





# **CLOSE CALLS**

**(REVISITED)**

**VITO TOMASINO**

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Second Edition

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Published by

The cover photo of the author climbing into the F-100 aircraft he flew in Vietnam was taken in 1965 by his crew chief, A1C Brackenbury. Most of the other photos in the book were shot by the author, a few by a fellow pilot, a Marine buddy, or military photographer. The author's bio picture was taken by his son, Steven Vito.



## **Books by Vito Tomasino**

### **Fiction**

Kracek

### **Non-Fiction**

Sabre The Journey

Close Calls and Other Neat Stories

Close Calls (Revisited)

## EXCERPTS

“The words of my high school friends still echoed in my ears as I signed the papers: ‘Join the Marines and go to Korea? Are you crazy? You’ll get yourself killed!’ They may have been half right.”

“When we took off from Cannon Air Force Base, New Mexico on October 15, 1962, we had no idea that a routine two week deployment to Florida would turn into the most perilous confrontation of the “Cold War.”

The innocence and hopefulness I saw in her beautiful face—despite the hardship and sorrow they must have endured during the war—brought home, for me, what the Korean War, any war, is really about...the kids!

“Upon our return from Vietnam a reporter asked me why we were there. “The kids,” I said, “the kids are why we are in Vietnam; to protect their right to grow up with minds unfettered by any form of oppressive government.”

“I looked at him with renewed respect and admiration. A P-51 pilot during WWII, and an F-86 driver in Korea with several kills to his credit, he epitomized the fighter pilot I hoped to become.”

“Risk is an inherent part of what we do, something all fighter pilots willingly accept. Hell, if anybody could do it, we wouldn’t

“Replaying that day’s ‘Close Call’ in my mind over a cold beer at the club, I wondered how many more I had left.”

## WE SHARED THE SAME SKY

“Vito encapsulates the pilot/aircraft synergy the F-100 inspired in its select aircrews better than any documentary I have ever read. He graduated at the top of his cadet class to earn a slot in jet fighters. In Vietnam, his performance marked him as a gifted aviator and iconic combat leader.” *F. Gregory Neubeck, Fighter Pilot*

“I published many of Vito’s articles in The Intake magazine, the journal of the Super Sabre Society. Our Editor, John Schulz, has said: ‘Vito’s skill and talent is to tell his stories in such a way that every reader is along for the ride.’ I could not agree more.”  
*R. Medley Gatewood, Publisher*

“We completed two years of intensive training on the challenging road to becoming fighter pilots in the USAF and forged a life-long friendship. A U.S. Marine before his Air Force life, Vito is the guy I want in that foxhole with me, or flying my wing. He’s not too bad with words either. *James E. Craig, Col. USAF*





**"...the wind beneath my wings."**

## FORWORD

When my father asked me to write the foreword for his new book, *"Close Calls, and Other Neat Stories"* I was, in one word, honored. Not only does his book cover many exciting stories spanning a lifetime of experiences and events from various parts of the world, each unique story carries a lesson for life. Growing up as a child you may know what your father does for a living—he's a pilot in the Air Force and fly's jets—but you may not be fully aware of the encounters and challenges he faces as part of that job. It wasn't until later, during our adult years my brothers and sister were privy to the many stories our father and mother would share around the breakfast table (usually after a nice helping of Dad's famous pancakes and a hot cup of coffee). We had no doubt our parents led a colorful life and had an endearing relationship, but these stories will give you a glimpse into the life of a marine and fighter pilot.

*Close Calls* starts out with a bang in chapter one, "The Hits Kept Coming." If this story doesn't keep you on the edge of your seat, I don't know what will. The fact that it's a true recollection of a fighter mission during the Viet Nam war and is riddled with multiple obstacles in the span of one night should keep you turning the pages in anticipation of how this man and his other fighter pilot brothers survived. This one story alone could be a major motion picture blockbuster—coming soon.

Don't get me wrong, this book is more than a few tales of a decorated fighter pilot, they are chapters in the life of a man who was raised on solid principles and held himself to a high standard. He was always eager to learn and never afraid to push himself to his limit...no matter what stage of his career, or where the target was. He may have taken risks at times but was able to rely on his ability to think quickly (useful when flying supersonic jets), analyze and assess the situation, maybe have a few seconds to consider a few options and then execute his plan successfully (he may refer to it as being lucky). What makes some of these stories more interesting is knowing that the man who wrote them usually came out of the other side calm as a cucumber, as if it were part of the job. What you will also glean from some of these stories is that my dad had a soft spot for children and knew that the faces of today's youth were the leaders of tomorrow. Throughout my life, I've always seen my mother and father treat every man, woman, and child from anywhere in the world with the same amount of respect and dignity.

A 28-year veteran of the U.S. Air Force myself, I had some close calls of my own. My most memorable was my very first B-52G navigator training mission at Castle Air Force Base, CA. That day found two young navigators and two young co-pilots bouncing off the runway, not once, not twice, but three times after 'wheelbarrowing' the mighty BUFF just off center of the runway. Unfortunately the

runway had a crown in the center and caused our aircraft to bounce to the right after each hit. It wasn't until we started seeing more of the unprepared surface (translate: grass) on our black and white Steerable TV camera downstairs in the navigator compartment when the Instructor Pilot called for a go-around. Instead of the instructor taking over the controls, he let the young co-pilot push up all eight throttles...while still fighting to regain centerline! We eventually gained altitude and established ourselves back in the airfield pattern with complete silence over the radios. It seemed like a long time passed before the pilot observer on the ground, call-sign FOXTROT, mentioned he saw sparks and thought we lost our left side tip gear. That raised a few alarms and attracted the attention of the Squadron, Base, and Wing Commanders who eventually cleared us to land after completing numerous emergency checklist items. Once parked, a visual inspection of the BUFF revealed no damage to the left tip gear, but that the entire underside of the number one nacelle was completely scraped. It was determined the scrape had occurred when full power was applied and a turn to re-gain centerline was attempted. Any more of a turn, and the most likely result would have been a huge fireball at or near the end of the runway.

The above experience resonates as I read each story in *Close Calls*. What you will also pick up from these stories are the relationships forged with fellow trainees, instructors, peers, supervisors, superior officers, foreign nationals, and everyday people from all walks of life. In a career where you are fortunate to work with people from all over the nation and around the world, you sometimes get to do and experience some incredible things. As an officer just starting his military career in a fighter squadron in France, many of his supervisors and commanders had experience flying missions in WWII and Korea. Being able to tap into their experiences and learn from their leadership was a huge asset for a young fighter pilot. Working alongside and becoming close friends with a foreign military is a treat and an honor, especially in a country like Libya going through a major regime change and presenting many challenges as a result. Who would have guessed that a guy from Brooklyn, New York (accent and all) would teach himself Arabic in order to better communicate with his Libyan students; or that he could create a relationship between a man in his jet and a school yard full of young students tucked in a Turkish valley? Those students and their teachers may never know the lengths one man went to in order to establish a bond and hopefully brighten their day by putting a smile on their faces—but you will. These are just a few examples of the relationships made along the way through a storied career in the U.S. Air Force.

*Close Calls* should, no, *will* amaze you with the many situations my father faced in his career. Once these stories were put to paper, the details were nothing short of amazing; or as Dad puts it, neat. I don't know of another book that puts the reader in the cockpit of an F-100 during a combat mission in Viet Nam, in the trenches during the end of the Korean War, survival training in the forests of West Germany, or in a flaming F-111 during a test sortie in Northern California—to name a few. I have no doubts you'll enjoy this newly revised and expanded edition of his original

manuscript, aptly named *Close Calls (Revisited)*—so kick the tires, light the fire, and enjoy the ride.

His son,  
Robert “Bert” Tomasino  
Lt Col, USAF (ret.)



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# **CLOSE CALLS**

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# 1

## The Hits Kept Coming

South Vietnam, October 1965

The sun hovered low in the western sky as three bomb-laden F-100's from the 429th Tactical Fighter Squadron—the iconic “Black Falcon” painted on their yellow-banded tails—lifted off the runway of Bien Hoa Air Base, South Vietnam. Their assigned target was an enemy arms cache located one hundred and thirty miles north of Saigon. Minutes before they could get there, Paris Control—under orders from 7<sup>th</sup> Air Force—redirected them to a new target. A U.S. Army convoy had been ambushed by the Vietcong a few miles south of the outpost at Plei Mei and in imminent danger of being overrun.



We were over the ambush site in less than ten minutes, but not before the sun

slipped behind the mountains, leaving us over an unplanned target that was quickly going dark, with no flare ship to light it up, and no qualified Forward Air Controller. There was, however, an Army Artillery Officer on scene flying a spotter aircraft similar to that used by our FAC's, and he knew a target when he saw one.

"Bulldog, this is Falcon, flight of three F-100's carrying bombs, rockets, and 20mm. What have you got for us?"

"Copy that, Falcon, glad you could join the party. We were on a resupply mission to Plei Mei when the Vietcong hit us as we entered a sharp bend in the road, splitting our convoy in half and making it all but impossible for our guys to establish an effective defense—one of the slickest ambushes I've ever seen, I'll give them that. But, we're out-gunned and on the verge of being overrun. It's also getting dark and we have no flare ship. What's more, I'm not a qualified FAC. I don't even have smoke rockets to mark the goddamned targets! Do you still want to do this?"

"Are you kidding? This is what we live for. It beats the hell out of what we were about to do with our 'stuff.' Just tell us where you want it, Bulldog...we'll do the rest."

"You're on, Falcon. Do you see the tracers pouring in from both sides of the road?"

"Hard to miss in the dark."

"The automatic weapons keeping our troops pinned down are on the other end. Take them out first."

"Our pleasure Bulldog. Falcon, set switches for bombs. Lead has the west gun, Two and Three take the two east of the road."



**429th TFS F-100 over target area in South Vietnam. 1965**

Each of us dropped two 750 pound bombs on the first pass, destroying all three enemy positions. But “Charlie” wasn’t done...not even discouraged. Three more guns opened fire on the convoy. At least one of them came from the same location we had just hit. Apparently our bombs killed the shooters, but not the gun. It was quickly taken over by another crew. “Falcon, let’s try this again. Arm for rockets.”

Given the 2.75inch Folding Fin Aerial Rocket’s (FFAR) greater accuracy, we took out the second set of automatic weapons, expending only one of our pods. The lethal saturation coverage of nineteen high-explosive warheads ensured that, even if the gun itself survived, it would take some time before a replacement crew could be formed.

Bulldog then directed our attack to the enemy force that had our troops under fire from both sides of the road. We hit them with our remaining rockets, then with 20mm cannons. Pulling off my first strafing pass, I saw tracer rounds from anti-aircraft artillery tracking Falcon Two as he completed his run. Bulldog also saw it. “Falcon, we’ve got AAA located just west of the bend in the road.”

“Roger that. Two and Three hold east of the convoy. I’ve got this. When the tracers stop, jump back in.”

Falcon Three questioned the wisdom of my plan. “You can’t knock out ‘Triple-A’ with twenty mil.”

“I know, but I can kill the crew and buy us some time; enough, maybe, for the next flight to get here before we run out gas.”

I climbed to an altitude that would allow me to attack at a steeper angle. It would give me a better look at the target and a few seconds more firing time. The gunners must have been expecting me, because they had my aircraft bracketed with 120mm high-explosive cannon shells before I completed my roll-in. It didn’t matter, I was already committed to the attack. I found myself staring straight down the muzzle of their gun—fascinated by the strangely beautiful light streaks that sailed by my canopy in apparent slow motion. It felt as though time had been suspended. I had experienced the euphoria of being “in the zone” before, but that evening the concept was raised to a whole new level.

Ironically, the tracer rounds they were using to adjust their fire made it easier for me to home in on their position. Aiming through the lighted path they provided, I fired a long burst from the F-100’s four cannons, showering the crew with 20mm high-explosive shells at the rate of six thousand rounds a minute, permanently relieving them of their duty. I also did enough damage to the gun to keep it out of action long enough for the next group of “Huns” to get there and finish the job of forcing the “Cong” back into the jungle.

We continued our strafing runs until we were well past bingo fuel, giving our troops the “breathing room” they needed to reform the convoy.

“Bulldog...Falcon One, we’ve pushed our fuel as far as we can...got to head back.”

“Roger that. The other fighters are less than five minutes out. With any luck,



we'll have a flare ship here as well. And Falcon, thanks! That was one hell of a demonstration of close air support...never seen anything like it, even under ideal conditions. You guys did it in poor visibility over mountainous terrain without "lights," not to mention an unqualified Forward Air Controller. You saved a lot of good men today."

"Our pleasure Bulldog. This is the kind of mission every fighter pilot wants to be a part of. As for your qualification as a Forward Air Controller, I've never worked with a better one."

"Thanks again Falcon...safe return."

"Same to you. Falcon, Lead's off right. Let's go home."

I completed a climbing turn to the south as Two and Three joined in close fingertip formation—checking me, and each other for battle damage and hung ordinance before positioning themselves on my wing.

"Lead, this is Three, we're clean...so are you."

"Roger that. Check all armament switches safe and say fuel."

"Two has 1350 pounds remaining."

"Three has 1450."

"Roger that. Lead has 1500."

*That should be enough to get us home*, I thought. Then, I saw it...a line of thunderstorms about thirty miles in front of us, stretching across our flight path as far as the eye could see. I estimated the tops to be over forty-five thousand feet. We were level at twenty-five, and could not climb over them without burning up the little remaining fuel we had. Going around was out of the question.

"Falcon, stay close, we have no other option but to go through this monster. If you lose sight of me, get on your instruments and turn ten degrees away from my heading. Hold that heading for four seconds, then turn back to parallel the original course. We'll rejoin in the clear on the other side."

"Sounds like a plan, Lead," Three quipped. "Think they'll extend 'happy hour' for us at the club?"

"Let's get back and find out, Sammy."

Our last two casual transmissions may not have been exactly as I remember them here, but they are not unlike the kind of nervous banter that fighter pilots resort to in a tight situation. An old fighter pilot (he was a few years older than me) gave me this bit of sage advice early in my career: "If you're going to die, there's no sense dying all tensed up." He had a wily grin on his face when he imparted those words of wisdom to me and I assumed he was just kidding. Since then, however, there have been more than a few occasions when I called on that bit of philosophical wit to carry me through a difficult situation and, oddly enough, it worked.

I saw a slight break in the cumulonimbus giants that were about to swallow us whole. "Falcon, I see a sliver of light coming through the clouds at 11 o'clock. It's not much, but it's all we got."

"Falcon Three has it. It's worth a shot, Lead."

"Exactly what I was thinking." As we got closer, the small sliver appeared to be expanding—enough, as it turned out, for all three Super Sabres to fly through in a loose "fingertip" formation. We managed to hold the flight together in the severe turbulence, but a dazzling 360 degree display of lightning discharges turned the night into day, while playing havoc with our night vision. However, the weather was relatively clear on the other side of the storm cell, and we would have more than enough time to recoup full night vision. Still, it was a dark, moonless night and we were a hundred miles from home. I switched us over to Paris Control.



**"Black Falcon" F-100's returning to Bien Hoa Air Base,  
South Vietnam. 1965.**

"Paris, this is Falcon, how do you read?"

"Loud and clear Falcon...squawk ident."

"Falcon squawking."

"Copy. We have you ninety-seven miles northeast of Bien Hoa. The field is VFR (Visual Flight Rules), with five miles visibility and thin scattered clouds at three thousand feet...altimeter 3-0.3-2."

"Roger, altimeter 3-0.3-2. Be advised Paris, we're approaching emergency fuel. My number two man is practically there. Request direct vector to Bien Hoa with a handoff to GCA (Ground Controlled Approach) and clearance to begin a route descent."

"You're cleared to 2500 feet. Call leaving Flight Level 2-5-0. We'll hand you off

to Bien Hoa GCA fifteen miles out.”

I eased the throttle back to eighty percent rpm and started a gradual descent, leaving the speed brake up to conserve fuel. “Falcon Flight, reduce power to eighty percent.”

“Two, copy.”

“Three.”

They remained in loose fingertip formation. My plan was to have Falcon Two make the first approach, since he was lowest on fuel. Three and I would then take separation on him for a formation approach and landing. That was the plan, until I received a call from Paris minutes prior to our handoff to Bien Hoa.

“Falcon, this is Paris, we have a problem.”

“We do?”

“Bien Hoa has lost all power to its runway lights.”

“Are you kidding me...no runway lights?” *Jesus, what next?*

“Afraid not. Flare pots have been set up on the first third of runway. They’re doing what they can to get more in place, but it’s not likely to improve much before you arrive. Other pilots have reported difficulty in seeing the runway more than a mile out.”

“Copy that, Paris. That pretty much changes our game plan.”

“Say again.”

“I’ll tell you about it later over a cold beer at the club.” What I didn’t have time to explain to Paris, was that all three of us were approaching emergency fuel and may have only one shot at a safe recovery. And now, I couldn’t risk splitting up the flight on the chance that Two and Three—who had been staring at my wing-tip lights for the last half hour—could safely make the transition to instruments and land on a nearly invisible runway. *No, we’ll do this together.*

If the flare pots couldn’t be seen until we were practically over them, then we would stay on top of them by flying a “360 Degree Overhead”—the standard fighter landing pattern under VFR weather conditions. GCA could align us with the runway and bring us in close enough to visually acquire the flares. I called for a fuel check.

“Falcon Two...550.”

“Three...650.”

“Roger that, Lead has 700. Given our fuel and the runway lighting conditions we can’t risk individual GCA approach and landings. Instead, radar will line us up with the runway for a “360 Overhead.” It’s our best option. Make it good.”

“Falcon One, this is Three, remind me not fly with you again.”

“I knew it wouldn’t last.”

“What?”

“The honeymoon.”

Paris Control interrupted our gallows humor. “Falcon, this is Paris, we have you at 15 miles, descending through 5000 feet. You’re cleared to Bien Hoa GCA. I’m looking forward to that cold beer.”

“So am I, Paris...thanks.”

I switched the flight over to GCA frequency. "Bien Hoa, Falcon here, how do you read?"

"Loud and clear, Falcon. We have a good 'paint' thirteen miles east of Bien Hoa at three thousand feet."

"Roger, request vector to initial for a '360 Overhead Approach' with full stop landings. We're below emergency fuel and can't afford a miss."

"Copy that. Crash Crew has been alerted. Continue descent to 1500 feet. Call reaching."

"Will do. Falcon flight go echelon right and tighten it up." I leveled off, just as Three completed his cross-under to join on Two's right wing. "Falcon, level at 1500."

"Roger Falcon, we have you at two miles on the runway centerline. Cleared to Bien Hoa Tower."

"Falcon, go Channel Two." When Two and Three checked-in I made my call: "Tower, Falcon on a two mile initial. Request full stop landings for three thirsty F-100's."

"Roger that Falcon, cleared as requested. Call the break."

"Falcon, I've got a visual on the flare pots. Take three seconds in the break and roll out on downwind just outside my jet wash. Two, keep me in sight until you start your turn to final. Three, do the same off of Two. Say fuel."

"Two, copy. I'm reading 400 pounds."

"Three...under five."

"Roger that, Lead has five. Make this one good, gents. Tower, Falcon is in the break."



Lead in the break

“In sight, Falcon...cleared full stop landings. Call turning base with gear and flaps down.”

The flare pots were barely visible from about a mile out, but provided the “marker” we needed to keep us oriented in the overhead pattern until we rolled out on final. Then, as we crossed the runway threshold, our aircraft landing lights provided all the illumination we needed. The three of us landed on the first attempt with good drag chutes; which were jettisoned when we cleared the runway and pulled into the de-arming area. Maintenance and armament personnel checked us over, disarmed the guns, and installed all safety pins before giving us a “thumbs up” to taxi.

Back in the parking area, Brackenbury, my Crew Chief, reinstalled the chocks and climbed up the ladder to hand me a cold beer before I could get out of the cockpit. That same scene was played out with two other Falcons. The word had gotten back to our Crew Chiefs before we landed. I think they were happy to see us.



**Reinforced revetment area, Bien Hoa Air Base, South Vietnam. 1965.**

The Bomb-Damage Assessment Report—as debriefed by Intelligence—confirmed that we did, indeed, get to the ambush site in time to inflict enough damage to force the Vietcong to momentarily pull back. This gave our Army friends the time they needed to rejoin the convoy and get back on the road. Although still under heavy small arms fire, they made it into Plei Mei with minimum casualties.

“Bulldog,” the Army Lieutenant Colonel who directed our attack, noted his appreciation of our work in his After Action Report. As a result, we were awarded

Distinguished Flying Crosses—an honor to be sure. Our real reward, however, was helping him and our guys on the ground fight their way out of a deadly ambush, not to mention getting back to Bien Hoa for that cold beer.

But, it was the Colonel's skill and courage under fire that impressed me most. He was flying a light, unarmed Cessna aircraft at 110 mph, a thousand feet above the thick of the action, and well within the lethal range of every Vietcong guerilla on the ground wielding an AK-47. Moreover, he stayed right in the middle of the "hot zone" for us and the fighters that followed. No one was more deserving of a medal for the mission than he—as was every man in that convoy.

We had our beers that night, and told our "war story" to every fighter pilot in the bar sober enough to listen. But we didn't get too carried away with our instant celebrity, because we knew that the very next day we would be "strapping on" another airplane to do it all over again.

# 2

## Brackenbury

During my tour in Vietnam with the 429<sup>th</sup> “Black Falcon” Squadron I never, in the one hundred missions I was tasked to fly, had to abort a flight due to maintenance issues. That averaged out to one mission a day for every day I spent in-country...*one hundred missions in one hundred days*. Such a uniquely successful combat record could have never been achieved without the help of one of the best Crew Chiefs that ever put a wrench to an F-100, A1C (Airman First Class) Brackenbury. Clearly, neither one of us could get the job done without the other. We were equal partners in that effort; which why I insisted he omit rank when he painted our names on the side of 618, *our* airplane.



In painting our names on the airplane I had my Crew Chief our leave rank off. His job was as critical as mine and deserved equal billing.

“Brack” was barely twenty years old, and Vietnam was his first war, but I had never met anyone—in the Marines, or in the Air Force—that worked harder, or was more dedicated to the mission than he. He looked to me as he would an older brother, and I was honored to fill that role. I believe it was that special bond we shared, that enabled us to achieve the combat record we did. He logged many long, tiring hours in that effort—more than a few of them were attributable to some of my “Close Calls.”

One day, as he was directing me into our parking spot, Brackenbury noticed the sheet metal damage to the underside of the nose section of our airplane. He chocked the wheels, hooked the ladder onto the cockpit rail, and climbed up. Taking my helmet and clipboard, he casually asked, “Get a little low, sir?”

“What do you mean, ‘Brack?’”

“I noticed the damage to the nose section as you pulled in...looks like straw stuck in the sheet metal.”

“Really? Let’s take a look.” I got out of the cockpit and followed him to the front of the airplane. “Well, I’ll be damned, I never felt a thing.” I said. “Guess I got a little lower than I should have on one of my strafing passes and clipped somebody’s ‘hootch.”

“Yes sir, kinda looks that way. But don’t worry, I’ll get the sheet metal guys on it right away. We’ll take care of everything. You don’t even need to write it up.”

Take care of it he did. The next day, when I went out to our airplane, the nose of 618 was as good as new. That incident, by the way, would not be my only close encounter with a thatched roof in Vietnam.





**"Brack," checking the maintenance Form 1 for #618.**

Returning from another mission I made a casual comment to him about needing two more rear view mirrors. "You know, 'Brack,' it would really be nice if I had two more mirrors to give me a better view of my "six o'clock." He didn't say much in response, except to ask where I thought they should be mounted. "About midway down the side of the canopy bow," I said.

The following morning, I was greeted with the usual snappy salute and "Good morning, sir." But I noticed something different in his tone, and his smile was more like a "shit-eating grin." Although every pilot is required to perform his own aircraft preflight inspection before climbing into the cockpit, I wanted Brackenbury to know that he had my full trust and confidence, and would often demonstrate that trust by simply asking him if our airplane was ready. His yes was all the assurance I needed. I would then check the weapons and pull the safety pins before climbing into the cockpit and "firing up" the big Pratt and Whitney jet engine. That morning, after settling into my seat, I reached up to adjust my rear view mirror and there they were...two new mirrors, mounted exactly where I wanted them.



**A1C Brackenbury, Bien Hoa Air Base, South Vietnam. 1965**

I glanced over at “Brack,” who had been watching me the whole time. He was grinning from ear to ear. I gave him a big thumbs up, then signaled him to pull the chocks. He did, and I was off and rolling again on mission number...



**Taxiing out for another go. Bien Hoa Air Base, Vietnam. 1965**

I never asked him where he got the mirrors.

### **A Personal Comment**

Not many missions flown in Vietnam were as gratifying as the two described in Chapters One and Three; missions in which close air support actually saved the lives of our soldiers. Most were of the interdiction kind, in which the target might be a suspected enemy troop concentration, an arms cache, a bridge...good targets, but all too routine. On very few of them did we have to confront anyone shooting back at us with anything more than small arms fire from AK-47's (Russian made automatic rifle). They were relatively uneventful when compared to night close air support. Nonetheless, those missions did serve a necessary and useful purpose in the war.

There was, however, one mission we were tasked to fly that, frankly speaking, pissed me off. We were ordered to fly a full-fledged fire power demonstration in the middle of the war, so that General Westmoreland, the Commander of military operations in Vietnam, could prove to his South Vietnamese counterpart that U.S. Air Force fighter jets were capable of providing close air support without endangering his troops.

Thus, after almost ten months of USAF jet-fighter operations in Vietnam, flying every type of mission in the book including close air support, we were now asked to demonstrate that we could do what we had already been doing on a daily basis for almost year. The General may have seen it as a necessary diplomatic exercise. I saw it as a colossal waste of time, manpower, and weapons.

# 3

## DÉJÀ VU

South Vietnam, November 1965

We sprung to our feet the second the alarm sounded, leaving chess pieces tumbling in our wake as we burst through the trailer door into the hot jungle night. It felt as though we were leaping into a Swedish sauna. It would be even hotter where we were going. The stifling heat, and the need to leave the unnerving blare of the klaxon horn behind, no doubt inspired us to shave a few seconds off the fifty yard dash to our aircraft.



The F-100 on Flight-line of Bien Hoa Air Base. South Vietnam, 1965.

I hit the second rung of the ladder from a dead run and scrambled into the cockpit. Before I was fully settled into the ejection seat, I pressed the engine start button and slipped into my parachute harness and seat belt. The starter cartridge exploded in a crescendo of noise and smoke, sending the RPM gage jumping off its peg. At ten percent, I moved the throttle “around the horn” into idle and set every switch in the cockpit, as the F-100’s powerful J-57 turbo-jet engine roared to life. I could feel its energy surging through the airframe and me—joining man and machine.



**Cartridge start for two "Huns" on alert pad. Bien Hoa Air base, South Vietnam. 1965**

On my Crew Chief’s signal, I raised the speed brakes and lowered the flaps twenty degrees. My Crew Chief, Airman Brackenbury, then checked the flight control surfaces for proper movement as I moved the control stick from one side of the cockpit to the other, and kicked in full right, then left rudder. That done, he pulled the gear pins and chocks and gave me a “thumbs up.”

Glancing over at my wingman, I saw his Crew Chief doing the same. He had kept up with me every step of the way. 1/Lt. Arthur Cornelius—a U.S. Air Force Academy graduate—was new to the theater, and had only recently gone through F-100D combat training at Cannon AFB, New Mexico before being assigned to the 429<sup>th</sup>. He completed his daytime mission orientation requirements shortly after his arrival in Vietnam. This would be his first night sortie, and it would be one to remember. *Art is going to be okay.* I switched us over to tower frequency.



"Falcon, check in."

"Falcon Two on...ready to roll," came the crisp reply.

"Roger, Two. Go tower freq."

"Tower...Falcon, scramble two F-100's."

"Roger, Falcon, you're cleared immediate takeoff, runway 27...winds 250 degrees at 10 knots. Turn left after takeoff, heading 1-8-0 degrees, and climb to 10,000 feet."

Minutes later. "Paris...Falcon level at 10,000."



"Roger, Falcon, we have you on scope...cleared on course."

Five minutes out from the target area, Paris handed us off to the Army observer pilot providing air surveillance for a Special Forces convoy heading to its Delta base camp, located about 20 kilometers southeast of Can Tho. Like his counterpart in Plei Mei, he was also flying a Cessna L-19, with no smoke rockets to mark the target. Once again I found myself, rushing to the aid of an Army Special Forces convoy at night, without benefit of flare illumination, or a qualified Forward Air Controller. This time, however, it was in the Delta region of South Vietnam, the Mekong River's outlet to the South China Sea. "Pathfinder, this is Falcon, flight of two F-100's, how do you read?"

"You're loud and clear, Falcon. Say position and armament."

"We're five minutes out, carrying bombs, rockets, and 20mm. Will that help?"

"Are you kidding? My boys are under heavy fire, and fighting for their lives. We need you to level the playing field for us, but we have two problems."

“What’s that?”

“We have no flare ship, or Forward Air Controller.”

*Déjà vu all over again*, I thought, recalling one of Yogi Berra’s (a colorful catcher from the New York Yankees of the nineteen fifties) philosophical musings. This time, however, a full moon hung in a relatively cloudless sky, its bright glow magnified by a wet Delta marsh. Acquiring and attacking the targets on level terrain would not pose the same problem we faced in the northern highlands. “Just tell us where you want it, Pathfinder.”

“Falcon, the automatic weapons fire coming from both sides of the road is our immediate and most dangerous threat. Take them out first.”

Tracers from the enemy’s heavy automatic weapons pin-pointed their location for us, as though some giant hand was mapping out the battlefield on an immense blackboard in real time. Their fire lanes perfectly positioned, the Vietcong had our troops pinned down in a deadly crossfire.

“Will do. Falcon Two, set switches for bombs. Take the gun north of the road. I’ve got the other one.”

“Falcon Two, copy.” We were each carrying two 750 pound bombs, one on each wing. Putting them within a hundred feet of the target would be enough to kill, or incapacitate the gunners, if not disable the gun. Squadron policy dictated that we drop bombs in pairs to avoid potential control problems during recovery with an asymmetrical wing load—a problem made even more difficult at night.

