

Chapter 5

Ed Gunter, Raven 71 Luang Prabang, Jul 1969 – Feb 1970

Author's Note: Back in 2009, I pulled out all my old log books, BDA books, maps, photos, notes, orders, TDY vouchers, etc. in preparation for oral interviews covering my time in the Southeast Asia Conflict. I spent about 7 ½ hours on the phone with historians in the Vietnam Archive Oral History Project at Texas Tech University. I feel it was a very comprehensive, honest dialog about my time in the war. The recorded portion is available through their website. The final transcript (129 pages) is still being processed for completion and addition to the website (<http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0697>).

As I feel that was a very complete history, I will not try to replicate it. I will say that my boss and good friend, Don Moody has put on paper some details of a couple of my missions and for that, I thank Don. They are available in Episode 3 of "The Adventures of Bob and Don" (<http://www.ravenfac.com/ravens/Adventures/Episode0003.htm>).

I won't be saying I won the war. I was just a young pilot, hungry to do something for my country and find some excitement. I did my job and did it well, I think. Like all of the Ravens.

I just wanted to add a couple of short stories that I feel captured some moments of my tour.



WHY WOULD I WANT TO DO THAT??

I had just arrived in Viet Nam as a young, inexperienced first lieutenant O-1 Bird Dog forward air controller (FAC) five months out of USAF pilot training. One of the first places I went was to the

504th Tactical Air Support Group for in-processing, briefings, and squadron assignment. At my initial in-brief, I was told the policy was that at the six-month point, if we were doing our job well, they'd let us volunteer for another assignment/site. The guys who were tired of the fight could go to staff, command post, make admin runs, etc. Guys who wanted more excitement could volunteer for hotter areas; and if you really want some excitement, there is the Steve Canyon program, but we can't tell you anything about it. Not even where it is. The Steve Canyon program had a requirement of six months SEA (Southeast Asia) FAC experience before you could get into it. You also had to accept tour extensions if needed to give you six months retainability.

At about the 3-4 month point, I had made my wishes known that I wanted to go to a hotter war. I even had an assignment to a hot province on the Cambodian border. About this same time, I was getting more than a little sick of the bureaucracy and overly restrictive Rules of Engagement (ROE).

The ROE were a crock. It was deadly for us to let the enemy stockpile guns, bombs, rockets, and ammo across some imaginary line, knowing we couldn't attack it. If I had a hot target and was taking ground fire, I still had to get approval from several levels before I could legally return fire. We were fighting with one hand tied behind our backs. Target validation was a long, bureaucratic process and the bad guys usually knew a target was approved before we did. (Shades of the current war—target approval in the White House.) As far as the bureaucracy, I felt we were really silly with all the emphasis on grooming and uniform standards. I thought majors and lieutenant colonels should have something better to do than fly around looking for FACs flying below 1500 feet and harassing me about a mustache in a combat zone.

Several things happened about that time that convinced me that I wanted to go fight a different war.

First, I was covering an insertion of troops into a hot LZ (landing zone). They met intense resistance and were in a heavy firefight, so I called for air support—fighter bombers. Air was on the way, but the province chief refused authorization to expend, as "I have troops in that area." Hell, I knew he had troops there; I was talking to the US advisor and watching them get hosed.

Next, my roommate went down in a smoking hole. As I flew over the site, directing ground forces (Aussies) to the crash site to retrieve remains, I started taking ground fire. I called for air, but some REMF at a higher level decided that my getting shot at wasn't as important as some pre-planned tree-buster, so I couldn't get any fighters. Another day as a target.

Then one of my classmates, Dan Davis, came back through III Corps after a couple of months in Steve Canyon. (Dan was run over by a Thud over the PDJ later that year.) I dragged him to the bar, filled him up with Pabst beer and Jim Beam, but he still wouldn't give any details. He did say it was a hot war; they got to check out in the AT-28 with bombs, nape, CBU (cluster bomb units), armed guns, etc.; they wore civilian clothes; and there weren't many field graders and visiting brass up there. That's all I needed to hear. I knew what I wanted—ASAP. I let my boss know.

A couple of days later, I was in the colonel's office as he told me that it was a very hot area, lots of chances to screw up, and don't go up there and start smuggling drugs, yadda-yadda. About that

time, Raven losses were mounting, so they waived the requirement for me needing six months in SEA.

A few days later, I was on an airplane to someplace, but nobody could tell me where I was going. As a lieutenant, it was kinda neat to be the only passenger on a Scatback jet to Udorn. Little did I know what adventures lay ahead of me.

