat. On the other hand 37 mm was fired in a five-round clip and was more of a gray airburst, and I think it airburst quite a bit higher. Because of the rate of fire and frag density we were more concerned about 23 than 37. Of course most of my personal problems resulted from the lowly 12.7 mm (50 cal), which seemed to be everywhere in great numbers.

I was hit most often when I was at low level relatively close to the AA weapon. Sometimes this was necessary, as in the case of the serious TIC at Rainbow, but sometimes I was just shining my ass, like on Thanksgiving Day on the floor of the Ban Ban when I richly deserved the death penalty and nearly got it. But I recall one day in the T-28, again over Ban Ban, I was at what I considered a very safe altitude – maybe 4,000 ft AGL (flying straight and level from A to B when a sharp CLANG knocked my boots off the rudder pedals. I started a belated jink and flew along for a few minutes intently studying the engine instruments and working on the old heartbeat. Everything seemed OK so I carried on with whatever I was doing, but upon landing we found a quarter-size dent in the prop blade – perhaps made by a 12.7 round. I was quite surprised to be hit just minding my own business at that altitude.

I Begin to Weigh the Odds

After my attention-getting introduction to flying in Laos shortly after I arrived in late July, things had settled into a relatively smooth pattern for me during August through October. I was busy learning the job, getting comfortable with the area, and enjoying the uniqueness of the country and the flying. And of course friendlies were doing well on the ground. From November through January I began to be more conscious of the constant risks. Perhaps the newness of everything and hard work to learn the job gave way to a little boredom and too much free time to think more deeply about what I was doing. I began to feel like the percentages were bound to catch up to me. I began to think of flying to try to reduce the risks because I think I was fatalistic about it – like there was nothing I could do to avoid it. I recall sitting on my bunk alone at night before sleep when I would briefly review the day and calmly say to myself, “This is simply not survivable.” Then I would go to sleep. I don’t recall nightmares or restlessness, and in the morning I rose raring to go down to the flight line and strap on an airplane. I never recall having black thoughts during the day. I enjoyed my flying and did plenty of it. I slept OK and certainly had a great appetite. But I’m sure it was there in the back of my mind. I was not afraid so much as resigned to what I came to believe was inevitable. I was not about to quit nor did I regret joining the program. It was all a kid could ask for – we were living very intensely. But there was just this little downside lurking in the background.

I suppose for a guy to be convinced for a lengthy period of time that he is likely to be killed any day is probably very unhealthy. The B-17 crews flying into Germany must have felt like that. And maybe the F-105 guys going for their 100 missions over the North. We used
to joke that the definition of an optimist was a Thud pilot who quit smoking because he was afraid he would die of cancer. But B-17 and F-105 guys were seeing other airplanes explode and fall out of the sky all around them. On the other hand, my own concerns appear unjustified – we lost only one Raven during my time at 20A, my Academy classmate Dan Davis in August just after I arrived. He collided with one of his fighters. We would lose two more Ravens soon after I left. But it’s not like we were experiencing heavy casualties – at least while I was there. Recently we did some research on casualties while designing a plaque to hang at the Air Force Academy to commemorate the Ravens. That research showed that there had been a total of 201 Ravens over six years. Of those, 23 were killed in action (KIA) in Laos. That’s just over 11 percent loss rate. (In the special case of Ravens at 20A, Karl Polifka estimates there were about 90 Ravens between 1968 and 1971, and of these 18 were KIA for a 20 percent loss rate.) Doesn’t sound so bad, but I guess the close calls I was experiencing from the AA, the hazardous weather, and my own carelessness made me feel like the next time I wouldn’t get away with it. I haven’t asked any of the other Ravens whether they had this same feeling – that’s not what guys do, but I sometimes wonder.