However, it didn’t take the Vietcong long to figure out our tactics. Thus, for their high value targets, such the Plei Mei resupply convoy, they learned not to reveal the location of their AAA (Anti-Aircraft Artillery) until we expended our 750’s. I made a mental note of it as I flew through their tracers that night—not a sound tactic if one wants to live to be an old pilot. How I managed to fly through an intense barrage of high explosive “Triple A” shells without incurring scratch on me or my airplane is something I am still trying to fathom. Nonetheless, the troops at Plei Mei—just like those we were redirected to that night—were on the verge of being overrun. Killing the gun crew bought them the time they needed to avoid that ugly fate.

But, this was Cornelius’ first night mission, and I briefed him to drop both bombs on the first run. I, however, I was not going to make the same mistake twice. Thus, when they revealed their Triple-A position, my “saved” bomb sent gun *and* crew into an early retirement. With their big gun neutralized they had no defense against two fire-breathing “Super Sabres” intent on doing them serious bodily harm. We blasted them first with our rockets (the F-100 carries two pods, each loaded with nineteen 2.75 inch FFAR (Folding Fin Aerial Rockets), then rained down a relentless barrage of 20mm high explosive cannon shells. Before expending our last round, the guerillas were not nearly as enthusiastic about pressing the attack. Without their automatic weapons in play, they were no match for even a wounded cadre of the Army’s best warriors. You don’t want to piss off a “Green Beret” on a level playing field.

The “Cong” were never able to mount a credible second offensive, giving the U.S. Ground Commander the time he needed to reform the convoy and move out

of the killing zone. They—like their Two Corps counter-parts—made it safely back to their base camp with minimum casualties.

“Falcon, this is Pathfinder, thanks. You just pulled our bacon out of the fire, and we won’t forget it. That was the best damned close air support I’ve ever seen without the benefit of flares.”

“Couldn’t have done it without your help, Pathfinder. A full moon, the wet Delta terrain, and your direction was all we needed to get the job done.”

“Thanks, Falcon. We’ll be tossing a few back for you tonight.”

“You do that. Let’s go home Two.”

“Roger, Lead...on your wing.” Checking me over, he added: “You’re clean,” then briefly rolled right to show me the underside of his aircraft.

“So are you.”

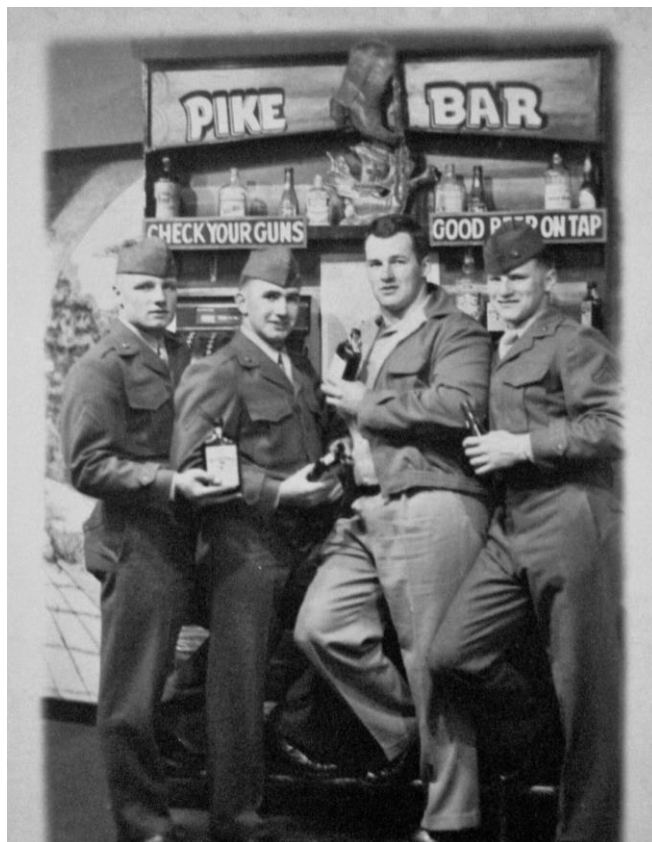
The flight back to Bien Hoa, and our landing, was routine—unlike Plei Mei, in which we had to fly through a wall of thunderstorms and land on a practically invisible runway with little more than fumes in our tanks. That night, however, we could at least celebrate our good fortune over a few cold beers at the club. This time, our aircraft would be reloaded and a now, “night-seasoned” Lt. Cornelius and I would go back to the trailer to pick up the chess pieces for another game.



# 4

## The Forgotten War

Korea, 1953-54: 2nd Platoon, Able Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division.



**McBurney, Tomasino, Lohr, and Teschimer at  
a mock bar in a Penny Arcade in San Diego, CA  
shortly before shipping out to Korea. June 1953.**

It was late June of 1953 when I boarded a Merchant Marine troop ship in San Diego, California with a thousand other Marines to join the fight in Korea.

One of the highlights of that long voyage was the crossing of the Equator about half way into our trip. "I Crossed the Equator" cards were issued to mark the date. It was my first time at sea, another unforgettable adventure. The Pacific Ocean looked much like her Atlantic cousin—which I had seen from the beaches of Long Island, where I spent much of my youth during the summer—huge swells, white capped waves, and a dark greenish blue.

One day—perhaps, at the same time we crossed the Equator—she showed me a face I had never seen before. She was calm, eerily calm, with not a ripple to mar her smooth undulating surface. Her color changed to a brilliant purple, so transparent it seemed as though I could see to the ocean floor from the bow of the ship. Ironically, that unreal picture of tranquility was revealed to me as we were about to enter a combat environment that would dispel any notions of peace .

On the return trip I would see yet another face of the mighty Pacific. We were hit by a typhoon the Captain described as the worst he had encountered in his forty years at sea. The previously benign "lady" morphed into a churning black and white mass of incensed seawater to become our new enemy. She threatened to overturn our ship with every giant wave that washed over the bow.

Five days after crossing the Equator we docked in Kobe, Japan for refueling. It was late in the evening. We were scheduled to leave port early the next morning, shore leave was not granted to anyone. That night, as I leaned against the ship's railing, contemplating the war I would soon be facing, I witnessed some unusual activity on the dock. Through the open doors of one of the warehouses, two men were practicing judo throws, slamming each other onto the hard concrete floor. Yet, neither one was hurt, or even shaken by the falls. Impressed with their skill and physical toughness, I made a mental note to learn more about the martial arts.

The following day, on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, we docked in Sasebo, Japan and were allowed to de-board. Picture a thousand Marines let loose on a small Japanese town after being stuffed in the hull of a troop ship for two weeks. If the people of Sasebo had not seen it many times before they might have thought they were being invaded.

"Stuffed" is not an overstated description of life "below decks" on a troop ship. We slept in suspended canvas bunks stacked four deep with about six inches of nose room between you and the man above. The walking-space between the bunks was so narrow, that if two guys on opposite sides of the aisle got out of their bunks at the same time they would have to get married. It was tight, but not so tight that some enterprising Marines couldn't find room enough for a poker game; which made walking even more of a problem than it already was. So you can see why, after two weeks at sea with a thousand other sweaty Marines in close confinement, we were more than ready for a little "Shore Leave."

Naturally, we all headed for the nearest bar or night club for a beer and some entertainment. While sitting there enjoying a soda (I didn't drink beer then) a young Japanese girl came up to our table and asked if we would like to have our portraits drawn. I thought it would make a nice memento and had her draw mine. I also saw that she needed the few dollars she was asking more than I did. Japan had barely started to recover from the devastation of the Second World War, which ended only eight years before our arrival. The little money she earned plying her artistic talents would help feed her family.



**Drawing by, Toshi Honage, Sasebo, Japan.  
I was on my way to Korea. July 2, 1953**

Her simple pencil drawing of me, particularly the look in my eyes, captured who I was at that stage in my life (I was nineteen) with more truth than a photograph. Somehow, the picture managed to survive the war, a fourteen month tour in Korea, and many more assignments over a twenty five year military career. Sixty years later, it found its final resting place on the wall of my office.

Our ship dropped anchor just outside of Incheon Harbor late in the evening of July 3, 1953. We stayed aboard that night. The next morning, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, we "landed."

“Landed” is in quotes, because we got off the ship the same way Marines did it when they stormed the beaches of Wake Island, Tarawa, Iwo Jima, and other South Pacific islands during WWII. Inchon had no deep water ports at the time and because of its extreme tidal flows, big ships had to anchor miles off shore. Thus, we would land at Incheon Harbor in LSTs (Landing Ship Troop).

That meant climbing down a cargo net slung over the starboard side of the ship and into a landing craft being tossed around by a choppy sea. That last step was a tricky one. Add to that picture, a steel helmeted Marine carrying a full field pack, an M-1 rifle, ammo, web belt, etc., and you begin to see the precariousness of the exercise. On the other hand we didn’t have to contend with the bombs, rockets and bullets that our predecessors did in WWII.

It was hot, very hot, but because of the limited availability of LSTs they packed us in like sardines. We stood shoulder to shoulder, face to backpack, as our landing craft slowly made its way to the shore. “If any of us should pass out,” I said to the guy next to me, “he’d have to do it standing up.” I was wrong. One Marine did pass out from the suffocating heat, but we managed to make enough room for him to lie down. He was quickly revived with a little water.

I’m sure, that every landing the Marines made on those bloody beaches in the South Pacific was forever etched into the minds of those who survived. Although our peaceful invasion paled by comparison, it was one Independence Day I will never forget.

Once ashore, they loaded us onto “Six-Bys” (two and half ton trucks with three sets of wheels). Each could carry about sixteen Marines with full field packs—twenty, if four sat on the steel floor between the wooden side benches. I was the last one to climb onto the canvas canopied truck bed; naively thinking that sitting at the tail end would not only give me more room, but a better view of the countryside. While I was right about the view, the roads just outside of Incheon were unpaved and, by the time we arrived in base-camp, I was covered in a thick layer of dust from head to toe. My green fatigues, not to mention my face, hands, and rifle had been transformed into a desert tan. I spent the next two days cleaning my rifle, field equipment, and me, as I was going through in-country orientation.



**Vito Tomasino 1st Squad Leader, 2nd Platoon, Able Company,  
1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division. 1953**

On day three we were issued additional live ammunition and “Flak Jackets,” and loaded back on the trucks that would carry us to the front lines. I made sure I got a seat closer to the front of the “bus.”

The first thing I noticed, when we jumped off the “Six-by” and climbed the hill to our fighting positions, was how quiet it was. We were not under fire, no bombs, or mortar rounds were raining down on us. Artillery shells whistled overhead, but most of those were outgoing. Yet, no more than a mile to our right, on hills “Berlin” and “East Berlin,” an intense battle was being waged to determine whether the 5<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment, or the Chinese People’s Army would lay final claim to that strategic high ground. Their fight included everything from close air support to hand to hand combat, and continued through the night into the following day.

From our position, it looked like a Fourth of July fireworks display. It was not. I watched helplessly, knowing that Marines were dying on those bloody hills, while all I could do was bear witness to the imagined carnage from the relative safety of my “foxhole.” I might just as well have been watching a newsreel in my hometown’s only movie theater. “What kind of a war is this?” I asked myself.

The Fifth Marines took “Berlin” and “East Berlin” back from the Chinese and held them until the truce was signed, but at a terrible cost in human lives. Less than one day “on the job,” and I had more questions about war than I would ever have answers. Years after the fighting ceased in Korea I would go on to fight other wars—both hot and cold—and be no closer to finding an answer.

When we stepped off the ship in San Francisco, more than a year later, there was no one there to greet us, no ticker tape parades...no pretty girls waving tiny

American flags. World War II was still an unpleasant memory for most Americans; particularly for those who lost loved ones. The Korean War, on the other hand, was no more than a “police action” in the eyes of President Truman—notwithstanding the ultimate sacrifice of more than 33,000 American lives. Indeed, less than a decade after our return, it would be all but forgotten.

But, we were Marines. We knew that what we had done for the people of Korea was good, and it was enough. We took one last look at the ship that brought us home, threw our duffle bags over our left shoulders and boarded the military bus that would take us to Treasure Island for processing into the “real world.”

# 5

## Steak and Mortars

It stood out like a sore thumb, with nothing but open level terrain between us—an inviting target to say the least. A week before the truce was signed on July 27, 1953, Marine cooks set up a mess tent on the forward side of a hill about thousand yards behind our front lines; then passed the word that they would be serving steak dinners with all the trimmings that afternoon. All we had to do to get one was walk those thousand yards in full view of hundreds of Chinese sharpshooters. What the heck, it had been relatively quiet in our sector, and after a week of eating nothing but cold World War II “C” rations out of a can, it was an offer too tempting to pass up. Besides, we were Marines, nineteen years old, and invincible.

Barely half way across that big open field we could smell the steaks, and picked up our pace. In the mess tent, I fell in line with about thirty other hungry “Jarheads,” and watched, almost in disbelief, as a big juicy steak was put on my tray, followed by French fries, vegetables, hot rolls, and desert. A big glass of reconstituted milk, or a canteen cup full of coffee would wash it all down. We carried those beautiful steaks to an empty table and sat down to eat what we thought would be the best meal of our lives. It damn near was.

Before I could take a bite of my food our Chinese “friends” (At that stage in the war there were far more Chinese confronting us than North Koreans) started to lob in 82mm high-explosive mortar rounds. They make a distinctive whistling sound just before they hit. When the first two or three exploded within fifty yards of the tent everyone dropped their knives and forks and bailed out; everyone, that is, except me and one other hungry Marine. We obviously shared the same reasoning.

There was no cover outside, just open field, where we would be more exposed. Why run out to where the mortar rounds were landing? The logical thing to do, we thought, would be to stay put and finish our meal. If we are going to die, it may as well be on a full stomach. The in-coming stopped after a half a dozen or so rounds had landed; shortly after they thought the last of us had dropped our forks. A few

of the shells were duds, and none hit close enough to do any serious damage.

Thinking about it later, I realized that the Chinese weren't really trying to hit the mess tent; that, given the ongoing peace talks, they were probably under orders not to do anything to jeopardize the signing of the truce. I reasoned, that it was more likely they just wanted to let us know they were still around; jealous, perhaps, of the hot meal we were enjoying. Maybe they could even smell the steaks sizzling on the grill. I'm sure they saw the mess tent as it was being assembled and already had their mortars zeroed in—puzzled as to why we set it up in plain sight, well within their range. It may have appeared as though we were thumbing our noses at them. I don't blame them for being a little upset.

The steak wasn't the best one I ever had, but it was certainly the most memorable, and almost my last. Even the Marine cooks got the message that day. They quickly dismantled the Mess Tent and reassembled it behind the hill, out of sight of enemy artillery/mortar spotters—where it should have been in the first place. A few days later they invited us back for another steak. Most of the guys took a pass, but some of us gave it another go. We ventured out into "no man's land" again in groups of four to six men, staying low and well spread out as we made our way to the base of the hill. As we approached the trench-line cut into its side, I swore I heard my old Drill Instructor at Paris Island whispering in my ear: **"Don't bunch up or one f---king grenade will get you all!"**

By staying low in the trench we kept out of the enemy's line of sight until we got to the other side. Easy enough to do on an empty stomach, but something Marines are notoriously bad at. Coming back with full bellies, made it all but impossible. We thought we were staying low, but apparently not low enough. The Chinese lobbed in a few short rounds to get our attention. "Incoming" will do that every time. We ran the rest of the way down the hill, while they showered us with mortar shells that fell consistently short. We didn't stop until we reached the base of the hill, and then double-timed it across the open field to the relative safety of our front line fighting positions. Curiously, the mortar fire stopped the moment we left the protective cover of the trench and ran into the open field, where we were most vulnerable.

Reflecting upon the incident sixty years later, I can speculate as to why none of the mortar rounds hit that big mess tent the first time, or found their way into the trench on our second steak run. If they were really serious about killing us, I reasoned, they would have used airburst-timed artillery shells instead of mortars with impact fusing. Had they done so, a lot of Marines would have died on both days. I don't believe that was their intent. The Chinese were better gunners than that. Nonetheless, as nineteen year old Marines wondering if we would ever see our twentieth birthdays, we didn't have the benefit of hindsight, nor the inclination to philosophically assess our plight. We just ran like hell.



# 6

## The Kids

Even as a young Marine I realized I was not going to change the world, but I could make a positive contribution to that noble end, one child at a time. No matter what country in the world I happened to be in, or whatever the circumstances of my visit, the children were always there. They served to remind me that my ultimate responsibility was to them; to do what I could to provide a world they could live in without fear, or hunger; a world in which they could realize their fullest potential.

I am grateful to all of the children whose lives touched mine, particularly those caught up in a war they could not understand. The curious, sometimes frightened looks I saw in their innocent faces spoke to me in a very profound way. I will always be grateful to the U.S. Marines, and the United States Air Force, for making it possible for me to look into the eyes of so many wonderful children. They are the hope of the world.

After the truce was signed, ending the fighting in Korea, I had the opportunity to visit Seoul, the capital city. It was largely in ruins; with the exception of its Buddhist Temples and other historic sites; which were left untouched by the bombs. Was there an unspoken agreement between the North and South? As we walked through the ruins of the city, led by the Company Chaplain, three young scantily-clad women waved and shouted to us from a second story window in a partially bombed out building. While they spoke no English, their gestures effectively conveyed the meaning of their words. I looked at the Padre, who was doing his best to keep a straight face. He picked up the pace a bit.

On a subsequent visit, I ran across a little boy and his older sister standing outside a Catholic Church—one left undamaged by the war. The image of that brave little girl holding her brother close to her side was etched in my memory. I will never forget her smile as she saluted me. The innocence and hopefulness I saw in her beautiful face—despite the hardship and sorrow they must have endured during the

war—brought home, for me, what the Korean War, any war, is really about...the kids!



**Sister and Brother in Seoul, Korea 1953**

I would later visit the Convent of that same church. The Sisters who taught school for the local children greeted me cordially and invited me to watch the students (age 6 to 11) perform songs they had been rehearsing for a class play. They each bowed and smiled before singing their song; then bowed again and shook my hand. I had come prepared that day and gave each of them a chocolate bar, as I held their hand and thanked them. “Cam-sam-ne-da,” I said, returning their bow. They stole my heart. Looking into their eager faces, I saw hope for the future; just as I did in the little girl and her brother in the photo above.

Eleven years later, I would have the opportunity to take another, very similar picture. I was assigned as the ALO/FAC (Air Liaison Officer/Forward Air Controller) to the First Regiment of the Vietnamese Army. A week later we were deployed to the field hunting down the Vietcong. But, they were very elusive and only surfaced when they believed they had the advantage. To find them we had to literally “beat the bushes.” This often required getting off the M113 (Armored Personnel Carrier to

question the local natives.

On the way back to our transportation after one of those questioning sessions, I met a little boy sitting on the side of the road holding his baby brother. He looked to be about eight years old. I pointed to my camera. He smiled, and I took their picture with the M113 and an ARVN soldier in the background. That photo put a poignant face on the war in Vietnam.



**Little boy and his baby brother. On field operation near Quang Tri, South Vietnam 1964**

The contrast between the innocence of these two children and the horrors of war was never more apparent to me than when I looked into their eyes. I gave them each a candy bar and thanked them for the picture. What I was most grateful for, however, was the renewed hope they had given me; that, as long as we can continue to bring new innocents into this world, we may one day outgrow our penchant to destroy it.

On our second field operation I would photograph a very special scene, one that I believe captures the very soul of the Vietnam War. It was that of a little girl standing in a rice paddy with a baby buffalo and its mother, cautiously peering at me from the other side of the barbed wire. The look on their faces was remarkably the same. I imagined them thinking: *Who is this strange man, and what's he doing in my rice paddy?* I was only a few feet from them when I took the picture; yet, felt as though we did indeed exist in two different worlds—the fence a metaphorical divide.



**Little girl with buffalo calf and its mother, curious about the stranger on the other side of the wire fence. Quang Tri, Vietnam 1964**

No matter where I traveled—Korea, Vietnam, France, England, Libya, Germany, Saudi Arabia, and others, or what it was I was sent there to do, the children were always there to greet me. They helped me keep things in perspective and inspired me to do what I could to leave them a better world.

When the 429th Squadron got back from Vietnam in December 1965, it was early in the war and, although our involvement in it was already being debated, we were greeted like returning heroes in Clovis, New Mexico—a small conservative cattle town in the Texas Panhandle. They gave us a big welcome home ceremony on the flight-line, which was attended by half of the people in town.



The national and local news media covered the event. The question asked by every reporter who approached us was: "Why are we in Vietnam?" When asked, I did not hesitate. "The Kids, I said, the kids are why we are there...to protect their right to grow up with minds unfettered by any form of oppressive government."

I don't know if he liked my answer, but we had a relatively free press back then, and it was printed.

# 7

## How Many More?

Incirlik Air Base, Adana, Turkey, August 1961

We spent four days at Myrtle Beach Air Force Base, South Carolina, physically preparing ourselves for the long over-water flight to Lajes Air base in the Azores—a small group of islands about a thousand miles off the coast of Portugal. The preparation involved altering our sleep patterns through the use of drugs (uppers and downers) to offset the eleven hour time difference between Cannon AFB, New Mexico and Incirlik Air Base, Turkey. We were also put on a special diet; theoretically, to minimize the need for “bathroom trips” while we were stuffed into the already tight cockpit of an F-100D single seat fighter jet. The bulky, rubberized survival suit we had to wear would buy us a few more minutes of survival time in the frigid North Atlantic, but it severely hampered our ability to move in the cockpit—not to mention the added difficulty of having to relieve oneself into a small bottle, should the need arise. It has occurred to me—though I can’t confirm it ever happened—that there may have been a reason they nicknamed it the “Poopy Suit.”

Five in-flight fuel transfers from a KC-135 tanker aircraft (the military version of the Boeing 707) would be needed to complete the nine hour, non-stop flight to Lajes. The F-100D had the range to make the trip with only three air refuels, but safety precautions dictated that we always have enough fuel reserve to get us back to an airfield on land, should we be unable to take on fuel from the tanker.





**F-100 off the coast of Greece. On deployment to Incirlik Air base, Adana, Turkey. 1961**

The 428<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron would be replacing another squadron from Cannon AFB, and assuming “Victor Alert” (nuclear strike status). Thus, some of our aircraft were configured with a nuclear weapon soon after we touched down at Incirlik to replace those of the departing unit. They would be on call to launch within five minutes, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The alert pilots were changed weekly, the aircraft every two weeks to ensure neither one got “rusty.” So, when not standing alert, flying training would take up most of our time for the next four months.

Turkey is a sparsely populated country and, at the time, had few flight restrictions. For a fighter pilot the flying was as good as it gets, and low level high speed passes—more colorfully known as “buzzing”—was something in which most of us would occasionally engage, given the opportunity. Turkey was a great place to hone that skill.

My first training mission was a solo low level flight to a bombing range about a hundred miles northwest of the air base, where we practiced conventional and nuclear weapons delivery techniques. After executing an “Over-the-Shoulder” maneuver (one of several methods used to deliver an atomic bomb), I cleared the range and headed back to base.



**The F-100 low level over the mountains of Turkey, 1961.**

Flying low and close to the contours of the terrain, I pulled up to clear a higher line of mountains, rolling inverted as I crested their tops. With an unobstructed view of the terrain below—looking through the top of the F-100's plexiglas canopy—I spotted a small town nestled in the northwest corner of the valley. To the south of it, at a lower level, there was a one-room schoolhouse. Further south, and lower still, was relatively flat farmland. I rolled back to level flight and descended to fifty feet above the open field adjacent the school.

The children were in class on my first pass, but before I could complete a left climbing turn for a second run I saw them running out of the school waving at me excitedly with their teacher in tow. It was the welcome I had hoped to see. All my passes were made south of the schoolyard and over the farmland; which put me almost level with the kids as I flew by.

I began the show with a slow aileron roll, and followed it by performing almost every aerobatic maneuver I could safely do at low level with two empty 450 gallon tanks mounted on my wings: Loops, Cloverleaves, Barrel Rolls, inverted flight, High "g" Turns, Cuban Eights, and Aileron Rolls. I never enjoyed being a fighter pilot more than when I was showing off to "the kids;" when I saw the excitement and joy in their faces as I made each pass.

A bond was formed between us that first day, one that grew stronger with every visit I made to their village. How is it possible for a man to bond with a group of excited children on the ground, while flying by at more than 500 miles an hour? I will leave psychologists to ponder that question. All I know is, that it did occur, just as it did with the children of Cirey Sur Blaise, France three years before...with the children in every village and school I've visited in countries around the world. Customs may



vary, we may look different, eat strange foods, or drive on the “wrong” side of the road, but these are superficial distinctions. I would have the opportunity to perform several more “shows” for my new young friends before I left Turkey.



**F-100 flying by an ancient Crusader castle in Turkey. 1961**

I went back to that little village in the mountains every chance I was given. The jubilant reception I received from the kids made it more than worthwhile, and I looked forward to those visits as much as they did. On one occasion, however, I found the schoolyard empty on my first pass. Nothing unusual, but I did expect them to be pouring out of the classroom before I could line up for a second pass. I would be disappointed. It was not until my third run, when I looked towards the village, that I saw them; not just the students, but everyone in the town. They were standing on the rooftops, waving at me with their country’s flag. It was a Turkish national holiday, and I was about to become part of the village folklore.

I was moved and honored by their spirited reception, and inspired to give them an air show that neither they, nor I, would ever forget. Indeed, it was almost my last. After exhausting my usual repertoire of aerobatic tricks (rolls, Loops, and Cloverleaf maneuvers in a variety of combinations), I decided to do something I had not done before; make a slow-speed pass with gear and flaps down, so they could get a closer look at the airplane and me—and I of them. At the near stall speed required for the pass, I would make my run just to the north of the village. The Air Force Thunderbirds included similar slow speed passes in their demonstration—although, over a level airfield. I would be performing it in a small valley surrounded by mountains to the north, south, and west; big enough, nonetheless, for an F-100 to safely maneuver at normal flight speeds.

The elevation of the valley dropped off to the east of the village. In retrospect, a west to east downhill run would have been the wiser choice. But, I was caught up in the excitement of the moment and made a mistake that could have cost me my life.

I approached from east to west at less than one hundred feet above the ground, the exact opposite of the heading I should have used. The townspeople were waving and shouting excitedly. I could almost hear the cheers. I waved back and rocked my wings in acknowledgement. It was a special moment for me; one that would never again be duplicated in my flying career.

As I flew by the village on that final run, I pushed the throttle full forward, expecting to accelerate, but the airspeed indicator did not move. Until it did, I could not raise the gear and flaps, or even turn to avoid the onrushing cliff without stalling out. If that were to happen, there would have been no way to avoid the mountain's fatal embrace.

I considered ejection but quickly ruled it out. With no one at the controls there was no guarantee the aircraft would not crash into the village. My best, and only chance to avoid disaster was to select afterburner and hope that it "took;" which, at near-stall speed and high angle of attack, was far from a sure thing. Nevertheless, it was all I had.

I rammed the throttle outboard and waited for the raw fuel pouring into the engine burner cans to ignite, giving me the added thrust I desperately needed. Then, I felt it, the familiar explosion of four thousand additional pounds of instantaneously generated energy, as it surged through the airframe and me. Thus, by the grace of God, and some damn good aircraft maintainers, "Sabre" and I lived to fly another day.

My prayer was answered, but my eyes never left the airspeed indicator, as it visibly affirmed the positive acceleration I was feeling. With that assurance, I was able to raise the gear and flaps in time to barely clear the wall of stone ahead of us. I wiped the sweat from my brow and started breathing again, but I couldn't leave without saying goodbye.

Every eye in that village had been fixed on me, and were no doubt looking on in horror, wondering if I would wind up in the side of the cliff. I felt those same eyes follow me in my turn back into the valley, as I positioned myself for a final pass just south of the town and level with them. They may have also seen me wave as I eased back on the control stick, executed three successive aileron rolls, and set course for Incirlik air Base.

The first two rolls were for them, the third was for "Sabre" and me. Once again my "old friend" pulled me out of a tight situation. It was not the first time, nor would it be the last.

Replaying that day's "Close Call" in my mind over a cold beer at the club, I wondered how many more I had left.

# 8

## The Tightest Turn

Incirlik Air Base, Adana, Turkey, 1962

We returned to Turkey the following year and, the first opportunity given me, I revisited that little village in the mountains. It was as though I had never left. The children came running out of the school house and waved at me as I swung around for my second pass. I was “home” again, and the enthusiastic welcome back I was given by the kids was all I needed to give them one of my best shows ever.

While I never again made the same mistake as I did the year before, that second tour in Turkey was not without its notable moments. An important part of our in-country training included practice alert scrambles to a designated “nuclear target.” The mission profile included low level navigation, a simulated nuclear delivery, and a high level return to the base; which often required an instrument letdown and radar approach for the recovery. Usually flown solo, I was scheduled for such a mission on a day when weather conditions were marginal. The base of the broken cloud deck was at 1500 feet and the visibility five miles. Normally, those conditions would not pose a problem.

They didn’t, not until I approached a small mountain range in the middle of my planned flight path. I could have easily climbed over, but doing that in a real war would have exposed me to enemy radar and compromised the mission. Going around them was another choice, but that too involved a trade-off. Although the extra fuel needed to go over, or around the hills would not have jeopardized my chances of delivering a weapon on target, it might have made a difference in my getting safely back to base. As I got closer I saw an opening in the mountains that I believed would allow me to weave my way through, while staying low and “under the radar.” In an effort to fly as realistic a combat profile as possible I chose “door number one.”

Unfortunately, when I got to the other side of the pass, I found myself trapped in the middle of a small blind canyon surrounded by mountains, the tops of which were obscured by thick cumulous clouds. I had two options: select afterburner power and pull up into a steep climb; which would put me in the clouds and force me to go on instruments to maintain aircraft control, or make a hard 180 degree tight turn under them and fly out of the canyon the same way I came in. The first option would leave me without visual contact with the terrain. I knew the elevation of the mountain in front of me, but not how sharply it rose. I had less than a second to make a decision before scraping myself off the side of the hill.