I processed in at Udorn, Det 1 of the 56th Special Operations Wing, where I was officially assigned. I went through the usual in-processing drill. A couple of things were different though—all they could say was that I was going on TDY (temporary duty) orders “upcountry.” I should have looked at a map. They also assigned me a locker, and told me to put all my uniform items in it and forget them until I was headed home or on R&R (rest and relaxation). Then they pointed me to a tailor right off base to have some “walking suits” made.

They also gave me a mailing address and said I could tell my family, friends, etc. ONLY that I was still flying, but no details. All mail was to be addressed to Mr. Ed Gunter. I probably wouldn't get to see anything addressed to Lt. Gunter.

I met up with two other lieutenants who were headed the same direction. One was a USAFA and pilot training classmate—Smoky Greene—and John White. Smoky and I finished our tours in one piece. John was airlifted home after a bad O-1 crash.

They then told us to be on the Air America ramp bright and early the next morning for transportation to somewhere.



Ed Gunter and Smoky Greene upon arrival in Vientiane, Kingdom of Laos. Two lieutenants lost and bewildered without their uniforms.

First Raven Flight

Here I was—a fresh-faced young lieutenant. Four and a half months' experience as a FAC in III Corps, South Viet Nam had made me an old head. I had just arrived at a whole 'nother war. No idea where it was.

After landing at Udorn, RTAB (Royal Thai Air Base) in Thailand, I found my way to Det 1 of the 56th Special Operations Wing. Most of that time was a blur, but I do remember them assigning me a locker with instructions to put my uniforms in there and forget them until my tour was over. They also said to go to the Air America ramp the next morning for transport to my unknown destination.

I dutifully complied, and found myself along with two other young lieutenants/civilians—headed deeper into the unknown. I had a picture of the three of us—looking lost and forlorn as I pondered the words of one of Gen. Custer's troops: "What am I doin' here??"

After in-processing, briefings, etc. in the air attaché office at Vientiane, Laos, they had us draw straws for our final destination. I was odd man out, but the name of the site I was going to meant little to me. Once again, I was told to be at a passenger terminal on a strange field in a strange country. I asked who I was supposed to meet there and they replied: "Oh, you'll know him..." and grinned.

I was on time, and after a short wait, I knew who I was meeting—dude came in with long muttonchop sideburns, a black outfit and black boots, a sidearm, and carrying a large brown paper sack. He must have recognized my lost look as he came over to me and said, "C'mon, Gunter, let's get out of here." I had met my new roommate and mentor as a Raven—Fred "Magnet Ass" Platt. I was to learn a lot from Fred.

We walked out to the ramp, to an airplane I had never been in before—a U-17 with just a tiny tail number, eight rocket tubes, and a red stripe on top of the wing. No other markings. Without the formality of a walk-around, he said: "Get in and take me to L-54." I asked where that was... thinking "where the hell is that??"

I settled into the left seat, and finally found a tattered old checklist in the map case. I was religiously going through each item, trying to find the various switches, knobs, dials, etc. in a new air machine. After a few minutes, Fred grabbed the checklist, threw it in the far rear baggage compartment, and said, "Get this thing started and let's get out of here." I did and we did. My only direction was to head north. I guess taxi-out, take-off, and climb were pretty uneventful as the next thing I remember was leveling off. As I tried to figure out what I might need to set for cruise flight and navigation, I noticed Fred was reaching into the back seat and getting out his brown bag. I was pretty occupied exploring the new airplane. When I looked over his way again, he was reaching into the bag. He pulled out a can of beer, popped the top, and handed it to me. Oh, Lord.... This was really going to be an interesting assignment.... Lest the reader be unduly

concerned, that was one of only two times I flew during or after a drink. The other was one of those Silver Star vs. court-martial situations. Another story at another time.

We did get to L-54, and after a couple of landings, I was declared competent to fly the U-17. I guess the beer relaxed me just enough. The next day, I rode in Fred's back seat for 3.2 hours in an O-1 as he gave me a tour of the area and put in five flights of fighters. That was about what I'd do in a month back in Viet Nam.

Over the next two days, I flew over seven hours, getting to know the area and putting in airstrikes. I must have been doing something right, as I got 51 confirmed enemy soldiers killed by airstrikes I directed on my third day on the job.

Spin the wheel: Silver Star or court-martial?

6 January, 1970; about a month to DEROS (date of return from overseas) and two days before my birthday! It was a sloppy day—had worked a short day due to weather, got back to the field well before dark, helped refuel and rearm the U-17, and rode back to the house for a family-style dinner. After dinner, was sipping on Jim Beam as we watched one of the movies (on 16 mm reels) that were provided by the attaché. Our favorites were the Clint Eastwood movies—for a rating system, we'd count the dead bodies on each reel.