After Laos I never felt this sense of impending doom again, although I occasionally recalled how I felt in those strange days. I don’t think it affected my performance in future years – even in combat or other hazardous flying assignments. I just remember when Jerry Rhein told me I’d flown my last Raven sortie, I could not believe I had survived. I was relieved, I’m sure, but also a little confused. It’s like I did not have a plan for life after Laos. I guess I somehow figured it out and would not today self-diagnose that I was emotionally crippled by my combat experience as I know some were, but I suppose I had some mild form of PTSD. I have not previously reflected on these very private admissions in such explicit detail, but I think it has been somewhat therapeutic to write them down.

Anyway, I haven’t told others about this except my wife, who I met a few months after I returned from Laos. She told me years later she thought I was pretty messed up – a good project for her. She’s still working on me 40 years later.

T-28 Attack Mode
We looked up to the old Special Ops heads like Joe Potter and Jerry Rhein. They didn’t talk much about their exploits, at least not that I overheard, but we got the impression they had done cool things like flown Mustangs in little wars in Central and South America as “Yankee Air Pirates” opposing Commies wherever they were found. I remember flying to Udorn in a formation of two T-28s with Joe just before he left Alternate. When we reached cruising altitude he called to “synch props” and as briefed I slipped into trail and adjusted my RPMs till I could see his prop through mine making a stationary pattern. They don’t teach that in UPT! This was just one of the many prop-fighter tricks of the trade, in this case to minimize the sound of the formation and delay warning of our approach to enemy forces.

Our two T-28D-5s were capable of carrying bombs and napalm, but Ravens were restricted by policy to 300 rounds .50 cal in two “suitcase” guns under the wings (or some newer models with guns fitted internal to the wings) and two to four under-wing seven-round rocket launchers. Sometimes we carried only white phosphorous (“Willie Pete”) for marking targets, but sometimes one pod was loaded with HE (high explosive), better against troops and light armor. Until my final action at LS-184, I do not recall using the T-28 weapons in an actual close air support strike. But I certainly practiced strafing – a lot. I seldom returned home with bullets. My self-taught technique was to roll in on my target and begin firing. As I saw the rounds hitting the ground I would adjust the airplane to move the hits up onto the intended target, pulling out at the last second. Experienced fighter pilots will recognize this technique as a recipe for disaster.
When I returned to the States I was assigned to the F-100, Pipeline SEA. I had to first attend AT-33 fighter lead-in at Myrtle Beach. (Yeah, I know, helluva deal.) Anyway, when briefing prior to my first range ride my IP asked if I had ever strafed and I assured him I had strafed – a lot. So he skimped on that part of the briefing and we proceeded to the range. On my first strafe pass I rolled in and applied my personal combat-proven technique. As I was happily firing and adjusting the impacts up toward the canvas target the aircraft experienced a maximum-allowable “g” pullout initiated by the flabbergasted IP. “Greene, what the hell was that?!” Once I recovered from a near blackout I replied, confused, “That’s me strafing.” We returned to base for a long lecture on proper strafe technique, emphasizing prevention of self-inflicted ricochet damage. On a serious note, my Raven experience did provide invaluable combat experience, but in some ways the independence that a FAC uniquely enjoys tended to complicate my transition to flying in the “real” Air Force in a regimented fighter squadron environment. In short, I was spoiled forever by the freedom of being a young and dumb “Yankee Air Pirate.”

The Lure of Sam Neua

An exception to the general pattern of providing direct support to our manned sites late in my tour were some forays I made some 100 miles north and east to the traditional enemy stronghold at Sam Neua. As I recall the terrain there was unique and striking – flat open areas punctuated by huge steep karsts – and lots of natural caves that we knew housed lots of troops, equipment, and supplies. There were persistent rumors of American POWs held there by the PL. It was well defended by numerous guns of all calibers so it was a place to go and get shot at when you were bored or to throw some missiles and bombs into when you were pissed off. My BDA book shows I went up there and performed VR and put in fighters – usually F-105s with bombs or Bullpup missiles – about four times between 6 and 31 December. I recall one December morning at breakfast Joe Potter gently suggesting it wasn’t wise or useful to go up there, but to his credit he wasn’t usually dictatorial about things. But I respected Joe, and later Jerry Rhein, as the closest thing to adult supervision we had. So I think I went up there a few more times but was a bit more careful. I think I realized Sam Neua was a sideshow rather than central to our primary mission. But I also hated to think the enemy felt immune from strikes anywhere in our AOR (area of responsibility).