In that split second my mind flashed back four years to an air show in Chaumont, France, when I witnessed the solo pilot for the Skyblazer aerobatic team in Europe do something very similar to what I was about to attempt. He executed a 360 degree “high-g” turn within the airfield boundaries at less than one hundred feet above the ground. Before seeing that spectacular piece of flying, I had no idea an F-100 could turn so well. It made an indelible impression upon this novice fighter pilot. Had I not seen it with my own eyes, I would probably have opted to climb out of the canyon. The fact, that he performed his incredible turn in a “clean” F-100A, while I was about to attempt it in a “D” model with half full 335 gallon external wing fuel tanks, was a distinction I did not have time to ponder.

My “second” over, I simultaneously rammed the throttle outboard and rolled sharply into a ninety degree left bank, while pulling the control stick into me as hard as I dared without incurring a high-speed stall. Quick reflexes, and a fast afterburner light—giving me another 4000 pounds of reassuring thrust—enabled to me to pull off one of the tightest turns I ever made in an F-100.



**Mt. Ararat. On deployment to Incirlik Air Base, Adana, Turkey, 1961.**

Thankfully, the mountains I and never consummated our relationship and, once clear of them, I turned on course to continue the mission. By holding a higher cruise speed I was able to make up the lost time and meet my planned TOT.

Small consolation for choosing the wrong "door."

# 9

## Check Six

Incirlik Air Base, Adana, Turkey, 1962

Over the years, fighter pilots developed a colorful language all their own, a phraseology, unique to the air warrior clan; e.g., “Bogies, 12 o’clock high,” “I’ve got your tail, Lead,” “In the break,” “Turning base with three in the green,” and the classic, “Oh shit!”

That last one is not necessarily unique to the fighter pilot. When he uses it, however, it may mean that he is about to “buy the farm.” There are many others, but the all-time favorite phrase used by fighter pilots around the world is “Check six.” It’s our way of reminding each other of the imminent danger inherent in our business; i.e., of being shot down from behind by the one you don’t see.

The absolute necessity to “Keep your head on a swivel” was drilled into us by every flight instructor we had in basic and advanced flying training. Flight leaders brief it on every mission. Some of our pilots—I learned on this tour—devised a more imaginative way of hammering the point home. Many of our training missions in Turkey were flown solo, using a profile similar to that previously described. It usually culminated in a return to base at high level for a visual, or radar approach and landing. It was during that phase—after completing the most critical part of the mission—that a pilot was most susceptible to letting his guard down, and would thus forget the cardinal rule of survival in the air, “Check six!” I was one of those rudely awakened from his complacency.



**A selfie taken on an F-100D ferry flight to Vietnam at 35,000 feet over the Pacific Ocean. 1966**

Returning from another range mission, and feeling good about hitting the target within seconds of my scheduled TOT, I was enjoying the scenery; when suddenly, my windscreen was filled with a huge top view of an F-100 in a steep afterburner climb. His tail cleared my nose with less than fifty feet to spare. The slightest miscalculation in the timing of his pull from under my aircraft and both of us would have been walking home—assuming the collision didn't kill us. It was an impressive, though dangerous, maneuver that could have ended badly. Nevertheless, it got my attention like nothing else could have, and taught me a lesson I would never forget. Far from getting angry at the pilot who did it, I silently thanked him. I would not get caught like that again.

On the other hand, I thought it only fair that I return the favor, if not to him, then to any other fighter pilot not taking care to clear the airspace around him. My opportunity came a few days later, as I was returning from another simulated strike mission. I spotted a solo F-100 about fifteen miles ahead of me. He was slightly above my altitude of 25,000 feet, cruising along, apparently enjoying the scenery in front of him, but not checking his "six" where I was "parked." I pushed the throttle into afterburner and accelerated to 500 plus knots, quickly closing the gap between us. He never saw me, as I flew directly under him with less than fifty feet separation. *This one is really going to get his attention.*

Just before the tail of my aircraft cleared his underbelly, I pulled up sharply, filling his windscreen with a sight he never expected to see, and would never forget.

No doubt, the first thing he did when he got down was check the flying schedule to see who was airborne at the time of his close encounter. It didn't take Sherlock Holmes to figure out that I was the guy that ruined his sightseeing respite, and he was not as thankful as I was for the friendly reminder to "Check Six." He laid into me as soon as I walked through the door.

"Tomasino, what the hell do you think you were doing out there? You could have killed us both. That was the goddamned craziest piece of flying I've ever seen. How the hell did you live this long?"

Livid with rage, he never stopped his rambling tirade long enough for me to answer his questions. I thought he was going to take a swing at me, but he didn't. Instead, he continued his irrational rant for another five minutes. "I should report this to the Squadron Commander...have you grounded."

There were at least a half a dozen other pilots standing nearby, and more in the lounge within earshot of his wild protestations. "As for my grounding, that's not going to happen," I said, with less than full confidence. "And if I were you 'Ace,' I wouldn't want any more fighter pilots to know that you had your 'head up and locked' when you were supposed to be checking your 'six.'"

For some strange reason, that didn't seem to calm him down



# 10

## First Kill

Luke Air Force Base, Phoenix, Arizona, September 1957

Before Class 57R would officially become “Officers and Gentlemen,” there would be one last “Cadet Ball.” Ezdy rode the Greyhound bus from New York City to Greenville, Mississippi to be there for my graduation from USAF Basic Flying Training. Despite the long, tiring trek, she never looked more beautiful in her lovely pink gown, and I was never more in love.



**At the Cadet Ball, Greenville, Miss. July 1957**

The next day, July 27, 1957, was a proud day for both of us when she pinned on my Second Lieutenant's bars and shiny new pilot wings.



**Ezdy pinning my wings.**

Thanks to the kindness and generosity of my instructor 1/Lt Greg Neubeck and his beautiful wife, Peggy, who took Ezdy into their home while she was in Greenville, we could afford to spend a few more days together before she had to go back to New York. I saw her off at the bus station, then returned to the base to complete my out-processing. I would also leave by bus, but with a detour through Wilmington, North Carolina to buy a new car. My brother, Staff Sergeant Vincent J. Tomasino, a C-119 navigator stationed at Marine Corps Air Station, Cherry Point, knew a dealer there and helped shorten the process for me. I soon was back on the road to New York with a brand new red and white 1957 Chevy Hardtop. Ezdy and I were married in Brooklyn, on August 28, 1957.

A week later she, our son Felix, and I were driving down Route 66 headed for Luke Air Force Base in Phoenix, Arizona for my long anticipated introduction to my first jet fighter aircraft, the F-84F. Everything we owned, including the ironing board,

was stuffed into in the huge trunk of Dad's 1955 Packard. He suggested we use it, instead of the Chevy, for the long cross-country trip, because it would be safer and more comfortable. Felix had the huge back seat to himself and, with the pillows and blankets Ezdy gave him, could stretch out to sleep whenever he wanted. That said, I think the real reason Dad wanted us to take the Packard (which I dearly loved) was so he could drive our brand new '57 Chevy. Nevertheless, Dad was right about the Packard, and I also wanted him to enjoy the new car while we were "on the road."



**Our new 1957 Chevrolet Hardtop**

It was hot when we rolled into Phoenix and checked into a motel—our home for the next few days until we could find a house or apartment to rent. It had a pool, so Felix was happy.

I received some surprised looks when I reported for duty the next day. They apparently assumed that, with a name like Vito Tomasino, I must be Japanese. "Tomasino, we thought you were Japanese, that English might be a problem." There are some similarities between Japanese and Italian names in that they both end in a vowel, but the pronunciation is different.

"Well," I said, "I'm obviously not Japanese, but I am an Italian from Brooklyn, and English might still be a problem." That got a laugh. Nonetheless, their misread of my ethnicity turned out to be a good ice breaker, even if it did give me some advance notoriety. It would not be long before I earned it.

My initial flight in the F-84F would be solo—as would every other flight in that aircraft. Republic Aviation did not make a dual cockpit, trainer version of the airplane.

As a consequence, my instructor would have to observe me go through the start engine procedures while standing on the wing. He would remain there until I taxied to the end of the runway. Before sending me off by myself, he put his hand on my shoulder and he muttered a few words of encouragement like, “Don’t break it,” before jumping off the wing and walking over to mobile control where he could observe my takeoff and landing. I didn’t think he was referring to my leg.

I was ecstatic. My first flight in a jet fighter and it was without an instructor looking over my shoulder. For that reason alone the “Thunderstreak” has always held a special place on the growing list of aircraft I would fly in my Air Force career.

A month and half later, about four missions into the Air Combat Training Phase, my friend and Aviation Cadet classmate, Harlan Davis and I found ourselves about to leap into the blue without an instructor to supervise our actions. I’m not certain, but I believe they were called in for an unscheduled Commander’s meeting. What I do remember clearly is that, at that stage of our training Harlan and I were ready to do something more challenging with our free time than just bore holes in a clear blue Arizona sky.



**F-84F Thunderstreak. On display at McClellan AFB, Sacramento, CA.**

So, before going out to our aircraft, we made plans to rendezvous over the aerobatic area to fly some close formation; then enjoy some friendly aerial combat. We set up the engagement as we had been taught; i.e., turn away from each other forty-five degrees, hold that heading for twenty seconds, then turn back in for a head to head pass. The fight would begin anytime one of us saw the other, giving the pilot with the sharpest eyes the advantage—as would be the case in actual combat. Harlan and I spotted each other at the same time and began a series of hard turns,

crisscrossing flight paths with each turn.

We were soon going canopy to canopy in a vertical climb in which neither one of us was able to gain an advantage. Gravity would win that duel and eventually force us to reverse direction while we still had enough flying speed to control the descent. Gravity was our nemesis going up, but it was our ally going down, enabling us to quickly accelerate to safe maneuvering speed.

We continued our spirited “duel in the sky,” sometimes passing within one hundred feet of each other. I was able to gain a slight advantage with each turn, and eventually positioned myself at his “six o’clock.” Closing within firing range I eased my sight pipper (a dot of light in the middle of a circle of diamonds projected on my front windshield) onto his airplane and squeezed the trigger. Of course, our fifty caliber guns were not armed; we didn’t even have gun camera film. You can imagine my surprise when, at the instant I “fired,” Harlan radioed that he had flamed out. His voice was so damned calm, I wasn’t sure I could take him seriously. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Hell no! I’ve already tried a couple of air starts, and they didn’t take. My hydraulic pressure is also dropping fast and this bird is getting very ‘heavy.’ Any suggestions?”

“Just one.” As we descended below ten thousand feet, ejection became his only good option. I was about to tell him that, when the canopy suddenly flew off his aircraft as though it were ripped off by an invisible giant hand, followed by Harlan a second later. He struggled to separate from his ejection seat as he tumbled through the air, and finally kicked free. His parachute deployed immediately—just as it is designed to do at the lower altitude. I radioed his location to Luke Tower as I watched him float serenely to the desert below.

Harlan landed safely, but his chute was caught by strong winds that began to drag him across the rough desert floor. He quickly flipped onto his back and tapped the quick-release buckles on the parachute harness to collapse the canopy—a textbook demonstration of what we had been taught in training. Dusting himself off, he gave me a “thumbs up” as I flew by. The rescue helicopter was on its way and I was running low on fuel, so I rocked my wings in acknowledgement and headed home.

I barely got one foot inside the door of the Squadron building, when the Ops Officer called me. “Vito, the Commander wants to see you and Captain Johnson ASAP.” My instructor, who was standing at the counter, told me to drop my chute and helmet off in Life Support and follow him into the Commander’s office.

I gave them a blow-by-blow account of what had happened—leaving out the part about the unsanctioned “dog fight.” They had a few questions, but neither one asked how I happened to be there when Lieutenant Davis flamed out. I think they already had that part figured out. These men had experienced real aerial combat in WWII and Korea, in which they each shot down more than a few enemy aircraft and lived to tell about it.

The Squadron Commander, my instructor, Captain Johnson, and most of the

other fighter pilots at Luke who were teaching us the deadly art of air combat, were of a generation of air warriors more concerned about the ability of their wingman to stay with them, no matter what they had to face in the air, than they were in breaking a few peacetime flying rules. They didn't ask, because it was of little concern to them.

They couldn't tell me that, but I believe they were secretly pleased that two of their students had taken the initiative to hone their fighting skills, rather than waste valuable training time boring holes in the sky. That belief would be underscored soon after we started the next training phase.

# 11

## The Day I Went Four for Four

Luke Air Force Base, Phoenix, Arizona, October 1957

It would be our first use of the F-84F as a weapons systems platform—the very heart of the training we would need to become operational fighter pilots. Air to Ground Weapons Delivery was one of the most challenging phases of training we would go through at Luke Air Force Base, particularly since it involved so many types of weapons and variations in delivery techniques. The modes of delivery included high angle (45 degree) dive bombing with twenty five pound practice bombs, 2.75 inch folding fin aerial rockets delivered from a 30 degree dive angle, strafing with 50 caliber machine guns, and Skip Bombing (a 25lb practice bomb is released from level flight at fifty feet above the ground just short of the target, so that it “skips” into it on one bounce).

For most students, Skip Bombing was the easiest of all the delivery methods we would learn. Not for me. I would come up empty handed on my first two range missions, zero for four. Some of the other guys were going four for four—only two out of four hits were needed for qualification. I was frustrated and angry with myself...determined to get at least a minimum qualifying score the next time out.

Before going any further, I should first describe how the aircraft was configured for this training phase. The F-84F has two pylon stations on each wing: inboard, and outboard (the main landing gear took up the space between the two). All of the previous flight phases were flown “clean” (i.e., without pylons, or wing fuel tanks). For weapons delivery, however, a bomb rack holding four twenty five pound practice bombs, was mounted on the left wing outboard station and a 200 gallon external fuel tank was carried on the right inboard pylon. The extra fuel was needed for range missions because of the higher power requirements required to safely maneuver in



the pattern at low altitude.

I never listened more intently to Captain Johnson as he briefed me for that third mission; particularly the part about the techniques of Skip Bombing. He used his hands as visual aids as he spoke. "On your base to final turn descend to about one hundred feet above the ground and rollout in line with the target center. Continue a gradual descent to fifty feet above the ground and let the airspeed build to four hundred knots; then adjust power to hold that speed and trim the aircraft for level flight. All you have to do at that point is center yourself on the target and watch the bottom diamond of the sight reticle drift across the desert floor. When it reaches the base of the target panel, pickle and pull." In layman's terms he meant *press the red bomb button on the control stick and pull up to clear the target*.

It was the same briefing I had heard before. I had no trouble understanding it the first two times and, hearing his wise council again did not turn on any new lights, or inspire greater confidence in me. Nonetheless, on that day I was never more determined to put all four bombs through the target. I just didn't know how creative I was going to be in doing it.

Captain Johnson checked in with the Range Control Officer. "Indian Springs, this is Hawk, how do you read, over?"

"Loud and clear, Hawk, the range is yours."

"Roger that. Hawk is a flight of two F-84F's for Skip Bomb and Strafe."

"You're cleared in hot. Call the break."

"Hawk Two, set switches for bombs."

"Hawk Two copy." I took about six seconds spacing on Lead in the break, and rolled out on downwind just outside his jet wash. I watched him turn base and then onto final for his first bomb pass, marveling at how smoothly and precisely he flew his aircraft. "That's what I've got to do," I told myself under my breath. Captain Johnson called off just as I turned final for my run.

"Lead's off."

"Roger, Hawk One," Tower acknowledged, "Good hit."

*The guy never misses and today, neither will I.* I leveled off at 50 feet above the ground and accelerated to 400 knots, trimming off the control pressures as I did. I was slightly left of the target center and made a correction. The circle of diamonds projected on my windscreen raced across the ground to the white, 10x20 foot canvas panel, stretched between two, 10 foot high, 4 x 4 wooden posts. When the bottom diamond of my sight reached the base of the panel I pressed the bomb release button and pulled up into a steep climbing turn to downwind. As I did, I heard an unfamiliar noise, but the solidly built F-84F never wavered.

**"Hawk Two, you hit the target!"** The range officer sounded a little more excited than usual, but not as excited as I was to finally score a hit.

"Roger Tower, thanks." I said it as though it was an expected result for me.

"No, I mean you hit the goddamned thing with your airplane! Fuel is pouring out of your left wing and your right drop tank looks like a crushed beer can."

Before he could finish his colorful description of my airplane, I saw the fuel



pouring out of a gaping hole in the left wing and continued my climb to downwind.

"Hawk Two, this is Lead, hold your heading until I join on you." He moved in close enough to assess the damage.

"How does it look?" I asked.

"Not good...can't chance flying back to Luke. We'll have to put you down at Gila Bend" (an auxiliary landing strip near the range). He passed me on the left side "I've got the lead, stay on my right wing." Captain Johnson switched us to Gila Bend Tower frequency and told them we were coming in for an emergency landing. "Tower, this is Hawk, we're declaring an emergency. Two is streaming fuel from his left wing, and his right drop tank has been badly damaged, but looks secure. We need to get him on the ground."

"Roger that, crash crew has been alerted. The pattern is clear. Call entering initial."

On initial approach Johnson signaled me to take the lead and crossed under to my right wing. He flew in a chase position throughout the pattern until we were on final. He wanted to be sure that all three of my landing gear were down and locked, and that the fuel streaming out of my wing did not ignite. He went around as we crossed the overrun as I touched down without incident, stopping on the runway. The crash crew checked me over and, seeing the pool of JP-4 collecting on the runway, signaled me to shut it down. Maintenance would tow me in. Hawk One circled overhead until he saw I was safely down, then headed back to Luke.

A few hours later I flew back on an old twin-prop aircraft from the 1940's, and was taken to the Luke hospital for a mandatory checkup by the flight surgeon. Aside from my airplane, however, the only damage done was to my ego. That would later be compounded by the "Pink Slip" (a failed ride) I received for the mission.

The next morning, Captain Johnson and I were once again invited to see the Squadron Commander. It would be our second such invitation in less than a month. I wore my dress blue uniform, decorated with the four ribbons I earned with the U.S. Marines, and the shiny new pilot's wings Ezdy had pinned on me just a few months ago. I silently prayed they would still be there when I walked out of his office. I had already made up my mind before going in, that I would limit my answers to a simple yes or no sir, unless a more detailed explanation was asked of me.

We walked in, saluted sharply, and remained at attention. The Commander put us at ease, but did not ask us to sit down. "Lieutenant Tomasino, Captain Johnson briefed me on your close encounter with a Skip Bomb target, and how you and he handled things after that. To inflict the damage you did to that airplane you had to be less than ten feet off the ground. That's more than forty feet below the proper altitude for Skip Bomb Delivery."

He paused for a few seconds, then continued. "He also told me about the problems you were having with Skip Bombing on your previous two missions, and that you were determined to go four for four yesterday. Well, you accomplished that feat, but you weren't supposed to do it on one pass. I think that may be a first, but it's not something I would brag about at "beer call." Do you agree?"

"No, sir...I mean, yes sir, I do."

"What you did was very dangerous. Christ, you could have killed yourself out there, not to mention destroy a valuable Air Force asset, and we can't have that." *Here it comes, he's going to ask for my wings. How am I going to explain this to Ezdy and Felix. We just got here, and now we've got to pack up and head back to New York.* I waited for the hammer to fall—an apt metaphor, since swinging one of them again might well have been my next job after the Major was done with me.

"Lieutenant Tomasino! Are you listening?"

"Yes sir...every word."

"Good. The Air Force has already spent a ton of money training you to become a pilot. Hopefully, assuming you live long enough, you might even realize your goal of becoming a fighter pilot. To wash you out of the program at this stage of your training would not be in our best interests. Moreover, Captain Johnson told me that you handled yourself well during the emergency recovery at Gila Bend, and he's not easily impressed. He thought you should be given another chance, and I trust his judgment. So, I'm going to let you off with just a "Pink Slip" on this one. However, if you fly through another target, or shoot down another one of my pilots, you'll find yourself staring at a little red button in the bottom of some god-forsaken missile silo in "Podunk," North Dakota. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes sir, very! Thank you." I felt as though a huge weight had just been lifted from my shoulders. I still had a chance to fulfill my dream of becoming a fighter pilot.

The Commander then turned to my instructor. "Bob, make sure Tomasino is on the schedule for tomorrow's first go on the range. The sooner he gets back in the air the better."

"Couldn't agree more, sir. I'll take care of it."

"Then we're finished here, gentlemen...dismissed!" Captain Johnson and I saluted in unison, did a sharp "about face" and walked out of the office.

Outside, he put his hand on my shoulder and said: "Tomasino, I went to bat for you with the 'old man,' because I think you have the qualities it takes to become a good fighter pilot, aggressiveness and cool under fire. Neither of those things can be taught, but if you are going to live long enough to use them to your advantage you have to be smarter and more disciplined. You have to be as familiar with your own limitations as you are with your airplane's."

I looked at him with renewed respect and admiration. A P-51 pilot during World War II, and an F-86 driver in Korea, with several kills to his credit, he epitomized the fighter pilot I hoped to become.

# 12

## Flameout

Nellis Air Force Base, Las Vegas, NV, January 1958

Ezdy, Felix, Lucky and Donald (two pet ducks I had won pitching coins at the State Fair), and I drove across the Arizona-Nevada border at Hoover Dam in Boulder City, headed for Nellis Air Force Base and the second stage of my Advanced Fighter Training. Boulder City was a necessary creation of the same men who built the Dam—their home for the five years it was under construction. It would soon become a bustling little western town with motels, souvenir shops, and restaurants—one of only two cities in the state of Nevada that does not allow gambling. Many of the original establishments, like the Coffee Cup Café and the Boulder City Hotel (built to house visiting dignitaries during the Dam’s construction) still exist today.

It was dark when we started down the hill from Boulder City and saw the bright lights of the “Las Vegas Strip” for the first time. It looked like a string of brilliant gems strung out in a sea of blackness. At that time, it consisted of only a handful of hotel-casinos, many with names that do not exist today; such as: Frontier, Sands, Riviera, Hacienda, Royal Nevada, El Rancho Las Vegas. They were a welcome island of light in the middle of a seventeen mile barren stretch of road between McCarran Airport and Nellis AFB.

We continued north on Las Vegas Boulevard to the downtown casino area on Fremont Street, which housed the likes of the Golden Nugget, the Four Queens, the Golden Horseshoe, and the other casinos of the original Vegas. Except for some scattered ranch houses and mining operations the rest of the valley was barren desert.

Nellis Air Force Base was then, and still is, the “Mecca” fighter pilots from all over the world are drawn to. Those fortunate enough to make the pilgrimage and

participate in a realistic air-war training exercise called “Red Flag,” return to their respective countries with a greater knowledge of weapons tactics, and an increased confidence in their aircraft and in their own flying abilities. Nellis is also the home of the world famous Thunderbird Aerial Demonstration Team, as well as the Fighter Weapons School, where seasoned pilots come to earn their “doctorate” in the art of aerial warfare.

Before “Red Flag,” there was “William Tell,” a gunnery competition that hosted a face-off between the best of the best vying for the most coveted title that can be bestowed upon a fighter pilot, “Top Gun.” It represented the level of flying prowess I would strive to achieve in my career.

We checked into a little motel about two miles from the base. It would be our home until we could find a place to rent for the three months we’d be in Vegas. A week later we moved into a small duplex, located in the desert about a mile and a half off of the end of the Nellis runway. Aircraft taking off from the base flew right over our house. For us the daily air shows were an added bonus. We were young and too caught up in our amazing adventure to be bothered by a little noise. Sometimes I’d be the one doing the “buzzing,” which made it even more exciting for Ezdy and Felix. And, when the Thunderbirds practiced their maneuvers, they had front row seats to a free air show.

The F-100’s I flew were parked on the same ramp as those of the team, where I could get an even closer look at the Thunderbirds when they practiced their show routine. There were no restrictions imposed on them back then as to how low, and how close to the crowd they could fly, and they sometimes flew right over the heads of the spectators at little more than fifty feet above the ground. Thus, there were many times, out on that ramp, when I had the distinction of being “buzzed” by the best.



**A Thunderbird F-100A ready for takeoff at Nellis Air Force Base,  
Las Vegas, NV 1958**

During my stay in “Mecca,” I had the opportunity to fly with an instructor who was also a former Thunderbird pilot, Sam Johnson. Sam and I would fly together again for several more lessons when he joined me at Chaumont Air Base, France several months after my arrival there. I was assigned to the 494<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron. He found a home with 493rd. Despite our placement in two different squadrons we would have the opportunity to “team up” again.

When I first got to Chaumont, deployments to Wheelus Air Base, Libya for gunnery training were a squadron affair. That would later change to where two pilots from one squadron, and two from another, would be deployed together as part of a flight of four. I was scheduled for one of those four-ship deployments to Libya with Sam in the Lead and me on his wing.

I had never met anyone more professional in his flying, or more mission oriented than Sam. He meticulously planned, briefed, and executed every flight to the El Uotia bombing range. However, after the bombing was done he didn’t just rejoin the flight and head straight back to Wheelus, not Sam. That would have been a waste of good flying time. Instead, he moved us into close formation and put us through as much of the Thunderbird aerobatic routine as we were capable of handling. He would do that on every mission we flew during our two weeks at Wheelus, fuel permitting. It was the best and most challenging formation flying I would do in my Air Force career. It made me a better pilot, and I loved every minute of it.



**2Lt. Vito Tomasino climbing into F-100A Super Sabre, Nellis AFB, Las Vegas, NV. Jan 1958**

But, I'm getting a little ahead of myself. I still had to complete my F-100 checkout at Nellis. And, given my incident prone, yet short flying history, this phase of training would not be without its own drama. I had never before experienced a flameout in a jet aircraft, but that bit of good luck was about to change.

After practicing a series of turns while in wide-spread (1500-3000 feet separation between aircraft) Tactical Formation, Lead rocked his wings, signaling the flight to join in close formation. As the number two man I was expected to be the first in, then Three and Four, in that order.

There was a standing challenge between Three (the Element Leader) and Two, as to who would get there first. I had never been beaten before and wanted to make sure that my record remained unblemished. Our Flight Leader held his airspeed at a steady 350 knots and maintained a thirty degree right turn for the join. With the first dip of his wings, I pushed the throttle into maximum afterburner and accelerated to 450 knots, thinking that a one hundred knot closure rate would be enough to get me there before Three.

It did, but I was now faced with the problem of quickly losing one hundred knots of airspeed or risk an overshoot; which would have been embarrassing. With no time to weigh my options, I lowered the speed brake, yanked the throttle back to idle, and pushed in full right rudder. I was practically flying sideways, but the three actions, taken in rapid sequence, were enough to avoid the overshoot. Unfortunately, when I raised the speed brake and advanced the throttle to hold my position on Lead's wing, the engine did not respond, and the RPM continued to unwind. I had flamed out!

Instinctively, I hit the restart button and said a prayer under my breath. An air start in the Super Sabre was never a sure thing, even under ideal conditions. Compressor stalls at high altitude, violent enough to sometimes knock your feet off the rudder pedals, were a very common. This time, for reasons I have never figured out—maybe it was that short prayer—the J-57 jet engine roared to life without so much as hiccup, and I was able to complete the join before “Three” could lock onto Lead’s left wing. The flameout and restart sequence was so quick, and I lost so little ground, no one suspected I had flamed out.

Lead did notice me falling back slightly and pointed it out in the flight debrief—no doubt thinking I simply miscalculated the power needed to hold my position. As for me, I never called the flameout in the air (there wasn’t time) and, since everything worked out so well, saw no reason bring it up in the debriefing.

That apparently cavalier attitude towards another serious incident in the air would be characteristic of my entire flying career. Yet, it was not so much a cavalier attitude, as it was a realization on my part that there was, indeed, something else involved in how mishaps like that are resolved, and it had nothing to do with piloting skill.

# 13

## Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>

Stallings Air Base, Kinston, North Carolina, May 1956

Over the tobacco fields of North Carolina is where I would first learn if I have what it takes to soar among the clouds. I reported into Stallings Air Base, Kinston, North Carolina in May of 1956. The airbase was a civilian training facility contracted by the United States Air Force to provide the first phase of a two-part pilot training program, to be attended by students from the Aviation Cadet Program (in which I participated) as well as graduates from the college AFROTC program. The Air Force Academy was established the year before, but it would not graduate its first class until 1959.



Cadets of Class 57Q. Stallings Air Base, Kingston, NC. 1956



I had never flown an airplane in my life, or even sat in a real cockpit; but I knew what one looked like. Mom and Dad bought a cardboard replica of a Cessna flight panel for my birthday. It came with an instruction book, which I read countless times. I spent many hours putting that newly acquired knowledge to use in my cardboard cockpit.

The closest I ever came to flying was when Dad took me to the local carnival and bought me a ticket for the "Rocket Ride." I would describe the ride as two 200 gallon aircraft fuel tanks painted red, with a hole cut out of the top of each to make room for a seat. A steel wire cage was fitted over the "cockpit." Tailfins were added to make it look more like a rocket. Each capsule was fastened to the end of a thirty foot steel arm, attached at the center to another steel structure, which allowed it to rotate like a big two-bladed windmill. Since the rocket itself did not turn on the arm as it spun, you were inverted at the top of each rotation. The best part of the ride for me was when they stopped the arm to change riders in the other capsule as I hung upside down in my seat belt. I could have flown that "Rocket" all day long. But, after a half dozen "sorties," Dad got tired of waiting for me to get tired and wanted to move on to see the rest of the carnival.

The thrill of being upside down, and every other attitude you could imagine yourself in, other than straight and level flight, would characterize my flying career. I knew then, that I had to become a fighter pilot.

In a novel I wrote before this "memoir," there's a scene in which a young marine returning from the war in Vietnam told of a similar experience he had with his father to Kracek, the lead character and title of the book. Josh described the big grass field in Tennessee where the carnival was set up. It provided enough maneuvering room for the barnstorming pilot traveling with the show to safely fly his vintage airplane. It was a WWI Newport, a bi-winged airplane with open cockpits. The passenger sat in the front and the pilot in the back, for a seven minute ride around the field at a thousand feet above the crowd.