At some time during the movie, our radio operator was summoned to his station. Soon after, he came out and said that a friendly outpost was under heavy attack and they had to have a FAC and an interpreter (who had just arrived at the house) ASAP. There was one FAC who hadn't been drinking and it wasn't me. He said he didn't want to fly at night, in questionable weather in the mountains. After listening to several minutes of why it couldn't be done, I said, "There are people dying out there as we argue," grabbed the interpreter, and headed for the field.

We got airborne and I headed toward the outpost. The clouds were very patchy. I got above a thin broken layer and had the interpreter contact the troops on the ground. While en route, I contacted a "Spooky" gunship that was also airborne. Due to darkness and clouds, we could not see the outpost, but by flying over, they let us know when we were directly overhead and let us know where the bad guys were. Using that general guidance, I had the "Spooky" drop log flares, which provided a solid, steady reference point on the ground. That bright light showed nicely through the clouds below us. Using that as a reference, the "Spooky" was able to shoot enough to break off the attack.

Having relieved the immediate threat to the men on the ground, I headed back to L-54. We had one instrument approach there—an NDB (non-directional beacon) approach that had an MDA (minimum descent altitude) of 5,000 feet above the field due to mountains in the area. I knew that wasn't going to get me home, so I made one attempt at our home-grown instrument approach. I flew directly over the NDB. When I got station passage, I chopped the throttle, dumped the nose, and went into a steep turn, trying to keep the needle off the left wing. You'd descend until you puckered the seat cushion up your ass and if you didn't see the field at that point, add full power and climb back up. Well, that night, it didn't take much more puckering to convince me it was time to go somewhere else. So I called our control, told them I was diverting to Vientiane, 100

miles away, and headed south. Thank god I was in the U-17 with increased range. After 3.2 hours of night time, to include .4 of night instruments in the mountains, we were met by one of the strap hangers from downtown. The frown on his face made it obvious he could still detect the Jim Beam on my breath.

At any rate, it was apparently discussed in depth at pay grades far above mine. Bottom line was that I didn't get my Silver Star and didn't get a court-martial. I was quite happy to add my 17th oak leaf cluster to the Air Medal and know that I had saved some friendly lives.

I have the citation to my 18th Air Medal as proof of this exploit—except for the Jim Beam part. To protect the guilty, that was left out.

Got Religion?

The Laotians were very religious and devout Buddhists. Buddhist monks were highly revered and seemed to be everywhere.

When a new Raven got upcountry, the first few weeks were a “wait and see” trial period. You'd be watched from a distance to see if you were a good guy, not a loose cannon or flaming ass...., good pilot and FAC, etc. If all went well, you would be presented with a Buddha or two to protect you for the remainder of your tour. The standard line was that Buddha would protect you from any and all harm. After a couple of weeks, I was presented three Buddhas that I wore for my whole time in Laos. I still wear them for the banquet at our reunions.

Most of our missions were solo, but some were with an interpreter to talk to the troops on the ground. Sometimes, we would drop packages to the troops on the ground (I never wanted to know what was in those securely wrapped packages. The colonel at 504th had told me not to run drugs...). Mostly, the interpreter would be talking to the troops on the ground to coordinate their position and locations of enemy troops. He would relay that information to me, I'd clarify any questions through him, and then I could effectively direct airstrikes.

One of these interpreters/air guides was a lieutenant named Sy. Sy was unique for a couple of reasons. First, he stood head and shoulders above most Laotians, who were physically small people. Secondly, he had made his way through the ranks, having started as an army private. He was now a lieutenant and obviously plenty gung-ho.

This particular mission was flown near the confluence of the Mekong River and the Beng valley. We had been talking to the troops on the ground and located some bad guys. We had put in 2-3 sets of fighters on the troop concentrations. There was time between flights, so I decided to drop down and get the BDA (bomb damage assessment), a report of what the strikes had damaged, destroyed, etc. As I made a low pass over one ridge line, it suddenly sounded like the 4th of July. Several 12.7 mm (.51 caliber) machine guns opened up at once. They were close and well-aimed for us to hear them so loud above engine and wind noise, headsets, etc. I continued jinking and headed for the next ridge line. As I crossed it, I dropped down into the valley, hoping to get out of sight of those guns and get far enough away to climb back to a safe altitude. As I did, I started climbing back up and took a deep breath. I looked over at Sy and his eyes were as big as saucers.

I asked him if he was OK but got no response. I asked again, and still staring straight ahead, he said: "Mr. Gunter, I think we go home now." I tried to explain the importance of the target, that we had more fighters waiting for direction, and we needed to complete the mission. Sy continued staring straight ahead and said again, "I think we go home now." Digging deep into my bag of persuasion, I held out the two Buddhas on a chain and said: "No sweat, Sy; we have Buddhas. Buddha protect us." Sy finally looked at me and calmly stated, "Mr. Gunter, I think maybe Buddha take holiday today. We go home now."