Adult Leadership – Lack Of

What? Greene complaining about too much ice cream? Not really complaining, but I think the command atmosphere was an important part of the Raven story and I should talk about it, though I suspect it’s a sore subject with some. This is not so much a criticism of my fellow Ravens or our local leadership but just my observations that may help explain why things were the way they were.

At 20A during my time the command atmosphere (if you can dignify it with that term) was “relaxed.” Since we were single-ship we could pretty much do what we liked in the air, not that we needed motivational leadership to urge us to perform the mission to the best of our abilities. But we certainly did things “our way” – which in retrospect may not have
always been tactically sound or smart, but in fairness there was no Raven SOP (Standard Operating Procedures). So we were often making it up as we went along. You learned by doing and surviving – or not. The Raven program recruited people who were predisposed to independent action (a nice way of saying rebellious) – perhaps a necessary character attribute to carry out the mission in Laos. On the ground Raven behavior as a group tended toward the outrageous. It’s as if we felt a responsibility to cultivate a devil-may-care reputation even though over-the-top behavior would not have been our normal personality as individuals. Although it would not have occurred to me at the time, looking back I think a case can be made that we young men occasionally needed a little closer and firmer supervision in the air and on the ground.

Distance from HQ and the lack of associated restrictions and regulations that constrained our pilot peers in the “real” Air Force was a big part of the allure of the Raven program. This was pretty well covered in Robbins’ book. In retrospect I think it suited the ambassador to provide top cover to prevent too much command influence from 7/13th AF at Udorn. Regarding our local supervision, I am reluctant to voice any criticism of our on-scene leaders, who I respected and liked and I think did their best under trying conditions, or the 20A Ravens who actively resisted authority as a natural response by young men in the circumstances we found ourselves in. Our leaders at 20A certainly cut us a lot more slack than I would later cut the young pilots in my fighter squadron. For example, if Mr. (Capt. or Maj.) Smith suggested (i.e., ordered) Mr. (1st Lt.) Jones to do something a certain way, the likely result would be that Mr. (Lt.) Jones would tell Mr. (Capt. or Maj.) Smith that he could f --- off. And there would be no resulting disciplinary action.

Joe Potter and Jerry Rhein as site commanders tried in their gentle ways to give us the benefit of their long experience to keep us from killing ourselves. Ultimately Jerry Rhein cut my tour short by a couple weeks, which I have no doubt saved my life. But no question the “Terry and the Pirates” / civilian-clothes atmosphere led us to feel entitled to take with a grain of salt the military chain of command. We were very young – the tradition of military discipline was not yet ingrained. The 20A Ravens tended to be self-directed and on a very loose rein. The mission was to get up every morning and go look for trouble and when you found it – bomb it. There is no doubt in my mind that we Ravens had more pure freedom of action than any group of US military pilots since the Flying Tigers or Pappy Boyington’s Black Sheep. Probably for the same reasons – we lived and flew in a remote, hostile environment demanding relaxed command structure to get the job done. We were actually disciplined in some ways. For example, we were very focused and self-motivated when it came to the mission of supporting Vang Pao’s little army. But no question most of us took maximum advantage of our quasi-civilian status to rebel against military authority whenever the occasion presented. As a young guy having fun I certainly did not complain, but that does not mean I did not recognize a lack of normal military supervision which may have permitted, perhaps even encouraged us to take more risks, and no doubt added to my concerns about the odds against survival.