Josh's description of the pilot was more interesting, and certainly more colorful. "He looked as old as the airplane. I'll never forget him. He was a short, plump, rosy cheeked man with a big handlebar mustache and an even bigger smile. He wore a worn brown leather jacket, leather helmet and goggles, a silk scarf, riding breeches, and shiny brown boots. What a sight he was! What I remember most about him, though, was his love of flying. When he talked about it, his face lit up, his eyes sparkled, and suddenly he was twenty years younger and six inches taller."



**Mr. Karvonen and Lt. Maroney walking out to their aircraft. Stallings Air Base, NC. 1956**

If you leave out his description of what he wore, and the handlebar mustache, Josh had pretty much described my first instructor, particularly the part about his love of flying. I was fortunate to have great flying instructors in Primary, Basic and Advanced Flight Training, and go on to fly with some of the best pilots in the world, but no one loved flying more for the sheer joy of it than Mr. Karvonen.

One day—I think it was my third or fourth dual transition mission in the T-34 “Mentor” (the military version of the “V-Tailed” Beechcraft Bonanza). Mr. Karvonen had me grab my parachute and follow him out to the airplane as scheduled. We put our chutes in the cockpit and closed the canopy. After a hasty preflight inspection, we climbed in—he in the back, me in the front—and hurriedly closed the canopy. Why the hurry? It was pouring rain and we were getting soaked. Not surprisingly, we were the only ones out on the flight line. All the other instructors and students were probably shaking their heads, wondering what in the heck we were doing out there as they sipped their hot coffee. They used a flag system at Stallings to visually indicate whether or not the field was open for flying. Black meant no flying, green was a “go.” About every five minutes Mr. Karvonen asked me to check and make sure it wasn’t a green flag that only looked black because it was wet. He must have known something the others didn’t, because about an hour and half later the flag did go green, and we were the first aircraft off the ground.

Once in the air, he put me through the usual training regimen, which involved more time looking at the world upside down than right side up. We practiced all the required maneuvers, such as thirty, sixty, and ninety degree banked level turns, pylon eights, stalls, spins, etc., but it was aerobatics that really got Mr. “K’s” blood flowing. That suited me fine. I was “Rocket” qualified before I ever saw a T-34, and couldn’t get enough. I wanted more and he was eager to oblige.

That said, Mr. Karvonen taught me something else that rainy day, and it had nothing to do with flying techniques. He taught me what it meant to really love the wonderful profession we were privileged to share, a lesson I would carry with me for the next 22 years of my active flying career and beyond—a love and appreciation of soaring through the sky like an eagle, that is as strong in me now, 60 years later, as it was then.

It was Friday, the 13<sup>th</sup> of July 1956, when I first soloed—a once in a lifetime experience that no pilot ever forgets. Some people might be a little hesitant about doing anything the least bit risky on such a day, let alone fly solo for the first time. For me, it was the most liberating day of my life. It was also one of the most demanding of my flying career.



**Author with T-34. Stallings Air Base. 1956**

I loved Mr. “K” like a father, but he was the toughest flight instructor at Stallings. Each and every maneuver he taught me had to be done repeatedly until I could do it with absolutely no mistakes. Nevertheless, I welcomed his exacting standards, even his harsh criticism, because I knew he was trying to make me the best pilot I could be. He also wanted to be sure I was going to return to earth in one piece, particularly on that auspicious day.

It was only my eighth dual ride, and I had no reason to suspect it was going to be the day I soloed. He never mentioned anything about it in the briefing, although I'm sure it was his intention—assuming I met his demanding standard. After a series of loosening up maneuvers in the aerobatic training area we headed back to the field for some practice landings. He had me make a touch and go on the first approach, followed by a steep climbing turn into a closed pattern for a full stop. I turned off the runway thinking that was it...we were done for the day. Instead, he had me taxi back to the take-off end. Then, the old "Bald Eagle," as he was affectionately called by his fellow instructors, had me make one "stop and go" landing after another; yelling at me from the rear cockpit, while I struggled to find the perfect approach and landing that would satisfy him.

Nothing I did seemed to be good enough. There is an intercom system in the T-34, but he didn't need it. I could hear him shouting at me from the back seat over the roar of the engine. He had always been critical of me, but never to such an extreme. I was afraid he was going to give himself a heart attack. About a dozen practice landings later, he had me turn off the active runway and taxi back to the departure end for another trip around the pattern—so I thought. Instead, he had me stop the T-34 just opposite Mobile Control. I watched him climb out of the cockpit and step onto the wing, wondering what he was going to do next. *Jesus, what now? Is he going to clobber me with his clipboard or something?*

He leaned into my cockpit and casually said: "Do you think you can fly this thing by yourself?"

His question sounded a little sarcastic at the time. In retrospect, I think he just was trying to be nonchalant, as though sending another fledgling pilot into the blue all by himself was something he did every day, which he did. I wanted to say *You're goddamned right I can*, but I respected him too much to use those words. I looked him straight in the eyes and simply said, "Yes sir." I don't think it was my words, as much as it was the steely determination he saw in my eyes that gave him the assurance he was looking for.

"I know you can, son." He then removed chute from the rear cockpit, secured the shoulder harness and seat belt, and checked for loose items. Before stepping off the wing, he put his hand on my shoulder and said: "I'll watch the show from mobile."

Ironically, that next take off would be my thirteenth in an already omen-filled day. But, for me, it was just another number. I was so damned relieved to get him out of my airplane and off my back, not even the ominous portent of "Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>" could keep me on the ground. Mr. Karvonen had seen to that.

# 14

## Lost in North Carolina

Eleven years after VE (Victory in Europe) Day, on a ramp dampened by an early morning rain, my instructor and I stood before an aircraft not unlike those that helped decide the outcome of that war. The North American T-28 Trojan had a bigger, more powerful radial engine than the smaller T-34 trainer that had initiated me into the world of flight. It looked a lot like a WWII fighter, only with tricycle landing gear and dual cockpits. Indeed, it brought back memories of the P-47 Thunderbolt, the Navy Hellcat, and other famous aircraft of that war. I was only a youngster during the war, awed by the performance of the fighter aircraft and the brave pilots who flew them. I watched them shoot down enemy airplanes in the newsreels displayed the screen in the Bellmore movie theater. I read everything I could find about them in newspapers and magazines. I knew, even then, that that was what I wanted to do when I grew up.

Compared to the smaller T-34, the T-28 towered above us. Nevertheless, despite its size and power, I was not intimidated. After logging forty flying hours in the “Thirty Four” under Mr. Karvonen’s demanding tutelage, I was ready. I completed the walk-around inspection with checklist in hand and Mr. “K” looking over my shoulder. We climbed onto the wing, placed our seat-pack parachutes into the tandem cockpits—his in the back, mine in the front.

Most instructors would take the front cockpit for the first ride in a new airplane and simply demonstrate the aircraft’s capabilities, while the student observed from the back. “The Dollar Ride,” as it was called, was as much an imbedded tradition as it was a part of the training curriculum. The instructors liked it because it gave them personal stick time, and allowed them to show off their own flying skills. No doubt, there was some teaching value in it, but Mr. Karvonen, had nothing to prove to me, or himself, and taught me too well to waste even one hour of flying time on a “demo” ride. That, in itself, was a lesson I would never forget.



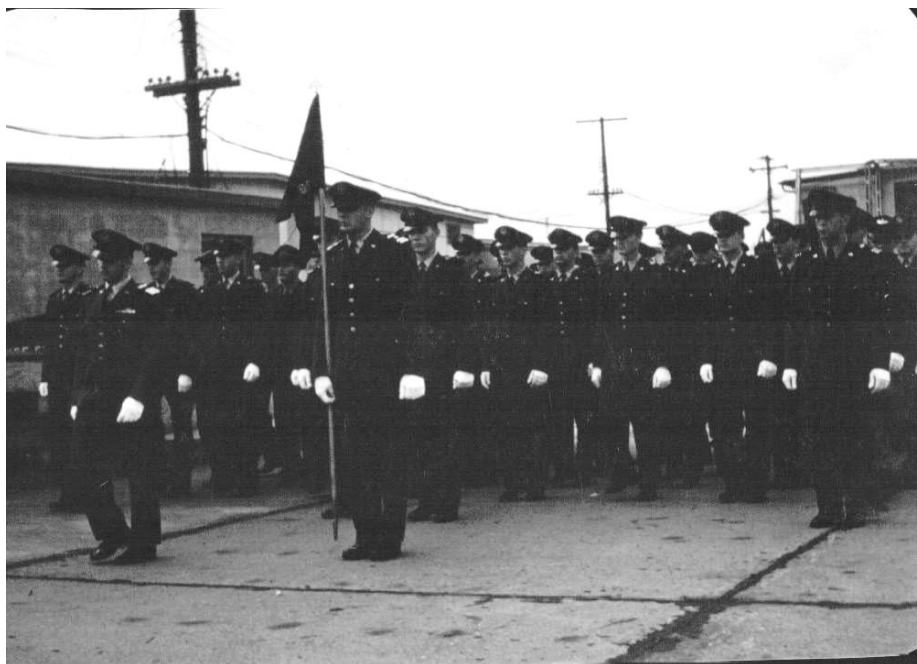
**Mr. Karvonen and I taxiing out for my first flight in the T-28.  
Stallings Air Base, Kingston, NC 1956**

As I went through the checklist items, I recalled the countless hours I had already logged in preparation for the flight, learning the location of every switch, instrument, and circuit breaker in the cockpit until I could touch each one blindfolded. I never felt more confident, and may have even impressed Mr. "K," though he never let on. We did all of the usual maneuvers on that first flight in the T-28, especially the kind that had us looking at the world from a variety of different angles. Then, he introduced me to the "Snap Roll." It was a trick you could only do in a conventionally powered airplane (until the advent of the F-22) and was often performed at air shows by stunt pilots. It was a guaranteed attention getter...impressive to watch. It was even more exciting to be in the airplane doing it.

Mr. Karvonen pushed the throttle forward and accelerated to 230 knots, then pulled the stick hard back, rapidly bringing the nose up, and kicked in full right rudder. That stalled the right wing and put the aircraft into a super-fast roll, so violent in its reaction it felt as though it might tear off the tail of the airplane. I enjoyed the sensation as much then, as that kid who could not get enough of a carnival rocket ride. Through the rear view mirror, I saw the big smile on Mr. K's face.

In retrospect, I realize now just how fortunate I was to have gone through the Air Force pilot training as it was then structured; i.e., the first six months in prop-driven aircraft with civilian instructors, the second six in jets and military instructors. Less than ten years later the USAF dropped the civilian half of the

program and established an all jet-powered military program.



**Cadet Class 57Q. Stallings Air Base, Kingston, NC. 1956. Two years later the Cadet program would be phased out.**

They also eliminated the Aviation Cadet Program about the same time the first graduates from the Air Force Academy entered flight training; which I thought to be an unwise policy decision. For by restricting entry into pilot training to college graduates (USAF Academy and ROTC), I believe the program was weakened. Most of the men who acquitted themselves so gallantly in World War II and Korea had no more than a high school diploma. They signed on for the sheer love of flying, as much as they did to answer their country's call to arms, and would have been happy spending the rest of their lives doing only that. Career progression through the ranks, and the political correctness it required—particularly in today's modern Air Force—was not something these men spent much time thinking about. The art of outmaneuvering another pilot in the sky and putting a weapon on target did. These were the men I was fortunate to have as mentors. They were the best fighter pilots in the world and we will never see their like again.

I soloed on my sixth ride in the T-28, and it would be a memorable one. Indeed, it turned out to be the first "Close Call" of my flying career—a harbinger of things to come. As usual, the "Bald Eagle" had prepared me well.



**Author in T-28. Stallings Air Base, Kingston, NC 1956**

It was a beautiful sunny day, when I leaped into the blue with all the confidence of a seasoned pilot and headed straight for the aerobatic area. I had the sky to myself, and I made good use of it. I did every maneuver in the book, including the one that wasn't, the "Snap Roll." All of the other maneuvers; such as Rolls, Loops, Cuban Eights, High-G turns, etc., were all performed in a smooth, controlled manner, in which key check points had to be hit. The "Snap Roll," on the other hand, required the same precise control inputs, but the resultant effect on the aircraft was one of uncontrolled abandon. It spiked the flow of adrenalin in my veins, but it was hard on the airplane.

After about thirty minutes of playing among the clouds, I leveled the aircraft to get my bearing. That's when I noticed that my attitude indicator had tumbled, my heading indicator was spinning wildly, and I had no idea where I was. I had wandered out of the designated aerobatic area over a part of North Carolina I didn't recognize, and there were no distinctive landmarks by which I could orient myself on the map. I had a general idea in which direction Stallings Air Base was, however, and used the standby compass mounted on the instrument shroud to turn to a heading I thought would get me there. All I had to do then was look for the lights on the control tower; i.e., the split beam with a green screen used by all civilian airfields.

However, I faced three problems. One, the T-28's standby compass is about as sophisticated as the handheld compass used by the Boy Scouts and cannot be read in a turn; Two, there were a lot more civilian airfields with split beams and green screens in North Carolina than I had ever imagined, and Three, the terrain was flat,



and looked the same in every direction as far as the eye could see. After chasing down several of those distinctive light flashes, emanating from one strange field after another, I realized that I was hopelessly lost. By then, I had been airborne more than an hour—already past my scheduled flight time—and had burned up a lot of fuel doing aerobatics. Christ, I was supposed to be in operations having my second cup of coffee.

At least my fuel gauges were still working, and they were telling me that I had better find a runway soon, or pick out a good open field for an emergency landing. *Not a great way to introduce myself to the local farmers*, I thought. *How am I going to explain what happened to Mr. Karvonen and the others, when they see me pull up in front of Squadron Operations in the back of a pickup truck?* The uncomfortable visions kept coming as I desperately tried to find something, anything that would get me headed back to Stallings.

Then, I remembered the sage advice one of the older instructors gave us one rainy day while we were waiting for a green flag. One of the students asked: “What do you do if you get lost around here? There are no really good landmarks to key on.”

He said, “Son, if that that ever happens to you, just turn due east and keep flying until you reach a great big lake, then do a 180 degree turn. When you’re over land again you’ll be back in the good old U S of A.” We all laughed. He just smiled.

But, I wasn’t smiling, and I was out of ideas. Then it occurred to me, that the “big lake” he referred to was the Atlantic Ocean. Reversing course over it would then have me looking at North Carolina’s coastline, which has many distinctive features easily found on my local area map. All I would have to do then is plot a course from a recognizable point on the coast to Stallings Air Base. *Finally*, I thought, *a plan. If I could only complete it before I run out of gas.* I turned due east and, just as the old instructor had said, I ran into that “big lake,” and made a 180 degree turn.

Before I got halfway around I saw it, the good old U S of A. To be precise, I was right over Carolina Beach, just south of Wilmington, and about twenty miles west of Cherry Point Marine Air Station. My brother, Vince, a Staff Sergeant and a navigator on the C-119, was stationed there. I could have used his expertise about that time. Cherry Point also had an ADF (Automatic Direction Finder) radio facility. I dialed the frequency into my onboard receiver and flew a northwesterly heading to intercept the 037 degree outbound radial. Cherry Point was also one of the designated emergency landing fields plotted on my map. Soon after I set course the fuel low light on one of the T-28’s two main fuel tanks glowed red. Three minutes later the other one flashed on. I was still about fifteen minutes from the field. It was going to be close.

In hindsight, I should have landed at Cherry Point to refuel before heading back to Stallings, and had lunch with my brother before continuing on. That would have been the smart thing to do. But, I was focused on getting back, and too worried about how I was going to explain my long overdue return to everyone, especially Mr. Karvonen.



**On final for Stallings Air Base, Kingston, NC 1956**

Then, I spotted it dead ahead, Stallings Air Base. It never looked so good. "Tower, this is Eagle Two...I have the field in sight." I should have declared an emergency due to the low fuel, but I didn't want to embarrass myself any more than what I expected to endure when I walked into ops.

"Roger, Eagle, call turning a five mile initial...field is VFR."

A few minutes later: "Tower, Eagle is turning initial at five miles. Request full stop landing."

"In sight, Eagle...cleared full stop...call the break."

"Eagle in the break."

"Roger, call base with 'three in the green.'"

The red lights that had been staring at me for the last fifteen minutes looked even bigger and brighter. I prayed that the T-28's big radial engine would not quit on me before I touched down. That being a real possibility, I carried enough extra airspeed throughout the pattern to give me a shot at making a successful "dead stick" landing—another bit of flying wisdom from Mr. Karvonen.

As it turned out, I not only had enough gas in the tanks for the landing, I was able to taxi back to the parking area and complete a normal engine shutdown. My Crew Chief asked me where I had been. A reasonable question, given that I was an hour late in returning.

"Welcome back, sir, did you have a good flight?" he said, smiling.

"Yes, I did. As a matter of fact, I enjoyed it so much I lost track of the time."

Most of it was true, but he didn't need to know the whole story. However, he

at least cared enough to ask. When I walked into squadron operations with my parachute slung over my shoulder, I expected to be greeted by a torrent of questions and some friendly needling about my getting lost. Instead—aside from a quick glance from one of the operations clerks standing behind the counter—I was hardly noticed. Was I invisible?

Students were standing around in small groups with their instructors listening to “war stories” told with the usual flurry of hand gestures. Other pilots were checking the scheduling board copying down mission flight data. Somebody must have seen me come in, but they acted as though they didn’t. No one even asked me where I had been. Their indifference to my late return raised some troubling thoughts in my mind. *Jesus, doesn’t anyone care that I’m more than an hour late? I could be lying dead in the middle of some tobacco farm. When were they going to wonder where in the hell I was?”*

# 15

## Over My Dead Body

We took off from Greenville, Mississippi, on a cross-country flight that would span the southwestern United States. Along our route of mostly barren, yet uniquely beautiful desert landscape, were the majestic landmarks of the Grand Canyon, Lake Mead, and the Sierra Nevada mountains—truly amazing works of nature. Impressive as they were, however, it was the golden hills of Northern California that “called us home.” Northern California is a beautiful part of the state.

My instructor, Lt. Greg Neubeck, and I were flying a T-33 jet trainer on a cross-country flight to Hamilton Air Force Base, California. We were impressed with the beauty of the San Francisco Bay area, and its unique city by the sea. Now picture if you will, the Golden Gate Bridge, the vineyards of Napa Valley, the Redwood Forest, and a sea of rolling hills of gold, and you can begin to imagine how viewing all of that from the air for the first time would leave a lasting impression on anyone.

Neubeck casually remarked as to how it would be a good place to retire. I was surprised to hear talk about retirement from a man who drove himself to fly more than one hundred hours a month in his quest to reach the fifteen hundred hour minimum time needed to qualify for Edward’s Test Pilot School. He reached that mark in less than two years, but his application was denied because he had no time in fighter aircraft. It took him a few more years to gain the experience he needed to be accepted for the School, but he got there, and graduated first in his class.



**USAF Test Pilot School, Edwards AFB, CA. F-104 in foreground.**

Nonetheless, his ultimate goal, was to become a U.S. Air Force Astronaut, and play a pioneering role in America's first space station, the "Manned Orbital Laboratory." Unfortunately the MOL program was cancelled in deference to President Kennedy's directive to NASA to put a man on the moon within a decade. As a consequence, Astronaut Neubeck never made it into space. Instead, he taught at the Edward's school for a while, before being assigned to Eglin AFB, where he would weapons-test the Air Force's latest fighter aircraft.

Greg and his beautiful wife Peggy would eventually retire on the opposite side of the country. As is the case with many career military people, who end up retiring close to the area of their last assignment, they settled near Eglin Air Force Base, Florida. Ezdy and I would make our home in Sacramento, California—between the Sierra Mountains and the San Francisco Bay Area. It would not be our last move. Following a short two-year stint flying F-111's at Cannon Air Force Base, in Clovis, New Mexico, I was reassigned to the Flight Test Section at McClellan Air Force Base, as a test pilot for the F-111 and the F-100.

Ezdy, the kids, TaTa (Ezdy's mother) and I drove into Sacramento on February 14, 1974, Valentine's Day. We stayed in guest housing for a few weeks until we found a place to rent in the town of Carmichael, a fifteen minute drive from the base.

After completing in-processing at the base, I drove out to Flight Test Operations, a two-story wooden building located on the west side of the runway. I met Lt. Col. Joe Chido, the Commander, and his Operations Officer, Major Pettijean. Chido was an experienced F-106 "driver." He also doubled as the F-100 test pilot, but had little

time in the airplane and was happy to turn that duty over to me. My 2600 hours in the F-100 was no doubt one of the reasons I was reassigned to McClellan.



**The F-100 Super Sabre. That's my grandson, J.R. in the foreground.  
The yellow and white striped tail paint scheme was used by the 493<sup>rd</sup>  
Squadron of the 48<sup>th</sup> TFWG at Lakenheath, England during the 60's.  
The aircraft found a home at McClellan AFB, Sacramento, CA. 2003**

As a consequence, I would hold dual currency in both the F-111 and the F-100 (triple currency, if you include the T-38, in which we were given our annual instrument check). It occurred to me then, that I may have been the only pilot in the U.S. Air Force current in both the first and the last of the Century Series Fighters, a distinction recognized by almost no one else, and a fleeting one at best. Nine years later, in 1988, the F-117 "Nighthawk" Stealth Fighter—secretly developed and built in the notorious "Area 51"—was officially introduced to the world.

No matter, the F-100—the first operational fighter in the world to attain supersonic speed in level flight—was *my airplane*. My "old friend" (as I refer to it in my poem, "Sabre The Journey") and I had been together for more than ten years, through cold and hot wars, on missions that spanned the globe. In that decade, and through all of those trials, "Sabre" never failed to bring me home. I was grateful for the opportunity to fly it again. This story, however, would involve the F-111.



**The F-111 Aardvark. Nellis AFB, Las Vegas, NV. 1972**

It was a clear day, the morning J.D. and I taxied out to Runway 01 at McClellan to test fly a recently overhauled F-111. Ezdy didn't usually drive out to the base, but she did on that fateful day because she knew I was flying. She also knew where to get the best view of my takeoff. She parked her car in front of Flight Test Operations and walked down the pathway to a small bridge that spanned the drainage ditch near the Ops building. I waved to her as we taxied by, and was warmed by the smile on her beautiful face as she waved back.

No other fighter pilot's wife I have ever met took as keen an interest in our job as did Ezdy. She loved flying as much as I, and would often go out to the aircraft hangar to talk to the maintenance personnel. She made a point of it every time she visited the base while I was flying. They appreciated her genuine concern for what they did to ensure that the airplanes I flew were ready and safe to fly. They loved her for it, and would often let her wear one of their headsets so she could listen to the radio calls between me and the tower. She didn't have one on that day, but from that little bridge she would have a front row seat for what was about to happen.

We were taking off to the north and she would be able to follow us from the time we released brakes to lift off. I was in the left (pilot's) seat, Major J.D. Stokes, my co-pilot, was in the right. I had always thought that, designating the F-111 a fighter was a misnomer, given its side-by-side seating, twin engines, and enormous size. Its "clean" weight at takeoff was close to 80,000 pounds, more than twice that of the F-100. The roomy cockpit suited J.D.'s six foot two, two hundred and thirty pound frame better than it did me. However, it wasn't the extra room in the cockpit that bothered me, it was the side by side seating and restricted visibility to the right



and to rear of the aircraft. Adding a few more rearview mirrors would not compensate for that shortcoming.

I taxied onto the active runway, stopped on the centerline and pressed down hard on the brake pedals as I eased both throttles into full military power. J.D. and I watched the engine instrument pointers wind their way into the “green.” “Looks good,” I said, glancing over at him. Never much for words, J.D. just nodded in agreement.

With his silent assent, I released the brakes and pushed both throttles into full afterburner range. The instantaneous generation of thousands of pounds of added thrust pressed us against our seatbacks and propelled us down a runway that was rapidly disappearing under our aircraft. Nearing takeoff speed, I eased back on the control stick and lifted the nose of the aircraft approximately ten degrees. We were airborne seconds later, listening to the unique sounds and vibrations of the big tricycle landing gear folding into the underbody of the fuselage. It was precisely at that point, just after the gear doors locked into position, that I heard an unfamiliar sound. “Did you hear that, J.D.?”

“Hear what?” He scanned the instruments. “Looks good here.” By then we were about fifty feet in the air with wheels up and the end of the runway disappearing under our nose—about the worst position to be in should something go wrong.

“Hear it now?”

“No...engine readings are still normal.”

“Maybe, but I’m picking up vibrations from the left engine...coming out of afterburner.”

It didn’t help. The shaking increased to the point where even J.D. could feel it on his side of the cockpit. I pulled the power back to idle, but to no avail. The vibrations intensified. “I’m shutting down the left engine.”

I didn’t wait for J.D.’s approval. Our airplane was coming apart, and we were less than one hundred feet in the air with the runway behind us. There was no time to discuss the issue. He would have done the same.

“Tower...China 53, we lost our left engine...declaring an emergency. Request clearance for an immediate landing opposite the direction of traffic.”

“Roger, China, you’re cleared as requested, crash crew has been alerted. Winds are five knots, out of the northwest. Call turning base with gear down.”

“Will do, tower.” A slight tailwind would normally not be a problem. However, combined with a full load of fuel it would increase our landing speed and complicate the problem of getting safely stopped on the runway. I was already in a right climbing turn as we spoke and reversed the turn ninety degrees left to put us on a closed downwind. As soon as we rolled out to level flight J.D. hit the fuel jettison switch to dump as much fuel as we could before landing. When it started pouring out of the rear of the aircraft it was immediately torched off by the still engaged right afterburner. If we hadn’t maintained full power on that engine we would have dropped out of the sky like a rock. From the ground, however, it must have looked like we were on fire. The guys in the Tower certainly thought so.



“China 53, you’re on fire...you’re on fire!” yelled the voice screaming into our headsets an octave higher than normal.

“Negative tower, we’re just shedding some weight before setting this bird down. The fuel streaming out of the tail of our airplane is apparently being ignited by the afterburner of our good engine. We’re not on fire, but our left engine is coming apart.”

His voice dropped down into normal range. “Jesus, China, you could have at least warned us.”

“Sorry, we’re a little busy up here.”

I flew a tight pattern to get us back on the ground before our right engine could be damaged by the disintegrating turbine blades of the left. All this was taking place while Ezdy nervously watched the drama unfold from that little bridge. She knew something was wrong seconds after I lifted off and did not perform my signature maximum performance take-off. She loved to watch me “stand the aircraft on its tail.”

That once common test pilot technique gradually faded from use with the introduction of rocket propelled seats, and the ability to safely eject at zero airspeed and altitude. Nonetheless, I continued to perform the maneuver. I did it for all the people on the ground who made it possible for me to fly those amazing air machines: the Crew Chiefs, maintenance personnel, life support personnel, tower operators, and, most of all, Ezdy. I also loved the adrenaline rush of “pushing the envelope” so close to the ground.

There was a third reason. Early in my flying career, I witnessed a sensational demonstration of the technique by a test pilot flying out of Wheelus Air Base in Libya. I won’t go into the details of the story here, but the only reason the pilot in that doomed F-100 lived to fly again was because he pulled off the greatest max performance takeoff I had ever seen, one that left an indelible impression on my young mind. I vowed then, that one day I would be able to do the maneuver as perfectly as he did. And, once I could—rocket seat, or no rocket seat—I was not about to let that skill fade.

I can only imagine what went through Ezdy’s mind when she saw the huge flame spewing from the back of our aircraft as we made the turn to downwind. She wasn’t wearing a headset that day and couldn’t hear the radio exchange between me and the tower. She was so intent on watching me, that she never saw General Gavin, the Depot Commander, drive up to Flight Test Operations. He saw her as soon as he got out of his car. “Who is that woman?” He demanded to know, as he approached the pilots standing outside of Test Ops.

“That’s Tomasino’s wife, sir.” Major Snow answered.

“Well tell her to leave. She can’t be here.”

Snow walked over to the bridge. “Ezdy, General Gavin says you have to leave.”

She was startled when he interrupted her and loudly replied, “Over my dead body!”

He walked back to where the General was standing. “Sir, she said...”

“Yes, yes, I heard her. That can be arranged!” He made sure he said it loud enough so that she could hear, but didn’t have time to carry out his threat.

While that little drama was being played out, J.D. and I started our base turn. “Tower, China 53, turning base with three in the green.”

“Roger, China, you’re cleared to land.”

General Gavin, Ezdy, and the others, saw it at the same time “Damn, I’ve got to go.” As he stormed off, he ordered, “Get her out of here!” But, the General didn’t know Ezdy like the other pilots did, and he was in too much of a hurry to notice that none of them dared approach her again. He got back in his staff car, drove onto to the taxiway and sped to the runway end, where we would be turning off—assuming the turbine blades tearing through the side of our aircraft did not puncture a fuel cell, or take out the good engine.

J.D. stopped jettisoning fuel when we started our base turn, but we were still well above normal landing weight and would need to maintain an extra fifteen knots airspeed in the pattern. We’d be landing hot, but, with ten thousand feet of runway to work with, getting stopped wasn’t going to be a problem. I touched down about five hundred feet past the runway threshold, and held the nose up for maximum aerodynamic braking.



**F-111 landing**

After lowering the nose, normal braking slowed us down to safe turn-off speed before the runway end. General Gavin looked on as the Crew Chiefs chocked and pinned the wheels, then signaled me to shut down the right engine. As soon as I opened the canopy, ladders were put in place for Stokes and I to disembark. The General shook our hands as we stepped off the ladder. “Well done, gents.”

The pleasantries quickly aside, he asked, “What the hell happened up there?” We gave him a “blow by blow” account of the takeoff, the engine vibrations, and our decision to land downwind, then walked over to take a look at the left side of the airplane. It was riddled with holes made by the disintegrating turbine blades—some of them big enough to pass a basketball through. For J.D. and I, seeing the extensive damage to our airplane simply explained the severity of the vibrations we felt in the cockpit.

The General, however, saw it from a different perspective. “Do you guys know how lucky you were?”

Neither of us felt the need to answer what we understood to be a rhetorical question, and Gavin did not wait for one. “If any of those turbine blades had gone the other way and punched through a fuel cell, or the right engine...”

He never finished the sentence. He didn’t have to. We would learn later, from the mechanics working on the aircraft, that some of the blades had indeed gone in the other direction, but miraculously missed critical aircraft components. They also found a pair of pliers—what was left of them after being sucked into the left engine.

Apparently, one of the technicians who helped reassemble our aircraft placed them on an upper shelf of the engine pod and forgot to take them with him when he was through. Unfortunately, they could not be seen on preflight. The takeoff acceleration and vibration of the engines in full afterburner would dislodge the pliers from their perch and into the turbine blades. While the Pratt and Whitney TF-30 can ingest walnut shells and small birds with ease, it’s not so good at swallowing cold steel.

To answer the General’s question, no, we didn’t know how lucky we were. But, risk is an inherent part of what we do, something that all fighter pilots willingly accept. Hell, if anybody could do it, we wouldn’t. Indeed, it was the added challenge of taking a flying machine to the outer edges of the envelope that drew us into this segment of the flying profession.

Luck does play a role in how “Close Calls” like this turn out, but nothing trumps good judgement and piloting skill. The important thing is, we were safely on the ground, the airplane would soon be made as good as new, and J.D. and I would be strapping it back on for another go.

As for Ezdy, well, she never was concerned with the General’s empty threat and lived to see me perform a few more maximum performance takeoffs.

# 16

## Ezdy

It was near dark when I pushed open the heavy iron gate to our rented chateau in the picturesque village of Cirey Sur Blaise, France and drove into the courtyard. The noisy muffler of our 57 Chevy hardtop was all I needed to announce my arrival. Before I could step out of the car, Ezdy came running out the door and flew into my arms. She was crying. Tears of joy I thought. I was only partially right. Still sobbing, she blurted out, "Vito, I'm so happy you're home, but I ruined your career!"



The town square of Cirey Sur Blaise, France. 1958

Gently wiping away a big tear from her eye, I said: "Ruined my career...before I had a chance to do it myself? I knew I was marrying a beautiful, passionate Cuban woman, but I never thought I'd be putting my Air Force career on the line."

She gave me a not so playful blow to my chest with the side of her fist. "Vito, it's not funny, and I'm not joking. I did. I ruined your career!"

I held her close again. "I'm sorry, honey. Let's go inside...tell me all about it."

Ezdy had already made coffee and poured us two mugs. We carried them to the dining room table. I added my usual two teaspoons of sugar and a little milk, and then she let it all out.

"Vito, you were only supposed to be gone two weeks. I was here alone with the kids, out of milk, vegetables...everything. The bachelor friend you left our car with was supposed to come by to check on us, but never did. I didn't know what to do, so I asked our neighbor, Madame Gegare. Though I couldn't speak French and she didn't know English we were both mothers with kids and managed to communicate through sign language. She told me that the women of the town go down to the corner near the local deli at about six in the morning, carrying their urns, pots, and empty bottles to wait for the milk truck to drive up. They would also get their meat from the butcher, vegetables from the local farmers, bread from the bread man in the same way. A small deli on that same corner only carried items that could be stored without refrigeration, but it had some good locally made champagne. "

Ezdy told me how she would boil the milk and skim off the cream to make butter, as she had seen her mother and aunts do in Cuba. It's what she fed the baby, Felix and herself. They never got sick, or experienced the slightest discomfort from the milk, or any of the food she bought from the local vendors. Everyone was doing just fine.

"You did great, honey, I'm proud of you."

"That's not what Mrs. Whisner thought."

"The Squadron Commander's wife? What does she have to do with it?"

"She and Gloria Hornsby (wife the Operations Officer's), drove out here to see us about a week ago. She asked how we were doing, if we needed anything from the commissary. I told her we were fine, that I was able to buy everything right here. I explained how I got the milk, meat, vegetables, etc., and expected her to commend my resourcefulness. Instead, when she heard we were eating the local food she became so unglued it scared me."

"My dear," she exclaimed. "You don't know what you have done. Get your children and come with me right now to the base hospital. You must have your stomachs pumped out before you become seriously ill."

"She said that?"

"Yes she did. The kids and I were doing just fine, then she comes here more than three weeks after you left for Libya to tell us that. My Cuban blood started to boil. I asked her what she thought she was eating when she went out to a French restaurant with her husband and later bragged about how good it was to their

friends. You can imagine her reaction.”

“I’m beginning to get the picture.”

“Probably not the whole picture. Gloria was standing behind her frantically waving her hands, trying to signal me to keep quiet, but it was too late. I told Mrs. Whisner if the best she could do after the kids and I had been left alone all this time is to have our stomachs pumped, she should leave. I’ll never forget the look on her face. She said something like, ‘Well, I never...’ then turned abruptly and stormed past Gloria almost knocking her over as she headed for that big side door of ours. I think she may have strained her arm as she pulled it open, not expecting it to be so heavy.

“Before Gloria followed her out, she turned to me and whispered: ‘You don’t know what you just did. You ruined your husband’s career.’ I’m so sorry, Vito...I...”

She started to cry again and I took her in my arms. “Don’t be, honey, you did nothing wrong. Mrs. Whisner was out of line, even if her intentions were good. As for ruining my career, I can take care of that all by myself.”

She pulled back from me to give herself room to hit me on the chest again. “Vito, this isn’t funny. Gloria is our friend. She wouldn’t have told me that if it wasn’t true.”

“I know,” I said, smiling. But, if this flying thing doesn’t work out I can always go back to swinging a hammer.” She stopped crying.



**Ezdy and T-33. Greenville. Mississippi. 1957**

That weekend the 494<sup>th</sup> Squadron had a coming home party at the Officer’s club. As Ezdy and I were walking to the ballroom, Major Whisner, who had entered the club behind us, put his hand on Ezdy’s shoulder and said: “I hear you threw my wife out of your house...that true?”

“Yes sir, and I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...”

He stopped her before she could finish. “You’re a brave young lady. There are times when I wish I could.”

I doubt that Major Whisner ever seriously harbored such a thought. I do think, however, that he fully intended to relieve Ezdy of any anxiety she felt about the encounter, particularly the part about it ruining my career. He was not only a fighter pilot’s fighter pilot, he was a true leader of men.

# 17

## **The Cuban Missile Crisis**

When we took off from Cannon Air Force Base, New Mexico on October 15, 1962, we had no idea that a routine two week deployment to Florida would turn into the most perilous confrontation of the “Cold War.”

In August of that year, Russian offensive missiles were suspected of being moved into Cuba. Accusations and denials were exchanged between the United States and the USSR, until U-2 photographs, taken October 14, 1962, confirmed the existence of the missile sites—the real reason for our “training exercise.”

The Strategic Air Command increased their readiness level to DEFCON 2 (the only time in U.S. history it had done so). B-52 bombers carrying nuclear weapons were put on continuous airborne alert. SAC’s B-57 medium bombers were placed on fifteen minute alert status and strategically deployed to bases within striking distance of Cuba. Fighter aircraft from the Tactical Air and Air Defense Commands launched from bases across the United States and converged on every military airfield in Florida.





**F-100's from the 428th Squadron being readied for deployment.  
Cannon Air Force Base. Oct 1962**

We were not the first to arrive in Homestead AFB, Florida, nor were we the last. In the forty-eight hours to follow, the ramp would be completely covered with F-100's, parked wingtip to wingtip from one end of the airfield to the other. As soon as we cut our engines, armament crews quickly moved in to load bombs, rockets, and 20mm ammo on our aircraft. It looked, and felt, like the hectic flight-deck activity seen on the aircraft carriers of World War II. The "USS Homestead," however, was much bigger. It was our first clue that our deployment was more than just another training mission.

Our second came when the vans in which they picked us up, dropped us off at a flight-line hangar big enough to accommodate a B-52. They showed us into a room that brought back memories of the "four star" accommodations we were assigned at Hahn Air Base, Germany, for the privilege of standing "Victor Alert" (nuclear strike status). That room—once an engine repair shop—was also in a hangar.

Our new quarters were not quite as luxurious. Its unusual five-tiered decking started at the center of the floor and went almost to the ceiling. Each tier was about three feet high by three feet deep and stretched from one side of the fifty foot wide room to the other. We claimed our space on one of the "shelves" and laid out the sleeping bags provided us.

By comparison, the engine room at Hahn was on one level, and offered steel framed beds with mattresses. This was "Victor Alert" all over again, but without the "four star" rating. Nonetheless, it would be our home for the next two weeks, while

Kennedy and Khrushchev played out their high-stakes poker game. We nicknamed it “The Bat Cave.”

Later—after the initial stage of the crisis had passed—we were moved into the BOQ’s (Bachelor Officer Quarters); which, under normal circumstances, would have been a welcome improvement. Unfortunately, it was impossible to accommodate the huge influx of fighter pilots who suddenly descended upon Homestead’s once peaceful air patch without crowding four or five of us into a room barely big enough for two. Some of us would wind up sleeping on the floor.

We all complained, but not too loudly. Such inconveniences were a minor annoyance, given the very real possibility that we could soon find ourselves flying south to destroy Russian missile sites in Cuba. For a fighter pilot, going into combat was the ultimate test of our training and flying skills. That said, however, even we did not want a World War III.



**Crew Chiefs readying an F-100 for alert status.**

On October 28, 1962, while sitting in the cockpit of a fully armed F-100, with my ADF radio tuned into the Oval Office, I listened to President Kennedy’s address to the nation. His speech would determine whether I, and hundreds more like me, would be speeding to Cuba (my wife’s homeland) to destroy the newly installed Russian missile sites.

As it turned out, Khrushchev and Kennedy both rejected the advice of their senior military officers to “go to war” and, in the “eleventh hour,” worked out a peaceful resolution to the crisis. In a series of personal letters between the two “K’s,” a deal was struck involving the dismantling of all missiles sites in Cuba and the return

of Soviet missiles and bombers to the USSR in exchange for the dismantling of our intermediate range ballistic missiles in Italy and Turkey, and the assurance that the United States would never invade Cuba. Thus, the very real possibility of a nuclear war, one that would have changed the face of the world forever, was averted.

Looking back on that fateful piece of history, I have to wonder if the reason a young, inexperienced President Kennedy appeared to get the best of the older, more experienced Premier Khrushchev, was precisely because of his youth and inexperience. Khrushchev was a master at bluffing, and relished confrontation, but suicide was never an option. I believe he was genuinely surprised by Kennedy's unexpectedly strong resolve, and feared that the younger man—prodded by his Generals—may, indeed, have been foolish enough to “push the button.”

# 18

## **Name, Rank, SN, and DOB**

As a graduate of USAF Advanced Fighter Training, and an F-100 Certificate of Qualification in hand, I was finally a full-fledged fighter pilot. Nevertheless, I had one more school to complete before I could report to my assigned duty station in Chaumont, France. So, once again, Ezdy, Felix, and I packed everything we owned in to the trunk of Dad's Packard and drove up to Stead Air Force Base near Reno, Nevada for Survival Training. Our pet ducks, Donald and Lucky did not make that trip. They were killed by a neighbor's hunting dog shortly after we moved into our duplex near Nellis AFB.

It was February 1958, the dead of winter in the Sierras. The school was three weeks long; with the third week spent in the rugged snow-covered mountains just west of Reno. However, before we were allowed to enjoy the beauty of those hills up close, we were given the opportunity to briefly experience a small taste of what our prisoners of war had to face in a very realistic setting.

That little ordeal came early in the program, after crawling face down in the dirt under barbed wire with 30 caliber machine guns firing live ammo overhead. After completing that exercise, we were "captured" and thrown into a replica of a North Korean prison camp. They stripped us naked, replaced our flying suits with nondescript prison uniforms and herded us into one of three underground bunkers—our home for the next three days. One worn blanket and a cold dirt floor would make our bed.

Sleep was not something we would have to worry about much, as our prison benefactors would find a hundred different ways to ensure we got very little. They would bang on the corrugated metal roof of the bunker with their rifles, walk in any time of the night or day brandishing guns and clubs in an attempt to intimidate us with in-your-face obscenities and threats.

Usually, after one of their warm and fuzzy visits, several of us would be taken away for interrogation. That was always a treat. Previous military training had

exposed us to the Geneva Accords, in which the rules governing the treatment of prisoners of war were explained; specifically the requirement to give the enemy only name, rank, service number and date of birth. When it was my turn “in the barrel,” I decided to test that theory. It was, after all, just make believe. What could they do to me, write me up for not appreciating the gravity of the situation? By challenging the boundaries of the Geneva Accords, I thought I might learn something more from the training I was undergoing. Thus, I decided to try to outwit my interrogator. That was a mistake.

I was rudely awakened from a sound sleep on the hard ground—you learn to do a lot of useful things like that in the Marines—and taken to a one room shack. As I stepped inside, the guard pushed me down on my knees onto the bare hardwood floor. I found myself staring at the front of a beat up old desk with a lighted lamp strategically positioned to shine in my eyes, while keeping the man sitting behind it in the shadows. I could barely make out a second guard standing in the far corner with an AK-47 cradled in his arms. My “escort” stood behind me.

After what seemed like a long time, the faceless man sitting at the desk spoke. “Who are you, and why did you invade my country?”

“Vito Tomasino, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, 50098A, September 19, 1934,” I said.

“I asked you a question. Why did you invade my country?”

The guard behind me poked me in the back with the butt of his rifle. “Vito Tomasino, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, 50098A, September 19, 1934,” I repeated, and got another hard jab from my friend.

“I’m only going to ask you one more time, Lieutenant. Why did you invade my country and bomb my people?”

“I did not invade your country, you invaded mine; or, at least, our ally’s. As for bombing your people, I only recall dropping them on your troops, who were trying to kill mine.”

“So, you can speak. Maybe now we can have an intelligent conversation. Do you enjoy killing people?”

“I thought you wanted to have an intelligent conversation.” That smart remark earned me another jolt in the back by my guard. I quickly added: “Of course I don’t enjoy killing people. But, when someone threatens my life, and the lives of my family and friends, I will do whatever is necessary to protect them and the freedoms we cherish in a democratic society.”

“A democratic society?” he repeated back to me. “That is nothing but an illusion you Americans have been living under for almost two hundred years. And your precious freedom is a joke. Only the rich and powerful are truly free in America. The rest of you are merely paid slaves; used to work their factories, build their roads and bridges, sell their products; and, whenever it suits their insatiable quest for greater riches and power, lay down your lives in a senseless war.”

“I suppose one man’s truth is another man’s illusion. But, what about the illusion you live under? Marx’s idea that you can take from some according to their ability and give to others according to their need is an unworkable fantasy.”

"You are wrong Lieutenant, communism does work. Look at the USSR and China."

"I have looked at them. They are nothing but dictatorships, and not of the proletariat, but of one man who rules unopposed and unchecked by a rival political party. There is no "balance of power," and the people have no voice in their government."

"Maybe you should look again. The transformation of a brutal feudal society into one in which peace and harmony reign and no one wants for anything takes time. To allow rival political parties to debate over the means we use to get there would only slow the change. Indeed, it may even stop it from ever happening."

"That's one argument I haven't heard before. You've got a point there; but I'll take a squabbling Congress over a dictator with unlimited power anytime. Marx saw communism as a perfect world in which people would be satisfied with taking only what they need, while giving all that they are capable of giving. Such a system could only be sustained if it is populated with perfect people. Human beings are far short of that ideal."

"You seem to be well read on the subject, Lieutenant. What was your major in college?"

"I never went."

"Really, you must have had some very good primary and high school teachers."

"Mepham was considered one of the best high schools on Long Island."

"Too bad you didn't go on to get your degree."

"I have no regrets about that. There was a war going on in Korea, and I had already made up my mind to join the Marines after graduating from high school. The three years I spent in the Marines gave me a real-life education no university could have duplicated."

"I'm sure of that, Lieutenant, just as I am sure that the information you have unwittingly given me will serve *my* cause very well. You should have stuck to name, rank, service number, and date of birth."

He was right; but I had also learned a valuable lesson about the interrogation process and my ability to control it. The information he so cleverly extracted from me could have put my family and a lot of other people in danger. I would not forget that lesson. My interrogator would also do his part to ensure that I did not.

"I think we're through here, Lieutenant. Guard, take him out and put him in the "Box." Spending some time in it, Lieutenant, will help you remember what just happened here."

The "Box" he referred to was an enclosed steel container, designed so an average sized man could neither fully stand up, or sit. It had several air holes drilled in it, and a small sliding steel panel that would allow the guard to check on its occupant without opening the access door. The guards thought it was good sport to smash the butt of their rifles against its steel sides whenever they walked by. It sounded as though you were trapped inside a kettle drum.

Although I was in there little more than an hour, it seemed much longer—

long enough to give me a small idea of what our prisoners of war in North Korea had to endure. The “Iron Coffin,” as we called it, left a lasting impression.

For the three days we were in the camp we were deprived of a full night’s sleep, and fed only a watery, foul looking soup with a few onions and potatoes floating in it. We were also subjected to communist propaganda classes and more interrogations. In our “free time” we established a command structure for our group based on rank, formed an escape committee, and even attempted a few breakouts, but with no success. All in all, I thought it was a worthwhile learning experience.

That was just the beginning of Stead Survival School, designed no doubt, to shock us into a state of mind that would keep us focused on absorbing every bit of survival information we would be taught over the next two weeks. Given a day to catch up on our sleep and replenish our energy level with some real food, we attended classes on survival in the wild, interrogation techniques, political indoctrination, the Military Code of Conduct, and the use of every item in our ejection seat survival kits. The last week of our training would be spent in the cold embrace of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

# 19

## Billy Hill

They dropped us off in a wooded area of the Sierras just west of Reno. Without snow shoes, we would have been swallowed up by the eight foot drifts. At those higher elevations, temperatures dropped to twenty degrees below zero at night. To survive in those conditions we were issued cold weather gear, such as parkas, insulated boots, mittens, and an extra sleeping bag; along with a little food, and other items stuffed into our backpacks. Making our way through the snow packed hills with all of that on our backs and very little to eat was a diet plan guaranteed to succeed. This cozy little place would be our home for the next seven days. The instructors stayed with us for six of those days, providing hands-on training in the art of survival in the wild.

At any other time of the year finding food—plant or animal— would be relatively easy. During the winter, with the ground completely covered with snow, edible plant life was impossible to find. If there were any live animals on the mountain, we never saw them. About three days into our trek we were given a rabbit by our instructors. They didn't tell us where, or how they got it, but I suspect they had brought a few along on the truck for training purposes should we not find any in the wild. Shared among six of us it didn't amount to more than a mouthful, but rabbit never tasted so good.

The seventh day of our field training was reserved for the "Escape and Evasion" exercise. We were dropped off in teams of two about eight miles from a designated finish point, and given twenty-four hours to get there. Jim Craig and I paired up and headed out just before sunset, armed with a map and a compass. Our instructors would not be accompanying us. Instead, they became our "hunters."





**Jim Craig. T-33 training at Greenville, Miss. 1957**

Jim is a cowboy from Abilene, Texas. He and I started our Aviation Cadet basic training, together at Lackland Air Force Base, San Antonio. After graduation we were split up; he was assigned to Hondo Air Base, Texas for his Primary Flight Training, and I to Stallings Air Base, Kinston, North Carolina for our initial checkouts in the T-34 and T-28 (prop-driven aircraft). We would be reunited again in Greenville, Mississippi, and there introduced to jet flying in the T-33. From there it was on to Luke Air Force Base, Phoenix, Arizona for the first phase of advanced jet fighter training in the F-84F; then to Nellis Air Force Base, Las Vegas, Nevada (fighter pilots “Mecca”) and the F-100, Super Sabre—the world’s first operational jet fighter capable of attaining supersonic speed in level flight. Stead Survival School would be our last “joint venture” before we went our separate ways.

Jim and I had received our assignments before leaving Nellis. He would be going to the 35<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bombing Squadron, 8<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Group, Itazuke Air Base, Japan; I, to the 494<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bombing Squadron, 48<sup>th</sup> TBW in Chaumont, France, where we would both continue to fly the F-100. I don’t know how, or why, a “good old boy” from Texas and a kid from Long Island, New York hit it off so well, but we did, and the demanding program we were about to complete together forged a lifetime friendship.

Before leaving us, our instructor warned that the temperature would drop well below freezing that night, with more snow in the forecast. He also briefed us on the two major obstacles in our path, a wide, fast running stream, and “Billy Hill,” the highest peak in the exercise area.

"If you should get wet crossing that stream," he cautioned, "get to the nearest fire-barrel set up along the creek as soon as possible. Better to be 'captured,' than freeze to death." He then reminded us of the caution we often heard in ground school: "Whatever you do, do not, I repeat, do not try to climb over Billy Hill!"

Good advice I'm sure; but that infamous hill was the only imposing obstacle between us and a direct course to the finish line on the other side of it. One has to wonder if the course was not designed to challenge the trainees to do exactly that. Going around would have added a few more miles to an already long, difficult trek, but it was the wiser choice.

With those last words of advice still echoing in our ears, Jim and I strapped on our snow shoes, slipped on our backpacks, and headed into the frigid night. About an hour later we reached the bank of that fast moving stream. It was about thirty feet to the other side, but there were enough large stones sticking out above the water level to make it across in a half a dozen well placed steps. I was the first to test the theory. I removed my snow shoes. Holding one in each hand for balance, I took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and leaped onto the first rock. I didn't stop until I got to the opposite bank. I looked back at Jim, who had already taken off his snow shoes and slung them over his shoulder. A light snow had just begun to fall as the sun disappeared behind the mountains.

"There you go, Jim...piece of cake."

"Easy for you to say. You used to do this for a living."

He was referring to my other life as a Marine, particularly the time I spent climbing the hills of Korea, where one misstep could send you tumbling down the mountain. Picking the right stone to step on without twisting an ankle became an acquired skill.

Jim made it about half way across, when his foot slipped on a snow covered rock and he took an involuntary dive into the freezing water. He was up in seconds, cursing like a drunken cowboy, and soaking wet. There was no way he could continue.

"Jim, we've got to get you to one of those fire-barrels before you freeze to death."

"Hell no, Vito, I'm not turning myself in. My body heat will dry me off."

I heard the determination in his words—I would have been disappointed if I hadn't—but I could also see the ice rapidly forming on his eyebrows and parka. "Christ, Jim, you're already starting to turn into an icicle. You'll be dead before we could walk another hundred yards. We've got to find you some heat, and get you off this mountain now."

Before I was finished having my say, he was shivering uncontrollably. "Maybe you're right, Vito," he said, through teeth chattering so badly I thought he might break a few, "but it still pisses me off to have to end it here. I'm no quitter!"

"No one knows that better than me." We saw the light from a fire-barrel about fifty yards up stream. "Come on, I'll walk you over."

As we approached, we saw that two of three men standing around the barrel

were students; one of whom had also had a close encounter with the creek. The other, Lt. Reed, was dry. The instructor handed Jim a blanket and told Reed and me to continue the evasion exercise.

Reed had also gone through the Cadet program with us and was no stranger. He stood about five foot six, was built like a Sherman tank, and had a personality to match. Life was always a little more interesting when he was around, and I was more than okay teaming up with him. I'm not sure he shared the same sentiments about me.

By the time Reed and I had walked another two hours, the light snow started to come down harder and the wind velocity picked up dramatically. The weather quickly deteriorated to near blizzard conditions, severely impairing visibility. The night was never so dark. Unable to focus on an object more than several yards ahead, it was impossible to take an accurate compass reading.

There were, however, occasional lulls in the intensity of the falling snow. One such break occurred when we found ourselves at the edge of an open field. On the other side of the level clearing we could barely make out what looked like a low ridge. I checked my map, did a quick mental calculation as to how far we had gone since leaving that warm fire, and took a reading with my Lensatic Compass. "Reedy, according to my calculations, all we have to do is climb that little ridge over there and we're home free."

"Yeah, if you say so. You're the only Marine here, so I guess I'll have to trust you. I have no idea where in the hell we are!"

I looked at him and smiled through near frozen lips, hoping that his trust in me wasn't misplaced. "You got that right. It won't be long now before we're warming our hands over a hot cup of coffee at the Officer's Club."

"Coffee, my ass, I'll have a scotch...a double."

*That's the Reed I know and love.* I thought. His acerbic quip was what I wanted to hear. It reassured me of his determination to "get home." When we got to the base of the ridge, it appeared to be about a two hundred foot climb to the top. I couldn't be sure, because of the low cloud cover. "Reedy, all we have to do is get to the top of this ridge and it's all downhill from there."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Hell no. Do you have any better ideas?"

"Hell, no!"

"I just said that," I repeated, with a smile. "Tighten the straps to your shoes and stay close." I've climbed steeper hills with heavier loads on my back, but never on snowshoes in near blizzard conditions. It was tough, slow going, but we made it to what we thought was the top. It wasn't. That "little ridge" was only the first. There was another, just as high and just as steep. I looked at a tired Reed. He was breathing hard, but seemed okay.

"Slight miscalculation. Looks like we have another little climb before we're there. We'll take a short break here." Reed grunted his approval through deep breaths, grateful for the reprieve.

We made it to the top of that second ridge, only to be confronted by another, just as daunting as the first. And there would be one more after that, before we found ourselves standing on the top of the very hill we were warned by our instructors to avoid at all costs, the abominable “Billy Hill.”

Reed was nearly exhausted when we reached the fourth level; which was probably a good thing for me, because, if he had had the strength, I’m sure he would have thrown me off the mountain. Instead, he heaved up what little food we were able to consume before we started up that godforsaken hill. We took a well needed break before starting down the other side.

“Billy’s” backside was as steep as the front and even more treacherous. It was impossible to keep our footing in the frozen snow. When we slipped—as we often did—we simply leaned into the mountain and slid down on our butts and backpacks. It was kind of exhilarating, even fun, and didn’t take nearly as long to get to the bottom of the hill as it did to make the climb. By the time we reached the base, the warming glow of a slowly emerging sun began to push aside the darkness.

We were well ahead of schedule and—with only about a mile left to go—in no hurry to reach the check-in point. Even at a much slower pace, we reached that small wooden shack about a half hour before the official open time. To our relief, the instructors waiting for us did not make an issue of it. Instead, they congratulated us on completing the course and invited us in to warm up near the pot-bellied stove. They handed us a hot cup of coffee, while looking at us rather curiously; like interrogators waiting for us to confess something they already knew.

“So, you two guys did it?”

“Did what, sergeant?” I asked, pretending I didn’t understand his meaning.

“Climbed “Billy Hill.”

Our sheepish grins were all the confirmation he needed.

We waited there until enough students had checked in to fill one of the trucks that would take us back to Stead. We didn’t mind. After spending a week in the freezing cold with little to eat, sipping hot coffee in front of a hot stove in a wooden shack was like sitting in the lobby of a four star hotel.

They dropped us off at the base gym where, before going into the field, we were assigned lockers to store clean uniforms and shaving gear. A hot shower and shave never felt so good. No one rushed. When I put on my uniform, however, I was surprised to find that nothing fit. My tailored Dress Blue uniform hung on me as though it were at least two sizes too big. Even my hat and shoes felt like they belonged to a bigger man. Before I started the field exercise I weighed 155 pounds with almost no body fat. When I checked my weight on the locker room scale it read 143. I had lost twelve pounds of solid muscle.

Breakfast at the Officer’s Club and the mandatory round of “war stories” was our next order of business. After listening to several, I excused myself before they got too far into the next. “Gotta go, gents, I have a wife and kid that are wondering if I’m still alive.”

I jumped into Dad’s ‘55 Packard and drove back to our little apartment in

downtown Reno. I knocked on the door. Ezdy opened it, looked at me suspiciously, and said: "Yes?" She didn't recognize me! I couldn't blame her. What she saw was a red faced man in a baggy blue uniform with his hat down around his ears. She actually started to close the door in my face.

"Wait, honey, it's me...Bill...your husband...Felix's father!"

"Bill? You don't look..." She cut herself off in mid-sentence and literally flew into my arms, hugging me tightly. "What happened to you?"

Smiling, I said, "Well, when you don't get much to eat for a week, and you've been exposed to the sun and snow in the High Sierras, this is what happens. But, I feel fine. You should see the other guy."

"That's not funny."

# 20

## **The Fighter Pilot**

We bid farewell to our good friend, Jim Craig before departing Reno, then drove back to New York to drop off Dad's Packard. It was early April, 1958. Two weeks later I would be on an airplane headed for France. Ezdy was seven months pregnant and would not be allowed to travel with me. She, and Felix, would have to wait until the baby was three months old before they could join me.

Harlan Davis (the guy I "shot down" in Phoenix) and I flew out together. When we got to Chaumont Air Base, home of the 48<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Wing (renamed the 48<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing a year later), they put us up in the VOQ (Visiting Officers Quarters) until we could be moved into permanent housing. Harlan was assigned to the 493<sup>rd</sup> Squadron, and I to the 494<sup>th</sup>. We reported in to our respective squadrons the next day.



**Crew Chief securing the hydraulic panel of a 494th Squadron F-100D.  
Chaumont, France. 1959**

The 494<sup>th</sup> Fighter Bomber Squadron—distinguished by the red and white striped nose and tail, and the unit logo (a black panther riding a bomb)—would be my first operational fighter unit. It was commanded by a man who shot down 15.5 German Fw-190's and Me-109's while flying P-51's during WWII. His name was Major William T. Whisner.

Four of his kills were scored on one mission, in which he charged head on into the middle of thirty German fighter aircraft poised to attack the airfield in Belgium from which he had just taken off. He was leading a group of twelve P-51's when he spotted them and, without a second's pause, instinctively turned straight into them with guns blazing, forcing them to break formation. The Germans scattered throughout the sky to avoid colliding with the crazy American. Whisner's P-51 was hit on that first pass, but despite the damage to his aircraft, he shot down four Fw-190's before safely recovering his crippled plane on an airfield the Germans never reached.

In another war, one fought in the skies over Korea, he added five more Russian Mig-15 and 17's to his total flying the F-86 Sabre Jet. That feat placed him in an elite group of only seven fighter pilots to become an ace in two different wars. I was honored and proud to be a member of his squadron. He was "The Fighter Pilot" I wanted to be.

After his retirement with the rank of colonel in July 1972, Whisner bought a P-51 and, in the spirit of the barnstorming pilots of yesteryear, traveled across the

country from one air show to another. I refer to him in the past tense, because he died of complications arising from a wasp sting seventeen years after his retirement. He was only sixty five. In an ironic twist of fate, one of the greatest fighter pilots in Air Force history was shot down by a “bee.”