SEA FAC was my first assignment out of pilot training and it no doubt spoiled me for future “real” Air Force assignments. I was a young lieutenant seeing the Air Force through a very different set of eyes than a couple years before when I was at the Air Force Academy
and then UPT. When I reported to my next base after the Raven tour I was soon reminded of the stark difference between an operational Air Force fighter squadron and the relaxed command atmosphere and air discipline of the 20A Ravens. It made for a difficult transition for me back into the “real” Air Force. I spent three years in the F-100 as an unruly captain struggling to become a USAF jet fighter pilot – behind my peers in fighter experience and often in trouble. But I survived to become a disciplined major. It was that or quit – or be fired – or killed.

Friendly Fire

During the month of January, Rainbow at LS-184 came under heavy enemy pressure. LS-184 is a relatively isolated site well north of our other friendly positions, 50 miles north of the PDJ and 80 miles north of 20A. I conducted strikes there for the first time on 4 January against bunkers and troops in the open and was credited with 20 killed by air (KBA) by Rainbow. My BDA book records that I “observed a body flying through the air” after an accurate bomb impact. I was back at Rainbow on 9 January directing seven sets of fighters between 1000 and 1730. As I study the BDA record I know I would have had to refuel around noon and I was back again by 1330. I was flying the T-28D according to AF flight records. I flew three sorties of about 2.5 to 3.0 duration for a total of 8.5 hours.

The afternoon brought disaster. Panda, four F-105s, checked in with Mk-82s at 1645. I gave them a strike briefing for a target near LS-184 and waited for them to arrive. I recall the weather as workable but with a low overcast, and it was getting late so it was rather gloomy. Panda lead reported me in sight so I fired a WP at my target and climbed to a position to observe the strike. Panda lead called overhead and that he had me in sight and had my smoke mark. I did not yet see him. So I waggled my wings and Panda lead acknowledged my waggle. He reported rolling in and asked for clearance. I then for the first and last time violated the FAC’s cardinal rule and cleared him “hot” without visual. In retrospect I did this for a couple of reasons. There were no friendlies in the immediate vicinity of my target and I assumed the gloomy weather was masking the F-105 from me. Most importantly – I trusted F-105 pilots. F-105 pilots earned a great reputation with Ravens because of their bombing accuracy and willingness to work in very poor weather. The F-4 wings imposed strict minimum altitudes, which reduced their bombing accuracy compared to F-105s. Just two days before on 7 Jan an entry in my BDA book states: “WX D.S. THUDS ARE BEAUTIFUL.” And Panda was so confident over the air that he had me in sight, even acknowledging my wing rock. So I cleared Panda lead while anxiously looking for him. The next thing I heard over the air was, “How are those hits, Raven?”

Oh s---! I saw no evidence of weapon impact anywhere near my mark. I directed “high and dry” and scanned the horizon for bomb smoke. There it was – about eight miles south. I flew in that direction and saw a CAS Pilatus bugging out. I called him on company freq and got a very terse “WTFO!” from an understandably shaken CAS pilot. He had been dropping rice to the village near LS-278 and the Thud pilot mistook the Pilatus for my T-28. He probably saw a cook fire in the village and assumed it was my smoke mark. What a classic blunder! My BDA book does not indicate damage or casualties, but a note says Rainbow will follow up and report. I don’t recall what I said to Panda lead but it was my
fault, not his – so I passed him some BDA and worked a waiting A-1 flight on Rainbow’s target, then set course south for the very long ride to Alternate. I knew two Mk-82s had hit very near a village and there were bound to be innocent casualties. I was probably on my way out of the program in disgrace if not court-martial. And it occurred to me I had to go personally apologize to Vang Pao. I dreaded this. He had recently commended me for good work, but I also knew he did not hesitate to shoot people who screwed up. I spent a very long 30 minutes pondering my fate in the gathering twilight. I figured by the time I landed, the US and Hmong leadership would already know what I’d done, either from the CAS pilot or Rainbow’s radio net. My only real clear memory of the evening was at VP’s when I told him at dinner, “Today I bombed a village.” I remember he gave a small shrug and said only, “C’est la guerre.” I imagine he had been briefed and he and the US leadership had decided not to take action against me. Nevertheless, this incident still haunts me.