A week after Harlan and I arrived at Chaumont, we were assigned individual instructors and began our checkout in the F-100D, a more advanced version of the “A” model we flew at Nellis. It had more power, but it was also heavier—due to the addition of flaps, wing fuel, and new armament capability. It was also not as agile as its predecessor. Designed specifically for air to air combat, the F-100A could go from release brakes to 40,000 feet in less than four minutes. Had the Korean War not ended in July 1953, it would have surely ruled the skies over that war-torn land.

The F-100D, however, was reconfigured for another type of mission, and another kind of war, the “Cold War.” Before the Intercontinental Ballistic Missile came of age, it was America’s first line of defense against the nuclear arsenal of the Soviet Union, should the temperature of the “War” change. We stood poised to strike targets in Eastern Europe and deep within the USSR, from airbases that practically surrounded our one-time World War II ally.

My instructor and I took off, with me on his wing, to practice close and tactical formations, rejoins, lead changes, etc. Everything was going well until we made our first practice low approach in close formation. I lowered the landing gear on his signal, but I could not get a safe nose gear light. I called him. “Lead, I’m only showing two in the ‘green.’”

“Copy that. Chaumont Tower, this is Cougar, are we cleared right turn out of traffic?”

“Roger, Cougar. Call us when you get Two’s problem sorted out.”

“Will do.”

Following proper procedure, we left the traffic pattern and flew into an area where I could safely recycle the gear. I tried several times with the same result. A visual check by my instructor verified that both main gear was down, although the nose gear light never came on, indicating that it was not locked into position. I tried pulling up abruptly to force the nose gear into the locked position, but it didn’t help. I would have to land with the unsafe gear indication.

“There’s one more thing we can do before attempting a landing,” Lead said.

“What’s that?”

“Switch the nose gear light bulb with one of the main gear. If it still doesn’t come on, we’ll at least know it’s not just a bad indicator.”

I made the switch...nothing. Still no green light. “We can rule out a bad bulb, Cougar.”

“That’s it then, Two. We’ll burn some more fuel with the gear down to get you closer to a normal landing weight before attempting an approach. You okay with that?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“You could always get out and walk.”



“No thanks, I’d like to get back on the ground the same way I left it, with three wheels under me.”

“Okay then, let’s make it happen.” “Chaumont Tower, this is Cougar Lead, Two will be landing with an unsafe nose gear...declaring an emergency.”

“Copy that, Cougar, the runway is clear and the Crash Crew has been alerted. Call turning initial.”

“Tower, Cougar One, request clearance to enter the pattern from an outside downwind. I’ll be flying chase until Cougar Two is over the runway, then take it around to reenter on initial for a full stop—assuming the runway can be cleared in time. If not I’ll be requesting clearance to divert to Toul Air Base.”

“Roger, Cougar, cleared downwind entry, call turning base. The weather at Toul is VFR, if it comes to that.”

I started my turn onto base. “Cougar Two turning base with Lead in chase...three gear visually confirmed down, but the nose gear light still indicates unsafe.”

“Roger Two, cleared to land. Crash Crew is in place.”

As I rolled wings level on final, Cougar One broke out of formation and started his go around. He accelerated ahead of me as I touched down on the main gear at one hundred and forty-five knots and pulled the throttle back to idle. I deployed the drag chute while holding the nose up for aerodynamic braking; taking care to slowly lower the nose wheel to the concrete while I still had good control speed. There was enough runway ahead of me to bring the F-100 to a full stop with minimal braking. The nose gear held, and the emergency crew were there in seconds to install the landing gear pins. They signaled me to cut the engine and hooked me up to a tow vehicle. The 494<sup>th</sup> Operations Officer, Captain Dewey Hornsby was there to meet me and drove us back to Squadron Ops. We were clear of the runway before Cougar One called turning initial.

I got a lot of “well done’s” from the other pilots when I walked into Operations, but the one that meant the most to me was the one I got from “The Fighter Pilot.”

# 21

## Behind Friendly Lines

They asked for volunteers, preferably someone who had not been to the Stead Survival School; but I was “volunteered” anyway. I think they made 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants for just such occasions.

A few months after the 494<sup>th</sup> Squadron returned from its TDY deployment to Wheelus Air Base near Tripoli, Libya it was tasked to fill two slots for the survival school in Ramstein, Germany. The other lucky “volunteer” was 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Tom Pulham, a recent arrival who had not been to the Reno School. Tom was a big man who stood over six feet and weighed in at close to two hundred pounds. He was also a city boy with no experience living in the wild.

The German program was similar to the one at Stead AFB; i.e., academics, field training, and a simulated prisoner of war camp. Nonetheless, there were some differences. At Stead everyone spent the first three days as a “POW” after first completing a night obstacle course involving crawling under low-strung barbed wire and live machine gun fire. At Ramstein, the Escape and Evasion segment came at the end of the course and, if you could successfully avoid capture by one of the Army patrols covering every road between the start and finish points, you were “home free.” Thus, instead of being subjected to a very realistic, very uncomfortable prisoner of war experience, you could spend them at the Officer’s Club enjoying a cold beer and a hot steak.

Tom and I went through the first two phases of training together, and were also paired up for the “Escape and Evasion” segment; which began immediately after a spending a week learning to survive off the land. Unlike the snow-covered Sierra Mountains we had to deal with at Stead, the forests of Germany were rich with plant and animal life. Unfortunately, we were kept on the move from one site to another and given little time to catch a rabbit or snake to supplement the survival rations found in the seat kit we would have had with us in an actual ejection.

So, with little real food to replenish our diminished energy, we were not in the best condition to begin a physically demanding evasion exercise. I suspect, that bringing us to that weakened state was done deliberately, to ensure that few of us would avoid capture and thus miss out on the educational experience of life as a POW.

We were given the coordinates of the finish point; which was just outside the main gate at Ramstein. The route we took to get there was up to us. They cautioned us to stay off the roads, because Army vehicle search patrols would be out in force. They also reemphasized the cardinal rule that must never be broken, NO WHEELS! A friend would not be allowed to pick us up in a car, motorcycle, or even a bicycle.

We had two days to walk the twenty miles from the drop off point to the “free line.” As a Marine infantryman, who had been on many such long marches climbing the hills of Korea, it was not a daunting prospect. For Pulham, however, it was truly unexplored territory. I could see he was not comfortable with the idea of walking twenty miles through the woods and tried to ease his concern. “Don’t worry, Tom, I’ve done this before. I’ll get us there.”

I could tell by the empty expression on his face that my words gave him little assurance. Thinking that humor might help, I added: “After all, even if we are captured, what can they do to us? Throw us in a fake prison for a couple of days, deprive us of sleep and food, torture us...”

“Very funny, Vito.” It may have been the poor light, but I think I noticed a slight smile on Tom’s face.

We started out at sundown, staying in the woods most of the time. When we had to cross a road we did it on the run, making sure a vehicle wasn’t coming. Six or seven hours later we were ready to call it a day. It was pitch dark and started to rain. We found a small clearing in the forest, crawled into our sleeping bags, and threw our waterproof ponchos over us. The next morning we woke up to discover that we had picked the only spot with an opening in the forest canopy directly above us. Had we moved ten yards in any direction we would have been sheltered by the trees.

That didn’t help Tom’s mood one bit. What did help was the small farm at the edge of the woods from which we harvested some fresh vegetables for breakfast. We only took what we could easily carry. Cabbage and carrots never tasted so good.

During daylight hours, staying off the roads was a given. There were too many vehicles to risk it, many of them U.S. Army. On the other hand, trudging through the woods was slow-going and boring.

That second night we found ourselves on top of a small ridgeline, thick with trees and scrubs. Visibility was so limited, Tom had to hold on to the end of my walking stick to keep from losing visual contact. After an hour of stumbling around in the darkness, we entered a clear area and saw the lights of a small village below the ridge less than a mile away. Contact with other human beings, and maybe some real food, was never more inviting. Looking at Tom’s face, I knew he shared the same sentiments. “Wouldn’t it be nice if we could just stroll into that little town, find a gasthaus (bar and grill) and have a bratwurst and beer, Tom?”

“Yeah, but we’d get caught for sure.”

"You're probably right, but I'm really getting bored with all this hiking through the woods stuff, and I've had all the raw cabbage and carrots I ever want to see again. Even if we do get caught, what can they do to us?"

"Nothing much, except throw us into a fake POW camp, deprive of us of sleep, starve and torture us...generally make us more miserable than we already are."

He was throwing my own words back at me, but I could tell by his tone that he wasn't completely against the idea. "Come on, Tom, a cold beer and a bratwurst in a nice warm bar...what do you say?" He reluctantly agreed. Tom was a big man and needed the food and rest more than I did. "Okay, Vito...but, if we get caught..."

I had already started down the ridge before he could finish his sentence. He quickly closed the gap before losing me. At the village edge we stopped to check for signs of our Army friends. There were none. In fact there wasn't a soul to be seen on the town's main street. Before I walk us into what looked like a "Hansel and Gretel" storybook village, I should add a few more details to set the scene.

Tom and I had been living in the woods for more than a week, and hadn't showered, shaved, or changed clothes in all that time. With the ponchos thrown over our backpacks, and walking sticks in hand, we must have looked like a couple of hunchbacked predators to the villagers peering cautiously out of their windows. The darkness and light rain added to the ominous picture we must have presented.

As it turned out, the town was so small it didn't even have a gasthaus. Except for the remarkable sameness of the homes lining both sides of the street—little white picket fences in front of each—there was only a small grocery store and a building we could not identify. It felt as though we were stepping into a fairy tale world with no idea whether we would run into the "Wicked Witch," or "Snow White."

Before we passed the first cottage, dogs started barking, kids were crying, and the lights on every porch were suddenly turned on. People stared out of their windows into the unlit street, trying to see what was spooking the dogs and kids. I felt as though we were reliving a scene from the original "Frankenstein" movie. Only, in this film, we were the monsters. If I had any idea we would stir up that kind of apprehension in the villagers I would have stayed on the ridge.

Even if there had been a bar in town we wouldn't have stopped. Indeed, we hurried our pace to get out of there as soon as we could. Unfortunately, before we reached the village edge a man on a bicycle approached us from the opposite direction, staggering from one side of the road to the other. The town he was coming from obviously did have a gasthaus, and he apparently had a few too many steins of beer. He headed straight towards us and asked what we were doing in his town.

"Gutten Abend meine Herren. Was ist los?" I learned a little German in the seven months I had been in Europe, shuttling between France and Germany. "Good evening gentlemen. What is going on?" is a close translation.

From that point on, however, he was talking so fast I could only pick up a few words here and there. Luftwaffe...mechaniker...Focke-Wulf...fliegend, but, it was enough. The Luftwaffe, of course, was Hitler's Air Force during World War Two. Hans

(our new friend's name) was a Crew Chief on one of their best fighter aircraft, the Fw-190. The Luftwaffe service cap he wore was another clue. Despite his limited knowledge of English, and my equally limited German, we managed to communicate through body language and hand gestures. To anyone observing, it must have looked like something from another old black and white movie, one of Charlie Chaplin's.

When he understood that we were on an escape and evasion training exercise, he became excited and offered to help. He told us that a friend of his in the next town had a car, and could drive us to the finish line. "Nein, Nein, es ist verboten (No, no, it's forbidden)," I tried to tell him, but he would not take no for an answer. "Es ist gut, ist gut. Macht nichts (it's good, it's good, don't worry)," he said, and told us to wait there while he went home to store his bike. We said we would, however, as soon as he was out of sight Tom and I looked at each other, shrugged our shoulders, and started walking. Given his condition, we never expected him to make it back once he got home, especially if he was married.

To our surprise, before we got a quarter of a mile down the road, we heard him yelling: "Kameraden, warten, warten! (Comrades, wait, wait!)." It was our Luftwaffe friend, running to catch up. Oddly enough he didn't seem to be as drunk as he was when he first approached us. I think the excitement of joining our exercise may have sobered him up; or, maybe he had a cup of good strong German coffee before he left his home.

As promised, he walked ahead of us at a distance that would allow us to keep him in sight, yet give us time to dive for cover in the shallow ditch along the road whenever he saw the headlights of an approaching vehicle. There were many that night and, before completing the two mile walk to the next town, we became intimately familiar with the ditch.

Climbing out of one, Tom repeated his concern about breaking the "no wheels" rule. "I don't know, Vito," he said, shaking his head. I'm worried about the fallout from doing this. They might make us go through this damn fire drill all over again. That's not going to please anyone; not me, or our Commander. Especially me."

"Jesus, Tom, it's just a training exercise. We are not doing anything we wouldn't be doing in a real situation. It's not as if we planned any of this." In fact, it was what many allied pilots shot down over Europe had done during the Second World War; accepted help from the "underground resistance."

Thanks to our German friend, we were just following in the footsteps of those intrepid airmen—my boyhood heroes. For me, this made the whole ordeal of having to go through a second survival school in less than a year not only worthwhile, but fun.

Hans stopped at one of the first houses in the village, a typical little German cottage with a picket fence. He had us wait outside the fence, while he unlatched the gate and walked up to the front door. The porch light came on with his first knock. An elderly white haired couple appeared in the doorway silhouetted by the lighted room behind them. We looked on as Hans animatedly explained to them who we were and what we were doing, pointing to us as he did.

As he went through his pitch they nervously looked over his shoulder. Our appearance alone must have raised some serious concerns in their minds about the sanity of their young friend, who had obviously had a few too many beers. It didn't look promising for Tom and I. We fully expected to be walking out of town instead of driving.

We were wrong. After about five minutes of listening to him plead his case, they nodded their assent. I have no idea what he said to convince them. Hans probably just wore them down to a point where they felt it would be easier to play along.

Inside the house, Hans hastily introduced us and started to leave. I asked him where he was going. "To contact another friend," he said; the one who actually had the car—his drinking buddy, perhaps. "Sie warten hier, Ich werde zuruckkehren. "You wait here," he said, "I will return."

He was gone more than an hour. I think he had a few more beers with his friend. Meanwhile, our reluctant hosts invited us to sit at the table and offered us something to eat. Thanking them, we asked if we could first wash our hands. "Ja, bitte," (Yes, please) the old woman said, pointing to the bathroom. Hot water and soap never felt more welcome. We even shaved our beards. I noticed the relieved look on their faces when they saw us come back in. The table had been set with freshly sliced fruit, sweet cakes and hot coffee. There's nothing like a cup of German coffee, and the one we enjoyed that night never tasted so good.

About an hour later, Hans and his friend Kurt returned and backed the car alongside the shadowed side of the house. Nice touch, I thought. He was obviously excited and anxious to get started. "Komm wir gehen müssen!" He spoke so fast I couldn't translate all his words, but I caught the "come we go part." His facial expression and body language revealed the rest. We thanked the old couple who had courageously allowed us into their home and said our goodbyes. It's still hard for me to believe they took us in on the word of their drunken friend. I wondered if they themselves had indeed been involved with helping allied airmen evade the Gestapo during the war.

Tom and I climbed in the back seat of a small black four door sedan (an old Audi). It wasn't wide enough to take our walking sticks, so we left them at the side of the cottage. Kurt drove. Hans was in the right front seat, his steely eyes focused on the approaching traffic. It seemed as though every other car on the road that night was an Army truck or Jeep. We saluted each one as they passed, unseen in the back seat of that little Audi.

I can't speak for Tom, but I didn't feel the least bit guilty about breaking the "no wheels" rule. On the contrary, it was one of the most memorable car rides I would ever take.

They dropped us off just short of the finish point, about a half mile from the front entrance to Ramstein Air Base. If there were any Army search teams in the area they would not be expecting to see anyone check in as early as we did. On the other hand, seeing two men in military fatigues climb out of a small black sedan with back packs, might appear a bit suspicious. Thus, walking the last kilometer was the

prudent thing to do. If we did get caught, at least we would be on foot. We said goodbye to Hans and Kurt, and thanked them. "Auf Wiedersehen meinen freunden, danke." Staying in character, Hans stepped out of the car and saluted us before we slipped into the woods. He was grinning from ear to ear.

On the drive back to Chaumont, France, Tom and I stopped off at that little German village to properly thank the old couple who were so kind to us. Wearing neatly pressed dress-blue uniforms we appeared less threatening. We handed them candy and flowers we had brought. They greeted us warmly, and insisted we stay for coffee and cake.

One of the first things I noticed when we pulled up to the cottage was, that those little picket fences I had assumed were white the night we walked into the village were not white at all, but some dark brownish color. The old couple's fence was roof was actually painted black. I realized then, that it was only thirteen years since the end of WWII and many German families had still not gotten around to repainting their homes and fences.



**My '57 Chevy in front of a German cottage. Ramstein, Germany. 1958**

It didn't take long for word to get out that there were strangers in town. My big red and white '57 Chevy hardtop parked on the road outside the cottage was an obvious clue. It also saved us the trouble of having to hunt down Hans and Kurt, who were knocking on the door before the coffee was poured. We stayed long enough to hear an animated Hans go through an embellished retelling of that unforgettable last night of the escape and evasion exercise, a night all of us sitting

at that table would long remember.



# 22

## I'll Take A Dozen

Korea, September 1953

I was tired and hungry, two inevitable consequences of having spent eight hours manning a fighting position on Korea's 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel. The cold night air helped keep me awake, but it also spawned a huge appetite. When my relief arrived at six the next morning, I gave him a quick briefing: "The bad guys are out there," I said, pointing to North Korea. I then handed him the extra bandolier of ammunition I was carrying and left the fate of a country in his capable hands. Taking care not to step on a loose rock as I side-stepped my way down the mountain, I spotted the mess area the Marine cooks had set up at its base.

I strolled in casually with my M1 rifle slung over my shoulder and my helmet tilted back. A salty old buck sergeant—he had probably been busted a few times in his colorful career—was frying eggs and bacon over a big open grill. I could smell the familiar aroma wafting through the air long before I stepped into his kitchen. "How many eggs do you want, Marine?"

"I'll take a dozen." I said it as a joke, but the expression on his face never changed. "You got it, 'Leatherneck'." He started cracking eggs on the grill with both hands, counting aloud as he did. "One, two...four...six...eight..." I think he expected me to stop him before he got to six. I didn't, and, to this day, I don't know why. I had never eaten more than three eggs in one sitting in my life.

As he deftly dropped on the last two eggs, he asked me how many strips of bacon I wanted. "Another dozen should do it, Sarge," I shot back, enjoying our exchange of one-liners. Without missing a beat, he tossed twelve strips of bacon on the hot grill. "You sure twelve will be enough?"

"One for each egg...yeah, I think so."

"Coffee and bread is over there." He nodded to a table on his left. "Fill up your canteen cup and get your toast started. You're gonna need at least twelve slices."

He did a pretty good job of playing it cool—like he filled that kind of order every day—but I noticed the smile on his face as I walked away.

By the time he was through piling the eggs and bacon on my mess tray, there was just enough room for the toast and butter. I carried it, and a canteen cup full of coffee, to a table where a couple of other Marines were sitting. They looked at me, then at my tray. The expression on their faces told me what they were thinking: *“You gotta be shittin’ me!”*

I ate every one of those twelve eggs, twelve strips of bacon, and wiped my mess tray clean with the twelve pieces of toast. I did need to refill my canteen cup with more coffee to wash it all down. Best breakfast I ever had, and the heck of it was, I didn’t even feel stuffed. As a matter of fact, I felt so good, I could have double-timed back up the hill and put in another eight hours on the DMZ. Of course, I was only nineteen then and my metabolism was on fire.

# 23

## Hill 443

After the truce was signed we spent most days training, with an equal number of days digging a new trench-line along the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel. This included building new bunkers and fighting positions, and laying down hundreds of yards of concertina barbed wire. It was hard manual labor that molded me into the best physical shape of my life; but not as hard as it was to keep ourselves supplied with food and water on top of the highest point in the 7<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment's area of responsibility, Hill 443.

Helicopters were supposed to take care of that little chore, but, until a landing pad could be carved out of the hilltop, Marines would have to carry their own supplies up the hill. An individual load would consist of either two boxes of C-Rations, weighing thirty-six pounds each, or a five gallon can of water; which, while not as heavy as the rations, made the climb even trickier because of its constantly shifting weight. Add a steel helmet, M1 rifle, ammo web belt with a full canteen of water, and each Marine is carrying close to ninety pounds of rations and equipment.

Even after the landing pad was completed, the helicopters were often not available for resupply because of bad weather, maintenance problems, or a higher priority mission; such as ferrying senior officers to Seoul for a luncheon meeting. We were not very happy with Marine chopper pilots, even less so with our commanders.

Work on Hill 443 was done in three shifts of ten days each, divided among the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoons of Able Company. Until the first bunkers could be built, we slept in one man "pup tents." Normally we used canned fuel to heat our rations, but if there was a fire already going we'd use it instead.

One morning, another guy in my squad and I combined our rations (corn beef hash) in my mess kit and placed it over a wood fire. Unfortunately, we were distracted just long enough to miss catching the pan before it collapsed into the fire. Assuming we had just lost our breakfast I reached for another can of C-Rations. My partner, however, was a hillbilly from Kentucky and assumed no such thing. He

casually scraped the corn beef hash off the ground and into the mess kit. "We don't waste food where I come from," he said. "A little dirt just adds to the flavor." He wasn't kidding.

Life on the mountaintop was camping out in its most basic form and, were it not for the long hours of hard labor we put in each day, might have even been fun. By the tenth day, however, we were more than ready to head down the hill for a shower and a hot meal.

When the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon got back from another grueling tour on the "Hill," we looked forward to the relative normalcy of Company living. We showered, shaved, put on clean fatigues and headed for the mess hall for our first good meal in ten days. Fate, however, had other plans for us.

A fire broke out on "443," that threatened to destroy three months of our hard labor, and before I could take a first bite of that juicy steak lying on my mess tray, every able-bodied Marine was ordered to drop whatever he was doing and head back up the "Hill" immediately. I can't remember a time when I was more "pissed off;" not even in boot camp where, it seemed, the Drill Instructors took special delight in seeing your temperature rise. I left my tray—steak untouched—and rounded up my men.

As First Squad Leader of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon, I led the charge up a mountain we left only hours before. I set out at the usual pace, one that would take us to the top in about forty five minutes and still leave us with enough energy to fight the fire. I tried to maintain that pace, but every time I thought about the steak I had to leave behind, I felt the anger within me rise to a higher level. When it reached the boiling point, I exploded. "The hell with this!" Cursing under my breath I doubled the pace, leaving the rest of the platoon in my wake. It took me about twenty minutes to reach the top of "Hill 443," a record that was probably never broken.



**Able Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon. South Korea. 1953-54**

One of the newest guys to join my squad was a bodybuilder from California who prided himself on his strength and conditioning (That's not him in the picture above). Shortly after joining Able Company, he challenged everybody to an arm wrestling contest and bested all takers; until he got to me. When he saw me attacking the hill as though I had just kicked in afterburner in an F-100, he could not believe it.

"He can't do that," he said.

"You're seeing the same thing we are," his squad-mates said.

"Well, I'm going after him."

"You can try," they said.

He did, and after pushing himself a hundred yards up the steep incline he had to stop to catch his breath. He was still bent over and panting when the rest of my squad marched by with smiles on the faces.

I know I shouldn't have left my platoon, but I had to burn off the anger within me. I used what was left of it to put out that goddamned fire on "Hill 443."

# 24

## Lakenheath

President DeGaulle ordered all U.S. Air Force fighter units to leave France by the end of 1960. He may have forgotten, that only fifteen years earlier tens of thousands of American, Canadian, and British men and women gave their lives to free his country from German occupation and bring him back from exile in the U.K. I think it more likely his emperor-sized ego was unable to forgive us for doing what he could not.

Two of the three Wings relocated to Germany—the 49<sup>th</sup> to Spangdahlem, the 50<sup>th</sup> to Bitburg. The 48<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing (Statute of Liberty Wing), was assigned to Lakenheath Air Base in Great Britain. All three squadrons from the 48<sup>th</sup> Wing flew out on the same day. Our wives and families would follow about three months later, after we had reestablished our alert posture and operational status. We were heavily engaged in a “Cold War” with the Soviet Union at the time, and maintaining combat readiness was our first priority.

That’s how it was then, and the way it is now. In the military service, one’s personal life always took a backseat to mission. Our wives understood and coped with that reality. Our children, well, they found it a little harder.

A lot of work was done at Lakenheath in preparation for our arrival, and we didn’t miss a beat. We were flying training missions a day after we arrived, and were standing twenty four hour alert in aircraft armed with nuclear weapons ready to strike targets in Eastern Europe and the U.S.S.R. a few days later. Unlike President Degaulle, Prime Minister Macmillan welcomed our arrival in the United Kingdom and embraced our mission. He did not forget what we had sacrificed to keep his country free.

At Lakenheath, we could simply drive across the flight line to stand “Alert,” as opposed to driving to Germany, as we did when operating under DeGaulle’s rules. We even had a building designed specifically to house the pilots, with real beds in semi-private rooms, and a dining facility. It was a major upgrade from the engine repair shop in the cold steel hangar we called home at Hahn AB. We brought those

guys back from Germany as soon as we were up and running in England.

A month and a half after our deployment to the UK we were given our first ORI (Operational Readiness Inspection). It would cover every facet of flying operations: command and control, mission planning, intelligence, maintenance, supply, tower operations, administration, and, most importantly, the flying of simulated strike missions.

Many of the exercise targets were located in southern France and—since air-to-air refueling was not yet available—required us to fly a “high-low-high” profile. We would climb to a high cruise altitude after takeoff, let down about one hundred miles from the target and fly in the rest of the way below a hundred feet. Flying over the target, we would execute a simulated nuclear weapons delivery, then climb back to cruise altitude for an instrument recovery at Lakenheath. The characteristically bad weather in Great Britain made VFR (Visual Flight Rule) recoveries a rarity.

Given the nature of the weapon we simulated carrying on these missions, all sorties were usually flown solo (single ship, single pilot). Some, however, were flown with an inspector in the back seat of an F-100F. I had that “privilege” on a previous ORI the 48<sup>th</sup> Wing was given while still in France. I was a 2nd Lieutenant then and my backseater was a “desk jockey” Major from USAFE Headquarters. My target that day was a bridge deep in the south of France, and I elected to fly the same hi-lo-hi profile just described above. By taking the most direct route in, I hit the bridge within five seconds of my TOT (Time-Over-Target).



In the detailed debriefing of the entire flight profile, I noted the closeness of my time over target and the successful simulated destruction of the bridge using the

“over the shoulder” delivery technique. I expected to hear some positive feedback from the Major, maybe even a “well done.” Instead, he asked me why I chose to approach the target from north to south.

“If you had made your run from the south you would have had a clearer look at the bridge from farther out.”

It sounded more like an admonition than a suggestion. Ignoring his puzzling criticism, I explained: “Well, sir, I chose that approach to the target because it provided better terrain masking, allowing me to avoid enemy radar detection until it was too late for them react defensively. A direct approach also got me there sooner, using less fuel in the process. Many of our real-world targets are so deep into Eastern Europe and the USSR, we wouldn’t have enough fuel to make it back to our home base.”

“Why do you want to get back?”

My Squadron Commander, Major Whisner, who was sitting in on the debriefing, had the same incredulous look on his face as I must have had on mine. But, before he could step in, I looked straight into the eyes of my Headquarters antagonist and calmly asked: “*Are you going?*”

That pretty much wrapped up the debriefing. He practically jumped out of his chair, knocking it over, and stormed out of the room. I didn’t see him again for the remainder of the ORI. However, he did have a few choice words to say about the incident in his written report.

Major Whisner later called me into his office to discuss it, but he did so with a “wink and a nod,” and simply advised me to be a bit more careful about choosing my words when talking to senior officers, especially those from higher headquarters. “When some of those guys get up there,” he counselled, “they forget what it was like ‘in the trenches.’”

The same Major and I ran into each other again five years later at Homestead Air Force Base, Florida, during the “Cuban Missile Crisis.” I could tell by the expression on his face that he was not happy to see me. We managed to share a polite hello and exchange a few words, but it was obvious he never forgot our first encounter and continued to harbor a grudge. He was also just as arrogant and overbearing as a Lt. Colonel as he was as a Major—a career headquarters bureaucrat with all the answers. He would not be going to Cuba either.

For our first “Readiness Inspection” at Lakenheath, I would be flying solo, and my mission profile would take me very near the town of Chaumont. The Air Base itself was a few miles away, but our base housing was located at the edge of the town. Ezdy, Felix, Steven, and my new son, Jimmy were still living there and I was not about to fly back to England without saying hello.

After completing my assigned mission, I climbed to twenty thousand feet and set course for Lakenheath. Thirty thousand feet would have been a more fuel efficient cruise altitude, but I had other plans that day. Chaumont was no more than twenty miles left of my return heading—the Air Base, about five miles further west. With both in sight, I started my descent and headed for the east side of town. Our home



was situated on a corner lot, near the entrance to the housing area. I kept it centered on my windscreen and descended to less than fifty feet above the ground in full military power. Just before reaching our home I engaged the afterburner and pulled up into a slow aileron roll. *They'll know who that was.*

By the time I could turn around for a second pass, Ezdy, Felix, and Steven were running out of the house, waving at me. Ezdy was holding Jimmy (our newest son) in her free arm. I think I saw him wave too.

They were expecting my visit, because I had called her the day before to tell her I'd be dropping in. I made several more low passes right over their heads, performing consecutive aileron rolls as I did. They loved it, and I felt a little bit better about leaving them in France while the 48<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing was brought up to "fighting speed" in its new home.

Our next door neighbor, a fighter pilot from one of the other squadrons who happened to be there visiting his family had an entirely different view of my visit. Ezdy heard him cursing me out, telling his wife I was a dangerous pilot, and that he would report me to Wing Headquarters.

When I got back to Lakenheath I learned that two such incidents had been reported. Some other intrepid airman had decided that, with all the fighter aircraft gone from Chaumont Air Base it would be a really good time to buzz the Tower. I never found out who that pilot was, but I admired his audacity.

I also secretly thanked him for taking some of the heat off me; as, no doubt, I had done for him. Had there been only one incident to contend with, the Wing Commander, Colonel Stanton T. Smith might have taken sterner measures; such as grounding us, or even slapping us with an Article 15. Either one could end a career. But we were at war—cold though it was—and he could not afford to lose two highly qualified Bomb Commanders, who were simply doing what every other real fighter pilot did during WWII and Korea.

Nevertheless, he had to go through the motions before reporting back to USAFE Headquarters. An investigation was launched, and I, along with every pilot who overflew France that day was called in for questioning. I had already made up my mind that I was not going to say anything self-incriminating. I loved flying too much to lose my wings over a harmless bit of low flying aerobatics.

Colonel Bruce Hinton, the Wing Director of Operations was my interviewer. It was obvious by the questions he asked, that he was more interested in me keeping my wings than he was in taking them. I left his office with my wings intact and some friendly advice about being a bit more careful as to where, when, and who I buzz. I took his advice to heart, and was never again caught for doing that immensely satisfying deed; but it wouldn't be long before he and I would be having another "serious conversation."

# 25

## Sharing the Same Sky

Night flying was not something most fighter pilots looked forward to, especially in the United Kingdom where the weather almost always compounded the visibility problem—as it did that fateful night. I took off at sunset to fly a routine cross-country that would take me over several countries in Europe before doubling back to England. By the time I was over the Lakenheath ADF (Automatic Direction Finder) the weather had dropped to less than two hundred feet overcast with about a mile visibility. Normally, this would not be problem. Since I still had plenty of gas in the tank, I would execute an ADF penetration with a hand-off to GCA (Ground Controlled Approach), then fly several low approaches before calling it a night.



**Coasting into Vietnam. Delivering a replacement F-100D to Phu Cat Air Base. 1966**

On my second “go around,” however, a light rain began to fall. I decided to make the next one a full-stop before the weather deteriorated to the point where I would be forced to divert to another base. Faced with that prospect, and to conserve my remaining fuel, I delayed lowering my landing gear until the turn to final—an action normally completed in the base turn.

“GCA...Cougar 31 turning final for a full-stop landing.”

“Roger, Cougar, call with gear down and locked.”

The gear locked in place as I rolled out on final. “Cougar, on final with ‘three in the green.’”

“Roger, Cougar, turn right two degrees, and maintain 1200 feet...glide path in one mile.”

“Cougar turning right two degrees. Say visibility.”

“A mile and a quarter in light rain.”

“Copy that.” The rain would cut the visibility even more. I could not afford to be anything less than perfectly aligned with the runway centerline when I broke out of the clouds.

“Cougar, you’re thirty feet high, increase rate of descent and turn left two degrees.”

“Roger, turning left two degrees...increasing descent.” A little left rudder brought me back on course, as my vertical speed settled on 850 feet per minute.

Tower called seconds later. “Looking good, Cougar. We have you on centerline and glide path, passing five hundred feet.”

“Roger that.” I eased back on the stick to hold the glide path. Another correction would not be needed until I broke through the overcast to find myself a thousand feet from the runway and slightly left of the centerline. I tapped the right rudder as I reached over to the lower left side of the instrument panel to turn on the landing lights. That done, I focused on making a smooth round-out and touchdown, while continuously crosschecking my airspeed. “GCA, Cougar has the runway in sight...airspeed’s high.”

“In sight, Cougar...cleared full stop.”

I wanted to call it a night, but my airspeed would not cooperate. “I’m taking it around, Tower...too hot for a safe approach.”

My next, and fourth attempt to get it on the ground, also resulted in an airspeed too high to risk landing on a wet runway. If the drag chute were to malfunction, and I failed to get a successful barrier engagement, “Sabre” and I would find ourselves mired in mud off the runway end. “Tower, Cougar’s on the go. Let’s try it again.” I took it around for a fifth and, hopefully, final attempt. At that point, I was indicating less than 700 pounds of fuel remaining on a gauge that might be several hundred pounds in error. So, the next one would be my last. *It had to be good.*

Once again, I was on glide path, on centerline, and on airspeed when I broke through the low cloud deck. I flipped the landing light switch up, then focused all my attention on the round-out and landing. I touched down right in front of Mobile Control, pulled the throttle back to idle, and deployed the drag chute. The aircraft was rapidly decelerating, and I was just about to pat myself on the back, when my right wing suddenly dropped onto the runway. It felt as though my right main gear had collapsed. I was safely on the ground—just a lot closer to it than I had expected to be.

Still doing about one hundred and fifty miles an hour when it happened most of the visual effects were behind me, so I couldn’t really appreciate the dazzling shower of sparks created by the drop tanks and centerline pylon as they made contact with the concrete runway. The pilot in Mobile Control described it as one hell of a fireworks display. The tower personnel echoed his sentiments. I was not in a position to enjoy the spectacle, but I could hear and feel “Sabre’s” pain as her metal skin was being stripped away. We carved a scar in the runway nearly two thousand feet long before coming to a stop. Then...silence.

I was down and still alive. Fire was my next concern, but there wasn’t any, not even smoke. Since I would not be taxiing in under my own power, I shut down the engine and checked that every switch in the cockpit was off or safe; all, that is, except one. I unbuckled my seat belt and shoulder harness, climbed down the side of the aircraft and dropped onto the runway. As my feet hit the ground I spotted the small fire under the fuselage. I also saw and heard the fire trucks racing down the runway and decided it would be best for me to stay out of their way. They had the fire out before I reached the grass infield. No serious damage was apparently done to the airplane.

As I was admiring the way they did their job, a familiar blue pickup truck drove

up behind me. A tall, slim man stepped out. It was Colonel Hinton. "Vito...you okay?"

"Yes sir, but I just broke one of your airplanes."

"Never mind that. Airplanes are easily fixed. Good fighter pilots are a lot harder to replace. What happened?"

"I'm not sure, sir, but it felt like the right main gear collapsed on touchdown."

He turned to look at my handiwork. The fire-fighters had put out the fire, but kept the truck in place as a precaution. "Let's take a look."

We walked over to the crippled F-100 and looked under the left wing. I noticed that we had to stoop a lot lower than usual. "Looks like the left main gear is up...so is the nose wheel."

"Yes sir, it sure does." The wing was being held up by the fuel tank, which was still intact. The right main gear was also up and locked, but the right wing tank was a tangled mess.

"When the right drop tank collapsed it took most of the weight off the left," Hinton surmised. "Let's take a look in the cockpit." The fire crew had already placed a stepladder against the side of the aircraft. The Colonel and I climbed up and leaned in. "The gear handle is up," he noted.

"Yes sir, it is, but I could swear I put it down on the turn to final. It was the one item I never bothered to look at when I went through my engine shutdown checks."

He could see that I was genuinely surprised. "Gear handles don't move by themselves, and this one is definitely in the up position; but this isn't the time to figure out why. First, we need to get you to the hospital. I expect the flight surgeon will give you a clean bill of health and release you. We'll talk more about this in my office tomorrow morning."

The ambulance was waiting to take me to the hospital, but Hinton waved them off and drove me there himself. He dropped me off at the front entrance. I saluted and started to walk away, when he called to me: "Vito, when you're through in there, call your wife and kids. They must be worried sick."

"Thanks, Colonel, I will."

He was right about Ezdy. I called her as soon as I left the flight surgeon's office. She always knew when I took off and when I was expected to land. There's no doubt in my mind that she knew it was me as soon as she heard the sirens. Hell, we were living in a small mobile home so close to the flight line there wasn't anything that happened on the airfield she couldn't hear. At the first sound of the sirens she got the kids out of bed, dressed them, and sat them together in the front of the trailer. They would stay there until she heard my voice.

Norm Turner, a 494<sup>th</sup> pilot and his wife—our neighbors—came over to talk to Ezdy, but she wouldn't let them in. Norm pleaded with her, but she refused to open the door. "Please, Ezdy, it's important. We need to talk to you."

"Go away," she said. "I know something happened to Vito, and I'm not talking to anyone until I hear from him." After ten minutes of trying to convince her to let them in, they finally gave up. It was at least a half hour later before I called to assure her I was okay. When I walked into the trailer Ezdy and kids were all over me. Only then

did she allow herself to cry. She had been bravely fighting back the tears so as not to worry the kids. When they did start to flow they were tears of relief and joy.

I was too young and too naïve to fully appreciate the fear and anxiety Ezdy dealt with every second I was in the air. Though not a pilot herself, she loved flying as much as I did, and had a genuine interest in the missions I flew. When we first moved to England we lived in a little town called Diss and, even from inside our home, she could tell by the sound of its engine(s) what aircraft it was and which window to look out of to see it pass by—that included British, as well as American planes.

One day, while I was at work, she heard the sound of a passing airplane she did not recognize and ran outside the house to see it. A British Vulcan bomber was on fire, with thick black smoke trailing behind it. The doomed aircraft was only a few thousand feet above the town when the pilots and crew bailed out. Ezdy saw their parachutes open and followed their gentle descent to the ground. The chute of one of the crewman, however, never opened. She watched in horror as he fell to his death less than a mile from where she was standing.

When I got home that evening, Ezdy held me closer and tighter than she ever had before. With tears streaming down her beautiful face, she told me what had happened. The images of that terrible scene never left her, and I am sure they were still fresh in her mind when I was having my own little misadventure. I can't imagine her distress that night as she waited for my call.



**Ezdy leaving our little trailer in Lakenheath, England to “bring in” the New Year at the Officer’s Club—the same day she learned that she was pregnant with our fourth son, Robert. 1961**

The day after my wheels-up landing, my Squadron Commander, Major Whisner, and I were called in to see the Wing Director of Operations. Entering his office, we snapped to attention and saluted sharply. “At ease, gentlemen, have a seat...coffee?” We both declined. “That was one hell of a show you put on last night Lieutenant. I don’t know if anyone has ever done that before in an F-100. Do you, Bill?”

“No, sir. I’ve seen the P-51 ‘bellied in’ many times during WWII...a few more in the F-86 Sabre Jet in Korea, but never in an aircraft as big, or one that landed as fast as the F-100. Most of them occurred during daylight hours and were not nearly as spectacular as Tomasino’s. Some of those pilots were not as fortunate to walk away from them as he was.” He paused momentarily, deep in thought. “I lost some good friends in those bloody wars; I was relieved not to have lost another last night.” Whisner’s usually stoic face took on a more pained look.

“I agree, Bill,” Hinton said. “I also lost some friends in those same wars. I am reminded of an old adage our flight instructors used to tell us...you remember. ‘Any landing you can walk away from is a good one.’ Well, Vito walked away from this one; that was good. Now, he has some explaining to do, and I’d like to hear what he has to say.”

It was obvious in listening to them talk of their own experiences, and by the tone of their words, that I was in the company of two men who understood the uncertain nature of our business, that skill alone is often not enough to stay alive. Nevertheless, I had no intention, before going in, of making excuses for my mistake. "Colonel Hinton, I've gone over it in my mind a hundred times, and the only possible reason I could come up with for the gear being up, was because I either did not put it down, or I was so focused on the approach and landing that I inadvertently tapped the gear handle to the up position instead of the landing lights. Either way I screwed up and broke a perfectly good airplane."

"Well, I haven't heard that one before. Have you, Bill?"

"No, sir. But, it is possible, given the pressure Vito was under at the time; i.e., low fuel, minimum visibility, poor weather conditions, at night."

"Possible, but not something I would try to sell to the Wing Commander. Tomasino did screw up, as he freely admitted, and that's the only explanation the "old man" is going to buy. He doesn't like excuses, and I'm not going to give him any." Turning to me, he added: "By the way, Vito, you didn't break it. Maintenance found no structural damage. Aside from some minor sheet metal repairs, all they have to do is refit it with two new drop tanks and a centerline pylon. It will be back in operation in a few days."

"That's good news, sir. Thank you."

"As for you, I don't think I'll have any trouble convincing Colonel Smith to keep you on flight status. I know my boss, and his first priority is to maintain the Wing's combat readiness status. He's not about to lose a fully qualified strike pilot over an unfortunate mistake. Just make sure it doesn't happen again."

"I will, sir!" I heard myself say the words, but I don't know if they convinced him, or me.

Major Whisner and I stood up, saluted, and started to walk out. Hinton stopped us before we got to the door. "Bill, we need to get Vito back in the 'saddle' as soon as possible. See that he's on tomorrow's flying schedule."

"Will do, sir."

Looking at both men, I was never more proud of the fact that I wore the same wings on my chest as they did. I realized, perhaps for the first time, how fortunate I was; not for having survived another close one, but because I had the honor of "Sharing the Same Sky" with two of the best damn fighter pilots that ever strapped on an airplane.



# 26

## Vietnam

Cannon AFB, New Mexico, September 1964.

“Top Dog” was the code name given the accelerated deployment of experienced fighter pilots into Vietnam capable of directing air strikes in close proximity to friendly troops, Forward Air Controllers. They were to be in place, and “ready to go” before the first of the U.S. fighter jets arrived in-country. The 428<sup>th</sup> Squadron was tasked to assign one pilot to fill the job of Air Liaison Officer/Forward Air Controller (ALO/FAC) in Vietnam. Bob Siteman and I were both up for the next Temporary Duty slot and were called in to see the Squadron Operations Officer.

“I know you’re already aware of the reason I called you in,” Major Steinmiller began, “so I’ll skip the pep talk. This a high priority mission and TAC wanted you there yesterday; but we’re going to give you a whole three days to pack a bag and say your goodbyes to your wife and kids. Both of you were next in line for an overseas TDY; but, since only one of you is needed, I’ll leave it up to you to decide which of you it will be.”

Bob suggested we flip a coin and had a quarter in the air before I could voice an opinion. “Call it, Vito.” “Heads,” I said, reflexively.

I won the toss, but volunteered anyway. I knew that Bob had already made plans to take his wife and kids on a vacation to California to visit their families. Vietnam had also been the subject of heated debates in Washington, as well as in the news media, and I wanted to get a first-hand look at what was going on over there. However, when I explained my reason for volunteering to Ezdy, I left out the second part of my rationale.



**Bob (on the right) joined me later when the 428<sup>th</sup> Squadron was deployed to Danang Air Base, South Vietnam Dec 1964.**

Two days later I was climbing aboard an Air Force C-130, along with Captain Gordon E. Peterson, another “volunteer” from the 478<sup>th</sup> Squadron. Each of us carried an Air Force issued grey canvas B-4 bag. It was what we would be living out of for the next three months. Our first stop was Travis Air Force, California. Commercial air would take us the rest of the way. After a short lunch we, and few dozen other fighter pilots from every TAC base in the States, started to board a World Airways 707. It would take us to Vietnam, with stops in Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines.

Unfortunately, aircraft mechanical problems turned our short lunch break into a three day visit. None of us were happy with the delay. We were led to believe that “Top Dog” was a high priority mission and were hustled off our respective bases almost as soon as we could pack our bags. Now, we were told to wait, while they figured out how to fix the problem.

A MATS (Military Air Transport Service) base is an okay place to refuel and a grab a quick lunch on a weekend cross-country, but no self-respecting fighter pilot wants to “live” there. The action was in Vietnam, and that’s where we needed to be....where we wanted to be. We kept our respective commanders apprised of the situation. Had we not, we might have sat at Travis a lot longer than three days. They got things moving. Once we were back “on the road,” the rest of the flight went without incident.

Saigon, however, was another story. It seemed as though every “bureaucrat” in

7<sup>th</sup> Air Force had to brief us before we would be allowed to join our assigned units in Vietnam and start earning our pay. I had the distinct impression that the folks in Headquarters were either bored to death with their “white collar” existence, or just using the pretext of in-country indoctrination to justify it.

I could be wrong. Maybe they just liked hanging out with a bunch of edgy fighter pilots. Before they were through with us, however, we convinced them that we could not do our jobs as Forward Air Controllers; i.e., direct air strikes against targets on the ground, unless we could see both the targets and the fighter aircraft. Thus, we had to be in the air. The O1E (the military version of the Cessna 170 tail dragger) was already being used in Vietnam for that purpose. If we were to be effective, we had to be checked out in the O1E. They weren’t prepared for such a program before we got there, but could not argue with our logic and reluctantly acceded to our demand.

After a one-day academic crash course on the airplane and the smoke rockets it carried, we were in the air, deftly maneuvering a light-weight flying machine with a top speed of 125 MPH—about one tenth as fast as the F-100 we left back in the States.



**O1E aircraft with smoke rocket launcher seen in foreground.  
Tan Son Nhut Air Base, South Vietnam. 1964**

I have to admit it was fun making minimum run takeoffs and landings at Tan Son Nhut Air Base. And it was even more fun doing them on the manicured grass strips of French Colonial rubber plantations. On the other hand, landing one of those little “tail draggers” on an 800 foot long dirt runway carved out of the side of a mountain

in the central highlands was a true test of character.

The Montagnards—fierce native warriors who lived in the mountains bordering Cambodia and Laos—were always there to greet us, as were their “Green Beret” advisors. It was an honor to meet them both. Unfortunately, my assignment was in Quang Tri, a small village near the North Vietnamese border, and I would not see these brave people again during my time in Vietnam.

After some target practice with 2.75 inch white smoke rockets, our O1E checkout was complete. Since we were firing the rocket at a fraction of the speed and altitude we used in the F-100, putting it right on target was “like shooting fish in a barrel.” For a group of displaced fighter pilots, that part of our training was the most fun.

After Tan Son Nhut, we were farmed out to bases throughout Vietnam. I was assigned to Quang Tri, which is as far north as you can go without an entry visa for North Vietnam.



**A1E, a WWII Navy fighter bomber ready to taxi.  
Danang Air Base, South Vietnam. 1964**

My first stop, however, was Da Nang, a fighter base about midway up the east coast of the country. For the next few days, I would be briefed by intelligence and several other in-country specialists, before continuing my journey. These people seemed just as bored with their lot as their counterparts in Saigon. I think they found relief from their boring existence, by imparting their “wisdom” to someone who had not heard it before.

The ancient city of Hue was next on my itinerary. One of the fiercest battles of the war would be fought there a few years later. Once again, I was obliged to sit

through a series of briefings to familiarize me with the local situation. I understood it was to prepare me for the job, but little new was added to the information already given us in Saigon and Danang. All they succeeded in doing by delaying my arrival at Quang Tri was to further irritate a fighter pilot who wanted nothing more than to join his assigned unit and get on with the war.

My radio operator, Airman First Class Nathan W. Carstens, was already there. He and Major Phan, the Commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN (Army of South Vietnam) Regiment, were probably wondering where in the hell I was.

Three days later we landed our O1E on the small dirt strip at Quang Tri. I hopped out of the back seat, grabbed my B-4 bag, and thanked the pilot that flew me there. Airman Carstens greeted me with a snappy salute. "Good to see you, Captain."

"It's good to be here," I replied. Carstens would never know how much I meant that. Before I could say more, he took my bag and threw it in the back of the Jeep.

"Major Phan is anxious to see you, sir."

"Probably not as much as I am to see him."

We drove straight over to the 1<sup>st</sup> ARVN Regiment Headquarters, where I met Major Phan and Captain Thanh, his second in command. When I walked into his office, the Major was sitting behind his desk smoking a big cigar. In the three months I was there, I don't recall ever seeing him without one. Thanh was standing to his right. Both men were of medium height and slender build.

Phan returned my salute and gestured for me to sit. His English was limited, and my Vietnamese was non-existent. There was no time for the Air Force to send us through language school before we left the States. Fortunately, Captain Thanh's English was good enough to interpret for us.

Major Phan asked about my military background and training. I gave him a short verbal resume. "Ah," he said, "very good...fighter pilot. We need American air support. Thank you." I told him that I looked forward to assisting him in any way I could, and briefly explained my role as an ALO/FAC. I could tell by the way he expressed himself, that he took a lot of pride in his Regiment and the amount of time it spent in the field hunting down the Viet Cong. Before leaving his office he told me not to get too settled in, that the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment would soon begin a new operation. *Finally*, I thought to myself.



**Captain Thanh and me on field operation. Near Quang Tri, Vietnam 1964**

Two days later, Airman Carstens pulled our Jeep in behind the Major's, who led a convoy of M113 Armored Personnel Carriers and a long caravan of trucks carrying troops and supplies. The M113's were heavily armored tracked vehicles that could traverse practically any kind of terrain—ideal for the rice paddies and muddy roads of Vietnam. We set up base camp in a large open area about eleven miles to the west of Quang Tri. It would be “home” for the next seven days; from which we would run Search and Destroy operations in every direction, riding in and on top of the M113's, or on foot. We literally “beat the bushes” to ferret out the Viet Cong.

We even stopped at a small convent to question the Nuns as to whether they had observed any strangers in their area since the Regiment's last operation. I stood back to get a picture of Captain Thanh talking to the young Sister in the open doorway.



**Captain Thanh questioning Nun. Near Quang Tri, South Vietnam. 1964**

I'll never forget the puzzled look on her face when she opened the door for Captain Thanh and saw me taking the picture of them, and a seemingly disinterested U.S. Army Lt. Colonel with one foot on her porch. The Colonel was the military advisor to Major Phan, my army counterpart. The scene must have appeared as odd to her as it did me. *Strange war*. She must have thought the same.

Only once during the week we were in the field was contact made with a small enemy force (VC, or North Vietnamese Regular Army). They wisely disappeared into the jungle after a brief exchange of artillery and mortar rounds. We then returned to our base camp, where we would spend the night before convoying back to Quang Tri.





**Major Phan and the ubiquitous cigar. On a field operation near Quang Tri, Vietnam. Oct 1964**

That operation was started in the middle of the Vietnam monsoon season. The heavy rain flooded our entire bivouac area—with the exception of the access road and the abandoned school house we used for our Command Center and sleeping accommodations. To my surprise, we enjoyed a hot meal that first evening—consisting of meat, rice, greens, and cold beer—served by the Regiment's cooks who had to wade through waist deep water to bring it to us. I was impressed.

After a great dinner, Major Phan took out another big cigar. I waited for him to light it up before suggesting: "If anyone deserves a medal for this operation, sir, it's your cooks." I thought I detected a slight smile, but I wasn't sure if he appreciated my humor.



# 27

## The South China Sea

South Vietnam, 1964

One of the most unsettling experiences I had in Vietnam happened on a return flight from Quang Tri to Da Nang (a fighter air base, located about midway along the east coast of Vietnam).

Between the bi-monthly field operations, Airman Carstens and I would drive down to Da Nang Air Base, where I could get a few hours of flying time in the O1E (a light, high winged Cessna 170) to maintain my proficiency level. As part of my training routine, I would often fly back to Quang Tri to shoot practice landings on the small grass strip. If Major Phan and Captain Thanh happened to be watching, I'd fly the pattern a little tighter to demonstrate the O1E's ability to stay right on top of the ground action. I would also take each of them on a short air tour of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment's area of responsibility. By getting a personal look at what the Forward Air Controller could see and do from the air, I believed they would be more confident in the effectiveness of fighter close air support.



Flying the O1E over Vietnam. Taken before "Selfies" became popular. Oct 1964

Even before I took off to return to Danang, I could see the thunderstorms already building along my planned route. Quang Tri sits about ten miles inland from the coast, so I flew directly east, then headed south to Da Nang, while staying over the South China Sea, just far enough to avoid the storm cells. It would add a few minutes to a flight that would normally take thirty, but I was not about to get sucked into a thunderstorm in an O1E. Compared to a jet fighter it was little more than a manned kite.

Flying through a thunderstorm in an F-100D, a fast, fifteen ton aircraft capable of withstanding high "g" forces without damage, is one thing; attempting it in a slow, high wing Cessna is suicidal. I know this, because I've been through a few in the "Super Sabre."

My first such encounter with one of those storms happened on a night training flight in France in 1958—early in my flying career. Captain Dewey Hornsby, the 494<sup>th</sup> Ops Officer, and I took off after sundown in an F-100F (two-seater) to fly a "round robin" from Chaumont, France to England and back. After punching through a thin overcast we leveled off at thirty thousand feet. The weather was clear until we approached the English Channel, where we were confronted by a wall of thunderstorms that towered above us and stretched for miles to either side of our flight path. We could not go over, or around them without burning more fuel than we could afford.

I asked Dewey what he suggested we do. "Just take it through, Vito. It doesn't look that bad."

With that bit of assurance I pressed ahead. Within seconds of being swallowed

up by that monstrous black cloud, we found ourselves violently buffeted by super strong winds that came at us from every direction. I tightened my grip on the control stick. "Christ, Dewey, I thought you said it didn't look that bad."

Before he could respond, we were struck by lightning. Every red emergency and yellow caution light flashed on, lighting up the cockpit like a short-circuited pinball machine. We also lost our attitude gyro, the primary reference instrument for keeping us oriented to straight and level flight. Pressure based instruments, like the air and vertical speed indicators, were as useless as our radios. The only instruments we could rely on to provide us with any reference as to where we were in the sky were the turn and bank indicator and the magnetic compass— both very difficult to interpret while being tossed around the sky like Mother Nature's play toy.

I remembered what my previous flight instructors had briefed me to do in the event going around one of these things was not an option: "Set the throttle at cruise power and maintain heading and altitude until you get through it." Turned out to be good advice. We were only in the dark belly of the thunderstorm a few short minutes. It just seemed a lot longer. Once clear all the caution and emergency lights went out, and the instrument readings returned to normal. I reset the attitude gyro, and pressed ahead to our next checkpoint.

Hornsby, strangely quiet while we were getting beat up in the thunderstorm, was first to speak. "Good job, Vito." He then added: "I think we'll go around this thing on the way back."



**Cloud formations over the South China Sea. Vietnam. 1964**

Going around it was exactly what I was attempting to do on my flight to Da

Nang. And, while I thought I had put enough separation between me and the storm to avoid being sucked in, I was wrong. What would have gotten me comfortably by in a jet fighter would not be enough in the much lighter and slower O1E. The powerful winds that poured out of the top and bottom of the huge cell created a turbulence so severe I thought it would tear off my wing. All I could do was ride it out like a cowboy on a bucking bronco and pray that my airplane, while being stressed beyond its design limits, would remain in one piece. “Bird Dog,” is the nickname of the O1E, but its wing was never supposed flap around like one.

Gripping the control stick even tighter, I turned fifteen degrees east to put more distance between me and the ominous black cloud that threatened to tear my airplane apart—putting me farther out over the water and less than fifteen hundred feet above it. I couldn’t hold my altitude within three hundred feet with the wing intact. If it had broken off, I would have taken my first swim in Vietnam after taking a record-breaking high dive.

I don’t know how that fragile little flying machine managed to hold together and get me back to Da Nang, but it did. Guess it was just not my time to go swimming.

# 28

## Djerba

It was the Fourth of July, 1969. Our good friend, Bashir invited Ezdy, me, and the kids (Steven, Jimmy, Robert, and Ezdy Lynn) for a picnic outing on Djerba, a small island just off the coast of Tunisia.

Bashir spent some time in the States and learned to love the country, its people, and the freedom it represents. He wanted to spend the Fourth of July with us: “To celebrate the independence of America,” he said, as proudly as any American.

We drove west—accompanied by three of his friends—on the two lane coastal road from Tripoli, Libya to Tunisia. It was about one hundred miles to the border. The island of Djerba was located another thirty-five miles along the coast. Our route would take us through the ancient Roman city of Sabratah, built on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. It was an engineering marvel—beautiful, even in ruin.

We couldn’t take the time to stop and fully explore the legacy of a once great empire, but, seeing it again brought back memories of a previous visit. Ezdy and I had gone there the year before with Bashir and the Dassault Aviation sales agent, who flew down to sell the Royal Libyan Air Force on the advantages of buying their new “Fan Jet Falcon” business jet. As the acting Commander of the Royal Libyan Air Force, Bashir would be making that decision.

I took this photo of him, Ezdy, and the Dassault Rep standing in the Roman ruins. Just before I snapped the picture, our French friend remarked; “Do you realize that we are standing in the middle of a Roman toilet?” We laughed. Who said the French didn’t have a sense of humor.



**Our French friend had just told Ezdy, and Bashir that they were standing in the toilet of the Roman ruins of Sabratah, Libya. 1968**

The RLAF did not buy the “Fan Jet Falcon.” Instead, it bought the Lockheed “Jetstar,” and the added safety feature of four engines. Nonetheless, it was a pleasure to have met and spent some time with this amiable man.

About half way through our journey we passed through Zuwara, Bashir’s hometown. While Ezdy and the kids were seeing it for the first time, I had been there before. Bashir had invited me and my colleague and golfing partner, Major James Alexander, to his cousin’s wedding. That was a month before Ezdy and the kids arrived in country. I don’t remember many details of the wedding, but I do recall it being loud and boisterous, and that the food was great. They also served some kind of locally distilled moonshine that made everything seem even more “over the top.”

Bashir and I engaged in a friendly drink for drink contest neither one of us would win. We left his cousin’s wedding long before the festivities were over; which lasted well into the next morning. Bashir and I were in no condition to drive, so he handed the keys to his Jaguar over to Alexander, who had wisely limited his intake of “moonshine.” He drove us back to Tripoli, while we slept it off in the back seat. When I told the story to Ezdy, I tried to cloak it in the necessity of maintaining good diplomatic relations. She didn’t buy it.

About an hour later we crossed the Libya-Tunisia border. None of us had passports, but we were waved right through. Apparently, the people who live near the border of the two countries travel freely from one side to the other. More than likely some of them belong to the same tribe, and simply found themselves living in different countries when the geopolitical lines were arbitrarily drawn in the sand after World War II.

We pulled up to a small dock where two large wooden oar-propelled boats were moored. They looked ancient, like something once used as life boats by the Barbary Pirates. There were ten of us, and we would definitely need both of them. Bashir settled with the owners on the price, as we loaded an equal amount of picnic baskets and people in each craft. The island of Djerba sits about a mile and a half off the coast of Tunisia. The first unsettling thing I noticed as we climbed into those old wooden tubs, was the absence of individual life vests, or even life preservers. If the sea had not been as calm and shallow as it was, I would have aborted the “mission” right there.

But, we would be crossing the strait in a semi-sheltered area of the channel where the water was so clear you could see to the sandy bottom. So, I kept my concerns to myself. *If the boat should capsize, I thought, we would be able to walk back to the mainland carrying the kids on our shoulders.* However, before the afternoon was half over, I would learn how wrong my thinking was.