I guess I quickly shook off my funk after the friendly fire incident and I was back in the air in the morning of 11 Jan. At 0930 I put in two Skyraiders, Hobo 42 and 43, on troops at TH8650 (LS-196 call sign Kingpin), only about 10 miles west of Rainbow. My BDA book notes “Outstanding work – strafe and Rx BLO 50’ ceiling. Made 8-10 passes. Friendlies 300-500m. 6 KBA [passed by] gnd.” Obviously the reference to a 50-foot ceiling had to be quite an exaggeration, but no doubt the weather was pretty bad. The next entry shows I put in two A-1 flights 10 miles south of Ban Ban at 1710 that afternoon. This long gap in time and long distance between strikes that day illustrates that the weather could be very bad across the area, and despite the heavy enemy pressure on our sites we just couldn’t always work airstrikes on some days in some places during this period.

“THUDS ARE BEAUTIFUL”

My Air Force flight records show I flew every day in January except 19, 20, and 22 Jan. This break in action was when I was given a few days off and ended up at the F-105 base at Takhli where I sneived a back-seat F-105G ride with my old Academy buddy Gary Fedel, who was flying with 333rd Tactical Fighter Squadron (TFS) Lancers. I was surprised how solid the Thud felt cruising at 600 knots calibrated and how much of a wallowing pig
it was in the traffic pattern at 350. Sure made me appreciate all the times four F-105s would come snaking up a valley under low clouds calling for a quick smoke on the target.

I previously mentioned how much of an impression F-105 pilots made on me during my Raven tour. SEA FACs had a ringside seat to the greatest show on earth – tactical fighter bomber weapons delivery against an enemy target that often returned deadly fire. A quick count shows I watched with a critical eye 701 F-4s and 773 F-105s roll in and release bombs under my direction during my six months in Laos. Experienced FACs developed a feel for the professional skill of individual fighter pilots and their communities – I had an expectation when I heard a flight leader check in and report inbound to my rendezvous. I was tuned in to the confident tone of an experienced flight lead tested by trips over North Vietnam and the gun-infested Ho Chi Minh Trail. I could not help developing a bias, preferring to have a flight of F-105s to a flight of F-4s. While the occasional F-4 pilot would prove outstanding, it was more the rule that they abided by altitude and weather restrictions that precluded accurate bombing. The F-105 community did not seem to have, or at least the pilots did not observe such restrictions. Therefore, a Raven could expect more effective dive-bombing from an airplane designed for low-level, high-speed delivery of tactical nuclear weapons. To be fair, before the advent of accurate bombing computers and smart bombs, dive-bombing from jet fighters in a defended environment was never easy or very accurate. But in my experience F-105 pilots were a lot better at hitting targets in Laos than F-4 pilots. I recall one morning (my BDA book says it was 7 January 1970) I had gotten airborne out of a cloud-shrouded 20A and into northeastern PDJ. Black Lion was calling for help to repel a company of NVA attacking his overlook position from the direction of Ban Ban. (Break, break … quiet, unassuming Will Green, CIA case officer call sign “Black Lion,” was actually black – and actually a lion. Would sure like to see him again, but according to Karl Polifka he died at Udorn some years after my tour.)

Resuming … Thick clouds covered the hilltops. It was marginal even for Skyraiders to work under the overcast and of course they would be at far greater risk from AAA guns. At 1000 Mallard, four F-105s, checked in. I briefed the target and weather conditions to the flight lead and I recall his words to this day: “Raven, if you are under there, we are coming under there. Give me a hold-down.” A “hold-down” refers to me mashing my UHF transmit button for several seconds while an ADF (automatic direction finding) instrument in the fighter cockpit points to the source of my transmission. The key point here is that this ADF is by no means a precise navigation aid. On the strength of this flimsy evidence the F-105 flight leader was going to lead his three trusting pals down through the rock-filled clouds, hopefully seeing and missing the ground seconds before plowing into it. This was not an isolated case. Thud pilots penetrated clouds on FAC hold-downs frequently – but this was about the worst conditions I ever recall for this maneuver. Seconds after my hold-down the flight lead called that they were under the clouds and looking for smoke. I quickly sent a WP rocket into Black Lion’s target coordinates and pulled to the side to observe four Thuds in loose trail weaving under the low deck, each in turn releasing accurate bombs and zooming up into the clouds to turn south to rejoin for their short flight home to Thailand. Uncharacteristically, I editorialized in my BDA book, “WX DS [dog s---], THUDS ARE BEAUTIFUL.”
Another F-105 story while we are at it. On the cloudy foggy morning of 21 October 1969, I was patrolling northeast PDJ talking to Lulu who was positioned on the southwestern side of the strategic Phou Nok Kok to overlook Route 7 connecting northern PDJ with the Ban Ban Valley. Lulu reported heavy fog but he could hear enemy on the road below. I imagined the enemy troops and vehicles as they moved along the road in the thick fog feeling safe from observation and attack. In lengthy spells of bad weather, I had been toying with the idea that I could direct strikes down through the cloud layer if I could pinpoint the target and distinguish friendly positions by triangulating the surrounding hilltops that stood in the clear above the clouds. I had to get the fighters on the right flight path and tell them when to release. This would involve a level release from above the clouds, so I had to estimate how far the bombs would travel after release. But I figured since this was a linear road target, as long as the bombs hit somewhere along the road they would probably do some good. I realized I would probably never know if the strike was successful unless friendly troops later found evidence. But I imagined at least the enemy troops’ sense of invulnerability would suffer. So Bear, a flight of four F-105s, checked in at 0845 and readily agreed to arrange his flight in one-mile trail lined up to fly on a specific heading to cross under my Bird Dog and release their string of 32 Mk-82 500 lb. bombs on my command. It was an example of how Ravens tried to innovate to work around the weather conditions and the willingness of fighter pilots to try something unconventional to get the mission done.

**Rainbow Rescue - 29 Jan 1970**

I would go back to Rainbow (LS-184) again on 24, 26, and 29 Jan as the military situation on the ground deteriorated. When I arrived just after noon on the 29th I found the friendlies, including the American case officer himself, had been pushed off the site into the trees about 1 km to the west. “Rainbow” was the radio call sign of the Hmong FAG who accompanied the CIA case officer. The case officer actually came up on the radio himself, which was unusual and ominous. I don’t think I had ever met the gentleman in person before but had talked to his FAG over the radio quite a bit recently. He had endured a tense month. As I circled the site I could see numerous uniformed NVA walking on the light-colored dirt mound that contained LS-184’s several buildings and dirt strip. The light-colored dirt contrasted well with the enemy’s dark-green uniforms. I was later told they were battalion strength with the mission to take the site. I’m still not sure of the strategic significance of these sites well to the north of the PDJ. Perhaps they sat astride important infiltration routes from North Vietnam. I was flying the T-28 that day, and after learning of Rainbow’s dire circumstances I requested urgent air support from Cricket. Cricket reported there was no air available until Zorro, A-1 night fighters, were scheduled to arrive in about an hour. Meantime I was all that was standing between Rainbow and a battalion of NVA regulars. I was armed with 14 HE and 14 WP rockets and 300 rounds of .50 cal. I began to attack the enemy soldiers on the strip to distract them from their assault on the friendlies. Rainbow reported that I was taking fire, which was no surprise, but I was amazed that the NVA soldiers on the airstrip seemingly made no effort to take cover as I rolled in on the strip. It kind of pissed me off that they weren’t taking me seriously. I pressed about 8 or 10 attacks until I expended my weapons, then made some very low passes thinking (absurdly) that I would get some enemy with my prop. Finally, Zorro 10,
flight of two Skyraiders out of NKP, checked in at 1500 and gave me 50 minutes and lots of ordnance on target. Rainbow himself was providing corrections for their ordnance. I was worried for the case officer – a solitary round eye in the woods a hell of a long way from the safety of home. And it wasn’t like these case officers were out there with Seal Team Six. The indigenous forces they advised were the elderly and very young remnants of a force whittled down over ten years of opposing the vicious communist PL and NVA. These case officers were cool customers with a serious amount of cojones. After the A-1s left, Newark, a flight of two F-105s, showed up with Mk-82s and delivered accurate hits. My little green book records Rainbow estimated 30 KBA (killed by air). I was now very low on gas and daylight so I said adios and pointed the T-28 south.

Page from my BDA book My final airstrike - 29 Jan 70 at Rainbow

I hoped Rainbow had a ride home to 20A. He did. Later that evening he walked into the Raven bar carrying a dozen or so sets of bullet-riddled NVA uniforms and blood-soaked belts and canteens. Even though I was fairly inebriated by this time I clearly remember him in a dramatic gesture dropping this warrior-to-warrior tribute at my feet in the bar. It was really a huge pile of gear. I was astonished and speechless – as I think were the other Ravens present. As I think back on that moment today, I realize this guy had a very long and stressful (for me it would have been terrifying) day in a life-and-death struggle with a battalion of regular NVA determined to take his site. In fact, his site had been threatened for over a month. I imagine that after the NVA dispersed and the friendlies reoccupied the site that evening Rainbow must have climbed into an H-34 Greenie and flown for an hour back to Skyline. Once he arrived at the flight line he must have gathered up his bloody tribute and without passing go, grabbing a meal, or taking a shower, he marched directly to the Raven house and presented me these trophies. Over the years recalling his personal gesture meant more to me than the Silver Star I would later receive for that day’s action. I very much regret I don’t recall what we talked about in those few moments. I fear I shrugged off his thoughtful gesture in mock “no big deal” modesty. I would never even know his name other than Rainbow. I would like to have a beer with him now and catch up on old times, but he was in a very risky line of work so I doubt he is still around.
As for me, it turned out to be my last Raven mission. The T-28 had a number of holes in it, and one in particular that the Air Operations Center (AOC) ordered repaired immediately that night in the dark so none of our backseaters would find out about it. A 12.7 round had punched up through the floor right through the rear seat cushion and out the canopy. That shredded seat cushion was a sobering sight. I had felt some of the impacts during the strike but did not know until I landed exactly where I’d been hit. I was very grateful I did not have anyone in the back seat – and that the round did not come up through the floor a few feet closer to the nose. It kind of makes me wince to think about that. The crew chief also found a couple small-caliber rounds in the cockpit and I saved one in my little souvenir pouch.

At some point – probably the next morning when I was somewhat more coherent, Jerry Rhein took me aside and told me he was cutting my tour short by a couple weeks. He said something like he just couldn’t afford to lose any more airplanes. I recall I accepted being relieved of duty early without protest. Over the years I’ve come to realize he had my best interests at heart. Bleak days were immediately ahead for 20A, and I would read about it on my way home to the warm welcome returning SEA warriors got from a grateful nation. (Sarcasm intended and I am adept at holding a grudge. But I am delighted that today’s military is so widely and deeply appreciated by the average citizen. As a nation we seem to now understand you can hate an unpopular war, but the troops who are drafted or volunteer to fight should not be blamed.)

Final Thoughts

Serious stuff now. What was the big deal about flying with the Ravens? A lot has been said and written about this. There is a hard core of men whose lives were so fundamentally affected by a six-month tour over 40 years ago that as senior citizens they still get together every year and relive the experience. The surprise is there are so many who feel so strongly that way. Why is that? I left Laos and went to a coveted F-100 assignment. I would fly and work in the “real” Air Force for another 27 years. I had a lot of plum flying jobs – all single-seat fighters, and single-engine till the A-10 (some say the A-10 was single-engine too – with half mounted on each side of the tail). I flew combat as an A-7 Sandy out of Korat in ’73. I flew Harriers with the Brits in a NATO squadron in Northern Germany in the late 70’s and later as an A-10 squadron commander when we were convinced (incorrectly) that the Sovs were 10 feet tall. It was a vital mission. I got to work with great people. But we don’t have reunions every year. We don’t spend money on party suits. Or write about our experiences for our grandkids. A surprisingly large percentage of the Ravens do all those things.

Upon reflection there was a fundamental difference between what I did in Laos and what I did subsequently. In Laos I experienced strong emotions I had not felt before or since. And I suppose many other Ravens to a greater or lesser extent feel the same. The flying was obviously great – maybe a little like the freedom of bush flying in the great wilderness with breathtaking scenery. But I think the most important difference was the mission. You weren’t fighting for some vague political philosophy. You weren’t just punching a combat
tour ticket as a step in your Air Force career. (If so you were likely to be disappointed.) It was very clear you were flying and fighting to preserve the way of life of people you lived in the midst of – some of whom you got to know intimately. Maybe a little like the Battle of Britain pilots felt. The Hmong had fought for years just to be left in peace, and by the time I was there they had lost all their brave young men resisting the most brutal of invaders. As a Raven you felt you could really make a difference with the weapons we could bring to bear. And it is heartbreaking to realize that we never had a chance in hell of success.

I suppose I suppressed my own feelings about my Raven experience for many years afterward for the reasons I outlined at the start of this piece. I was trying to have a successful Air Force career and live a “normal” life. While I was proud to have served as a Raven, instinct told me that it was better to keep my Raven experience to myself, like it was an aberration that would work against my career goals. In fact when I became a fighter pilot my first few years in the F-100 and later in the A-7 was a hard transition because my first 1,250 hours of operational flying was all single-ship combat calling my own shots. In some ways the young guys who started their Air Force careers as FACs in SEA would never again have the same degree of responsibility for the conduct of warfare as they had as lieutenants flying a 60-knot, high-wing, tail-dragging, prop-driven silver Cessna. Think about it. A 24-year-old first-assignment kid points at something on the ground and moments later it blows up or burns. You could have four colonels – maybe even generals – orbiting overhead in their magnificent F-4s or F-105s waiting for Lt. FAC to decide what target they would attack, with which ordnance, from which direction. And if the bombs weren’t accurate enough – Lt. FAC would tell them to safe ‘em up and take ‘em home. Thinking about it now I wonder how the generals could have put so much power in the hands of young lieutenants. I was certainly happy to have the job, and I think most of us acquitted ourselves well despite being young and unruly. Nevertheless, after being the tactical on-scene commander for a year, I had to go through the process of becoming a
lowly wingman in the formal and highly structured context of an operational fighter squadron. There were a lot of occasions when my experience as an independent scarf-in-the-wind bush pilot was exactly wrong in a post-war fighter squadron. In any case, despite the great temptation to do so, I did not want to live in the past as a “professional Raven.” Thus, despite enjoying the guys and being proud of my Raven experience, I tended to avoid the annual reunions during my working years. This may have been partly because of my experience at the first reunion at the Eglin Beach Club when PF (or someone) pulled a bowie knife on me five minutes after my arrival – and it went downhill from there. I joked for many years later that I was still paying my share of the damages to the Eglin Club. As evidenced by this narrative, I am finally willing after over 40 years to take a fresh look at my experiences as a Raven. And some of my closest lifelong friends, like Lloyd Duncan, happen to be Ravens. See you at the next reunion, and I may try to wrangle an invite to the next Sky reunion too. Let us not find ourselves saying regretfully, “I’d been a better friend, but I trusted time.”

End (at last!)