With the boats safely moored to a small wooden dock on the island we unloaded everything and carried it onto the beach. After spreading the blankets and arranging the picnic baskets, Ezdy and kids went looking for seashells. There were thousands to be found on Djerba’s pristine beaches. They returned with four bags full of some of the most beautiful shells I have ever seen. While they were gone, Bashir and I had been keeping an eye on the ominous black storm clouds forming to the north over the Mediterranean Sea, and decided to eat a little sooner than planned. We did not want to be on the island when the storm hit. I’m sure that he too had taken note of the condition of the old wooden boats and the lack of life preservers and vests.

The storm, however, was moving faster than we anticipated and, before we could take more than a few bites of the delicious home cooked couscous and lamb, we felt the first drops of rain on our faces. We hurriedly gathered up the picnic baskets and blankets and ran back to find the dock empty. The boats were gone. Their owners had taken them back to the mainland on the assumption that we would not be needing them for three to four hours. Cell phones didn’t exist back then, so all we could do was wait, hoping that they had also seen the weather closing in and would start back sooner.

One did. He pulled up to the dock about minutes fifteen later. By then, the rain was coming down harder, and wind had also picked up. Bashir asked about the other boat. “He will not come,” the man said, “too dangerous. I will take everyone in my boat, but we must leave now.” I’m sure Bashir was as worried about loading everyone into one boat as I was, but he said nothing. He looked at me and, with a smile on his face— so as not to frighten Ezdy and the kids—gave us a watered down

version of what the boatman had told him. “If we are going to do this, let’s do it now,” I said.

We loaded everyone into the one boat. The picnic baskets and uneaten food were left behind, but the kids would not let go of their hard earned seashells. We didn’t insist they leave them behind, thinking that keeping them preoccupied with protecting their “treasures” would ease their fears. Ezdy bravely hid her own fear from the children; but I could see it in her eyes, and she could see it in mine.

Before we were half way across the channel, the once calm aquamarine water between Djerba and the mainland had turned into a dark angry sea of whitecaps, its bottom nowhere to be seen. Our grossly overloaded ancient mariner was being tossed about like a toy in a child’s bathtub. *If this old boat were to turn over, how am I going to save Ezdy and our four children? I can swim, but I don’t know if Bashir, or any of the others can.*

The thought of all of us being dumped into the water at the same time was a nightmare that filled me with more dread than any mission I flew in Vietnam. It took far longer to make it back to the mainland in the choppy sea than it did in the tranquil water we had going out to the island. Nevertheless, we made it— thanks to the skill of our boatman, who knew the sea like an old lover. When we stepped out of that wooden relic from the past and onto terra firma, Bashir and his friends praised Allah for returning us safely. “Allah al ahkbar!” they chanted in Arabic. Ezdy had been saying her own prayers from the moment we stepped onto the boat— same God, different language.

The drive back to Tripoli was long, and thankfully, without any additional surprises. The kids slept most of the way, while the rest of us could not stop talking about the day’s unplanned excitement. Before we knew it, we were back in Tripoli, saying goodbye to Bashir and friends. Ezdy, the kids, and I drove back to Wheelus Air Base in our BMW 1600.

The sun was slowly descending into the sea as we drove through the main gate and onto the coastal road to the base housing area. I pulled off the road to capture the moment it sank beneath the surface. I had taken many photos of sunsets before, but that one, so rich in reds and yellows the sky seemed to be on fire, provided a fitting ending to a Fourth of July, a day in which the real “fireworks” happened on an island called Djerba.





The Libyan sunset taken the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 1968. The F-100 was later superimposed to create the visual for a book I would later write.

# 29

## Missing Man Formation

Two months after our Fourth of July incident in Djerba, another “Independence Day” would take its place in history—this time on the Libyan calendar. On the First of September 1969, in a brilliantly executed plan that gave him total control of the country in less than three days, a young First Lieutenant by the name of Moammar Gaddafi initiated a revolution that toppled the Sanussi regime of King Idris. Hardly a shot was fired and no one was killed. The blood would flow later.

A little known story about that fateful day in Libyan history has to do with timing. There were two (there may have even been three) revolutionary groups plotting to overthrow the Libyan government. One was comprised of junior army officers below the rank of major, headed by Gaddafi; the other, of senior officers, headed by an army colonel. Each group was known to the other, but neither knew all of the key members by name. To avoid an open conflict between them, the senior officers began ordering suspected members of the junior faction to foreign school/training assignments, Gaddafi among them. Thus, in an ironic twist of fate, he was forced to initiate his coup earlier than planned, preempting that of the senior officers by three days.

The Colonel leading the senior group was asleep in his quarters in Benghazi when he heard a pounding on his door. “What is it?” He asked. “Sir,” they replied, “you must come with us, the revolution has started.” “Not today, you fools, it’s the fourth,” he angrily shouted back. But, before he could turn off his nightstand light, the soldiers smashed open the door with rifles drawn, pulled the Colonel out of bed, and hauled him off to prison in his pajamas. He would stay there until a full investigation was completed; which, no doubt, included some serious questioning that would either confirm his ties to the ousted Libyan government, or absolve him of any complicity. Indeed, it was the policy of the Revolutionary Command Council, headed by Gaddafi, that any officer over the rank of captain would be assumed guilty

until proven innocent.

Major Bashir was in the United States attending Command and Staff College at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama when Gaddafi burst onto the world stage. As soon as he learned from his friends what was happening, he immediately flew back to Libya with his wife, Arusa, and their daughter to join the revolution. The moment he stepped off the airplane at King Idris International Airport he was arrested and thrown in jail. Unfortunately, his friends didn't know about the Revolutionary Command Council's edict regarding field grade officers.

His wife and daughter were taken to her parent's home. Bashir languished in prison for the next three months before being released under house arrest. Two months later he was allowed to leave his home, but remained under surveillance. That they could not find anything to charge him with surprised no one.

Bashir and I had become good friends from the outset of my arrival in Libya in April 1968—a friendship that stood in stark contrast to the prevailing anti-American sentiments that greeted my arrival. Unlike most Libyan Air Force personnel—still incensed over Egypt's crushing loss to Israel in the "Six Day War" almost a year before—Bashir was very pro-American, despite having played an active role in that war flying resupply missions to Egypt in the RLAF's (Royal Libyan Air Force) aging C-47's.

Our friendship grew even stronger after Ezdy and the kids joined me in Libya—long before the revolution. Bashir wasn't married at the time, but he loved kids, as did most Libyans. He also loved pancakes, especially Ezdy's. Every Saturday and Sunday morning he would stop by our villa for breakfast. The kids took to him like a favorite uncle. Even Jacques, our toy poodle, liked him; though he was afraid of most other Libyans.

When Bashir married his childhood sweetheart the following summer, he invited us and a few of the other American officers to his wedding. Bashir's marriage to Arusa was a courageous and unprecedented break with Arab culture, tradition, and Islamic edict. Since she had been formally married to another man (a Libyan Air Force pilot killed in an aircraft accident), and had a daughter by him, she was expected to never marry again. But Arusa and Bashir were too strong-willed, and too much in love to allow anything to come between them and their happiness. Arusa broke with tradition yet again, when she asked Ezdy to be the equivalent of her "Maid of Honor." Ezdy accepted without hesitation.

For a Western woman, and non-Muslim, to be asked to play an intimate role in a Berber marriage ceremony was a singular honor; one bestowed upon no other American woman before her. Moreover, given the strained relationship between our two countries since Gaddafi seized power, and the special friendship Ezdy and I shared with Arusa and Bashir, I believe it highly unlikely that her experience was ever duplicated by another.

There are many more tales to be told about our friendship, but I don't want to stray too far from this one. Those stories will be in my next book. It is important to note, that Bashir and Arusa were married in the latter half of July 1969, and left for

the States a few weeks later to attend a school he would never finish.

While Bashir was in prison, events on the outside were rapidly unfolding. Those specifically involving the Libyan Air Force often required my involvement.

Our USAF advisory group—which consisted of nearly one hundred U.S. Air Force officers and airmen—never stopped working alongside our Libyan counterparts during and after the revolution. Our maintenance personnel continued to work hand in hand with their mechanics, and we never stopped flying training missions with their pilots. Moreover, training continued to grow with the arrival of newly graduated pilots from the Greek Air Force Academy—where new officers and pilots received their initial training. Their willingness to accept our help, even while the revolution was still unsettled, was validation of the excellent rapport we had reestablished with them since the “Six Day War.”



**F-5A with new insignia, taken a few weeks after the coup. The space in the Arabic writing off my right shoulder once read “Royal.” It was changed to read “Arab;” i.e., the Libyan Arab Air Force.**

On the morning of the second day of the revolution, I learned that Lieutenant Fahti Tera, one of the original seven Libyan pilots to check out in the F-5, was killed while flying a night “show of force” mission over Tripoli.

He apparently lost sight of his leader in some thin clouds as they turned from the bright lights of the city into the total blackness of the Mediterranean Sea. I believed then (and still do), that Fahti experienced vertigo and became disoriented; that at less than a thousand feet above the water, with no visual horizon on which he could orient himself to straight and level flight, and only seconds to make the transition to instruments, he lost control of his aircraft and plunged into the sea.

I asked the other Libyan pilots if Fahti, or any of the wreckage from his plane had been found. They didn't know. "Is anyone looking for him?" My second question received blank stares. "Search and Rescue" was a foreign concept to them.

I immediately went to see their Commander, Lt. Col. Husumi. The door to his office was open and he waved me in before I could knock. "Major Tomasino, what can I do for you?" He asked me to sit, gesturing to a chair in front of his desk.

"Sir, I just heard about Lt. Tera."

"Yes," he said, before I could continue, "it is a tragic loss."

I saw the hurt in his eyes as he spoke. Husumi genuinely cared for his men, and losing Fahti hit him hard. "But we don't know that for a fact, sir, that's why I came to see you. Fahti may still be alive. If he is, we need to act now to find him."

"What do you mean...how?"

"We can mount a Search and Rescue Operation from the air, and from the sea. Our F-5's can cover a wide area in a short time using a grid search pattern. The Libyan Navy has Fast Patrol Boats that could speed to the site on our direction to recover any wreckage we find. Hopefully, we will also find a raft with Lt. Tera in it."

I could see the expression on his face change. "Fahti...alive? Yes, we must look. But we have never done this before. If you will plan and lead the search, I will contact the Navy to ask for their support, and obtain the radio frequencies we will need to coordinate between our aircraft and their boats."

"I'll get right on it, sir. Lt. Tera is not only one of the best pilots in your command, he is my friend. I first met him when he, and six of your other pilots were undergoing F-5 training at Williams Air Force Base in Phoenix, Arizona. I was going through a short version of the same program, so I could be in Libya for the arrival of the first new aircraft."



**Major Tomasino briefing Libyan F-5 pilots for an aerial combat training mission. Lt. Tera is sitting closest to the blackboard, Lt. Jummah Zaid is on the far right. The name of the pilot in the middle escapes me. Wheelus Air Base, Tripoli, Libya. 1968.**

As requested by Colonel Husumi, I planned the search operation and led the first of the F-5 flights that same morning. They would continue until sundown, but with negative results. The next day, however, we did find some wreckage, and relayed the site coordinates to the Navy Fast Patrol Boats. While they raced to the site, we orbited over the area. A few large pieces of what looked like the horizontal stabilizer of an F-5 were recovered, but there was no sign of Lt. Tera. We continued searching until just before sundown, but came up empty.



**F-5A over the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Libya. Searching for Lt. Tera. Sep 3, 1968**

I debriefed Colonel Husumi late that afternoon. We agreed that, given the conditions Fahti had to contend with; i.e., a moonless night, no visual horizon, his low altitude, and the likelihood that he experienced severe vertigo, there was simply not enough time for him to recover. Husumi reluctantly made the decision to terminate the search.

That night another idea came to mind, and I went back to see the Commander the next morning. I walked into his office and saluted. "As-salamu alaykum (the peace be upon you)," I said. It's an Arabic greeting, used anytime you enter a room with anyone in it, even a crowded restaurant.

"Wa-Alaykumu-salam (and upon you the peace)," he replied, returning my salute.

"Colonel, I have an idea I would ask you to consider."

"Of course, please sit down...coffee?"

"Thank you, sir...coffee sounds good."

He waited for the orderly to pour the coffees. "Now, tell me about your idea."

"Well sir, the Libyan Air Force has been flying missions in support of the revolution since it started a few days ago, and Lt. Tera has literally given his life for that cause. If anyone can be considered a hero of the revolution it is Fahti, and he should be so recognized."

"And he will be. When medals are presented, his will be awarded posthumously."

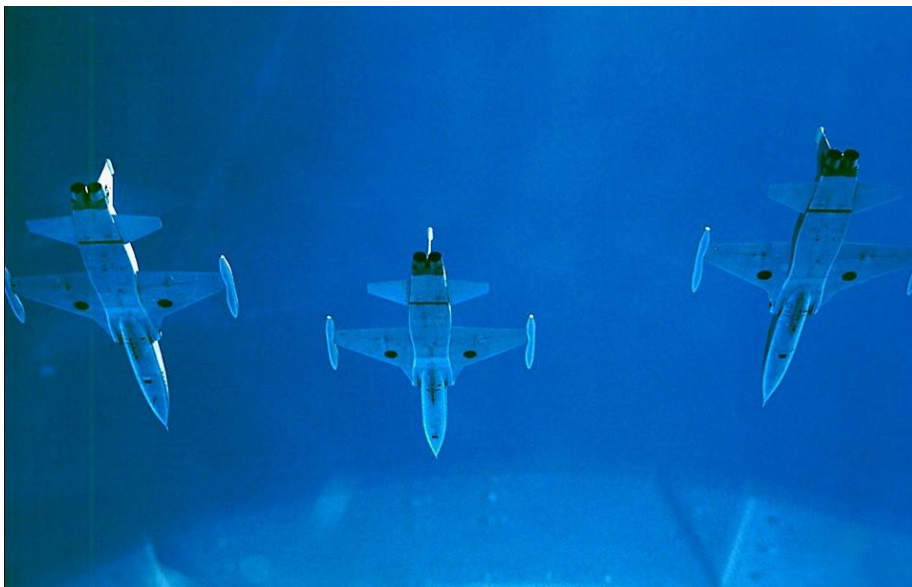
"That's good, sir, but I had something more in mind."

"Something more?"

"Yes sir. In the United States Air Force we have a special ceremony to honor a



fallen airman. It is performed whether he is killed in combat, or in peacetime. It's called the 'Missing Man Formation.'" I explained the ceremony in detail. "A flight of four fighter aircraft, flying in close fingertip formation is needed. The number Two man will be on Lead's left wing, Three and Four on his right. All four aircraft would fly low over the ceremonial site on the first pass. On the second and final pass, at about a mile from the site, the number Three man will pull up and out of the formation, leaving a space between Lead and Four before overflying the site." I used my hands to demonstrate the maneuver. "The passes would be coordinated with the ceremonial proceedings."



**In a true "Missing man Formation" there would be twice as much spacing between Lead and the aircraft on his right. Sep 1968**

Colonel Husumi liked the idea, and was deeply touched by my suggestion. He was a strong, yet sensitive man who took good care of his people, and they loved him for it. Indeed, the only reason he was not rotting away in a jail cell with Bashir, was because his men were willing to risk confronting the Revolutionary Command Council on his behalf.

"Yes, I like your idea. Fahti deserves this honor. But I must have the approval of the Command Council. I will meet with them this afternoon and give you their decision tomorrow."

True to his word Colonel Husumi called me into his office the following morning. "The Council approved the ceremony as you described it. We will do it."

That is good news, sir. I think the pilots you select for the mission should come from Libya's original seven F-5 pilots, Fahti's classmates."



“I was thinking the same thing, and you will lead them.”

My jaw must have dropped when I heard his words. They were spoken with conviction, as though any other consideration was out of the question. I tried to dissuade him from the idea as tactfully as I could, but I was not convincing. “Me? No, sir, I can’t. I mean, I don’t think it would be a good idea.”

He knew exactly what I meant. “Why? Because of the revolution?”

“Yes, sir. Given the current political climate, and the intensified anti-American sentiments, I don’t think I should be taking part in this, certainly not as the mission leader.”

Husumi uttered something in Arabic that, even with my limited understanding of the language, could be loosely translated as “screw the revolution!” “LAH!” He said, as forcefully as I have heard the word “no” spoken in any language. “No one has done more for Fahti than you, and, if you will not lead this flight we will not do it!”

I was at once stunned and humbled by his firm insistence that I be the one to lead the flight honoring a Libyan hero. More than anything else, however, I feared for what might happen to him. I wanted the ceremony to take place—Fahti deserved nothing less—but not at the cost of a man’s career, perhaps, even his life. I had to come up with something fast. “Okay, Colonel, I will lead the flight, but from the back seat of an F-5B with a Libyan pilot up front. I can still give him any direction he may need, but it will be his hands on the controls not mine.”



**Approaching a Libyan Air Base near Benghazi, Libya. The RLAF’s first deployment in their new F-5’s was to their Army Military Academy located near the airfield.**

Husumi smiled and said: "I will accept that." I could see he was relieved, but it was more for the fact that the ceremony was going to take place, than for any concern he had about Gaddafi discovering that an American would be leading the "Missing Man Formation." Nevertheless, he and I both knew, that while my compromise solution might avert political fallout for him, it did not guarantee it.

"Shook-ran, Colonel," I said...never with more admiration and respect.

"No, Major, I thank you. This was your idea. You have been a true friend and mentor, not only to Fahti, but to our young Air Force. This ceremony, and your participation in it, will not be forgotten by us, or the Libyan people."

# 30

## The Evacuation of Wheelus Air Base

Once in power, Lt. Gaddafi's first order of business was to promote himself to colonel. His second, was to order all U.S. forces to leave Libya by June of 1970. Anti-American sentiment had reached a new high, and there was a real danger we would react to it badly. If that were to happen, all we had done to regain the trust and confidence of the Libyans since the "Six Day War" between Israel and Egypt in June of 1967 would have been for naught. Libya played only a limited support role in the war; enough, however, to warrant holding back delivery of the ten F-5 fighter aircraft they had purchased from the United States.

Thus, the U.S. Air Force was presented with a huge logistics problem, one compounded by the harsh time constraints imposed by Gaddafi, and the emotionally charged atmosphere in which it had to be accomplished. Tensions were at a new high and, if left unchecked, could have easily deteriorated into open hostilities, destroying any hope of salvaging diplomatic relations between our two countries. Given those circumstances, the chance of an orderly and safe evacuation might prove impossible.

The arrival of Colonel Daniel "Chappie" James Jr. in August 1969—less than a month before Gaddafi's takeover—could not have come at a more crucial time. James was a big man, who stood six feet three inches tall and weighed close to two hundred and thirty pounds. A fighter pilot, of the "Tuskegee Airman" school, he never saw combat in World War II, but flew 101 missions in F-51's and F-80's during the Korean War. He went on to compile another 78 missions over North Vietnam, flying F-4's out of Ubon, Thailand, while serving as Vice Commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, commanded by legendary fighter pilot, Robin Olds. The other pilots dubbed them "Blackman and Robin."

Shortly after his arrival, James made it a point to visit every unit on the base, starting with the Royal Libyan Air Force; which was where I first met him. He did not stand on ceremony and seemed genuinely interested in me and my job as

Instructor Pilot/Advisor to the Royal Libyan Air Force. He had a way of making everyone around him feel at ease. No doubt it was his engaging personality, as much as it was his leadership skill, that enabled him to become the first African-American to achieve “Four Star” rank in any of the service branches.



**RF-101's from 17<sup>th</sup> Recon Sqdn, 66<sup>th</sup> Tactical Recon Wing, Laon, France  
on deployment to Wheelus Air Base Tripoli, Libya.**

After chatting with us for a while, our Detachment Commander, Lt. Col. Schneider introduced him to the Libyan Air Force Commander, Lt. Colonel Husumi. The next time Colonel James would pay us a visit would be September 2<sup>nd</sup>, the day after the start of Libya's revolution.

The RCC (Revolutionary Command Council) had been making unreasonable demands regarding equipment transfers needed to keep the base operational, and generally made life very difficult for our people. In response to the Libyans' confrontational attitude and unwillingness to compromise, many of our own people, including some high ranking officers, would have had us literally destroy the base, leaving it unusable. If we had done that, any chance of maintaining diplomatic relations with the Libyans would have been lost.



**F-100's over the Romulus and Remus Monument (mythical founders of Rome) and the old fort guarding Tripoli Harbor, Libya. One of the first things taken down by Gaddafi when he took control of the country on Sep 1, 1969.**

There was no such talk among any of the people from our detachment—at least, none I was aware of. We had worked too hard to regain a solid working relationship with the Libyans to sacrifice those gains to the emotional whims of a few disgruntled senior officers. Indeed, it was the outstanding rapport we had built with our Libyan counterparts the previous year and half, that enabled us to work alongside them during and after the revolution.

I also had a personal stake in how the situation would be resolved. My friend, Major Bashir Mekeshber, the former acting commander of the Royal Libyan Air Force was in prison. It was precisely because of the mutual trust Bashir and I shared, that we were able to accomplish as much as we did during the most critical phase of the RLAF's short five year history. His fate, and that of many other innocent men who were arbitrarily incarcerated simply because of their rank, or position, might well depend upon the atmosphere in which the Americans departed Libya. The thought that the short-sighted protestations of a few of our people might dictate how we leave the base weighed heavily on my mind.

I couldn't sleep thinking about it, the political fallout for the United States, and the fate of my friend. There had to be a better way. But, before going to Colonel James to voice my concerns, I had to have an alternative course of action in writing to present him. The ideas for that plan were literally formulated in my mind as I was lying in bed, half asleep. Before they could become a forgotten dream, I got up, sat

down at the kitchen table with a note pad and pencil and did not stop writing until a first draft of a workable evacuation plan was completed. Later that morning I dropped it off with the secretary in Wing Headquarters to type. I also made an appointment to see the Colonel that same afternoon.

"Come in, Vito. Have a seat...coffee? What brings you in?"

"Thank you, sir. I'll pass on the coffee, but I need to talk to you."

"You've got my attention." He could tell by my demeanor and tone of voice that it was not going to be a light conversation.

"Well, sir, it has to do with the recent edict issued by the RCC ordering all Americans to leave Libya by June of next year. I'm sure you've heard the negative rumblings of some of our personnel, and their suggestion that we leave Gaddafi with an inoperable airbase. I..."

"Yes, I've heard...take all our aircraft and airfield maintenance equipment with us, dismantle or destroy radar and navigation sites, knock down the control tower, even tear up the runway. If we do that, Libyan-American relations would be severed and the diplomatic door slammed shut behind us. I'm disappointed that some of my senior officers would allow their emotions to cloud their better judgment. But, I also understand their frustration and anger. Gaddafi and his people have been making life difficult for us at every turn. Nonetheless, as Commander of this base, I have to find a better way to resolve the issue." He stopped. "Sorry, I interrupted...you were saying?"

"I was about to say, that if we do that; i.e., leave Gaddafi with a worthless base, we will lose all the good will and diplomatic capital we have accumulated since the "Six Day War." I, and the ninety-seven other American Officers and Airmen who have worked so hard to reestablish good relations with our Libyan counterparts do not want to see that happen. You just made it very clear that you feel the same way."

"I do. It's been keeping me awake nights thinking about it." The Colonel looked at me like a man on a deserted island who just discovered he was not alone.

"I couldn't sleep either, and when the ideas started coming, I got out of bed while they were still fresh in my mind and drafted this plan; one that I think will allow us to hold onto our hard won gains, and make it possible to leave Libya with our honor and diplomatic relations intact." I handed him a copy of the plan.

James glanced at it quickly before laying it down on his desk, then settled back in his big leather chair. "I'll study this later. I'd like to hear it from you first."

"Yes sir. As I see it, there are only three options open to us. One, We could fight Gaddafi and the RCC on every issue, feeding their anger and provoking their total alienation; thus forfeiting any hope of salvaging anything of a bad situation; two, we could cave in to all of their demands and leave Libya with our tails between our legs, again losing everything; or three, we could take the initiative, stop merely reacting to their demands and offer them an alternative solution, one that would leave them with a fully operational base capably manned by their own people."

"When you put it that way, it's obvious that option three is our best chance to salvage the gains we've made here."

"Yes, sir, but it's not without its difficulties. It assumes that, despite the existing high-charged political atmosphere, we, and the Libyans, are able to set aside our differences to accomplish the side by side training needed to make it happen. Nor is there any assurance that they will even be up to the task of assuming full control of the airbase in only nine months. Given that their Air Force is barely six years old, we may be asking too much of them."

"I agree," he said. "It's not going to be a slam dunk, but what other viable option do we have?"

"None." I replied. "On the other hand, even if option three were to fail, we could still accomplish our objectives."

"How so?"

"The mere fact that we took the initiative and presented the Libyans with a plan that will leave them with a fully operational base, manned by their own people, will not only strengthen our negotiating position with the Revolutionary Command Council, but regain much of the trust and respect we recently lost. Thus, we can not only preserve our diplomatic ties with the Libyans, but continue to build on the relations between our two countries going into the future."

"You *have* given this a lot of thought, Vito, but there is more to your proposal."

"There is, sir. If I may, I'll walk you through the plan outline I just handed you."

James settled back in his big leather chair. "You've got the floor."

### **Wheelus Evacuation**

**September 11, 1969**

1. Task the key department chiefs to draw up specific plans for their areas of responsibility that would address both personnel training and equipment transfer.
2. Coordinate the plan with the United States Embassy in Tripoli to gain their insights and approval before presenting it to the Revolutionary Command Council.
3. Meet with everyone involved with the plan execution. Brief them on the overall concept, the reasons behind it, and the importance of its success.

The benefits to be derived from its successful implementation are:

1. Reciprocation on the part of the RCC in the form of greater cooperation in helping us complete a safe and efficient evacuation of Wheelus Air base.
2. The reestablishment of an atmosphere of mutual respect, which would hold open the "diplomatic door" between our two countries and preserve the security of American oil company personnel and our business interests in Libya.

“That’s it, sir. Do you have any questions?”

“Not at this time, but I may be calling on you later. Having worked so closely with the Libyans these past two years you have a better understanding of their mindset than anyone on my staff, and that can prove useful. Your plan covers the key items we’ll need to address to get the program started, including running it by the U.S. Embassy and the RCC for their inputs. The details can be worked out by the department heads. I also agree with your assessment of the political benefits to be gained. I’ve been tossing around similar ideas in my head for days, just never found the time to put them in writing. May I keep this?”

“It’s your copy, sir.”

I left Chappie’s office that afternoon confident that he would implement the plan I presented to him, or one similar to it. He did. And, as we had hoped, Gaddafi did reciprocate in kind, allowing us to complete a safe and orderly evacuation of all personnel and equipment by June the following year.

I believed then, as I do now, that how we conducted ourselves during “The Evacuation of Wheelus Air Base,” would make an impression on the Libyans they would not forget. More importantly, it allowed us to leave in an atmosphere of mutual respect...our dignity intact.



# 31

## **Bashir**

### **Part One – Before Gaddafi**

In an act of self-preservation, Israel struck first, destroying most of the Egyptian Army's tanks and aircraft before they could cross the Sinai border. When Syria and Jordan joined the fray they too were quickly beaten down by a well-trained, better-equipped, and a highly motivated Israeli Army that dominated the battlefield, and an Air Force that controlled the air over it. The Libyans played only a support role in the "The Six Day War," flying resupply missions to Egypt in their aging C-47 transport aircraft; reason enough, nonetheless, for the U.S. Congress to halt the delivery of the ten F-5A fighter aircraft purchased by them before the War. Delivery of the new jet fighters would take place in July the following year, three months after my arrival.

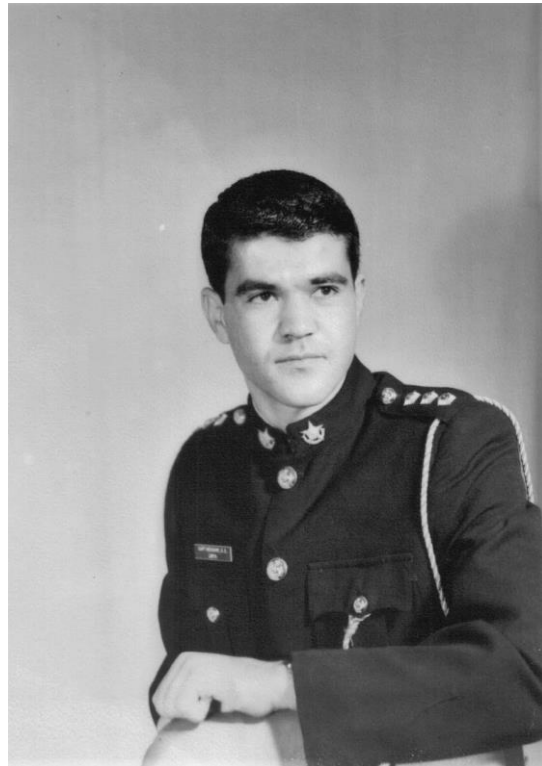
As would be expected, anti-Americanism soared to an all-time high during the war and it was apparent, from the cold but polite reception I received when I walked into Royal Libyan Air Force Flight Operations for the first time, that it had not eased much. The pilots that greeted me did so more out of personal curiosity than with a genuine attempt to make me feel welcome.

Their operations officer, Major Amrani, was not personally hostile towards me, but neither did he try to conceal his strong anti-American sentiment. The RLAF Commander, Lt. Colonel Husumi, was more accommodating. Indeed, he was very cordial, despite his own misgivings about American policy in the Middle East. We had a longer, more amicable conversation. I assured him, that the only reason for my being there was to give his Air Force a jet fighter capability second to none in the world. I meant what I said, and spoke with confidence.

Before leaving Williams AFB, I made a point of asking the Commander of the F-5 Training Squadron if there were any restrictions as to what I could teach the

Libyan pilots in terms of combat tactics, weapons delivery, and other flying techniques. “None,” he said. When I told this to Colonel Husumi, he smiled and offered his hand. “Thank you, Major. We welcome your help.”

I left his office confident that I would be working for a man I could trust to act in the best interests of his Air Force, a man who would back our efforts to help him install a credible jet fighter component. That feeling turned out to be truer than I could have imagined.

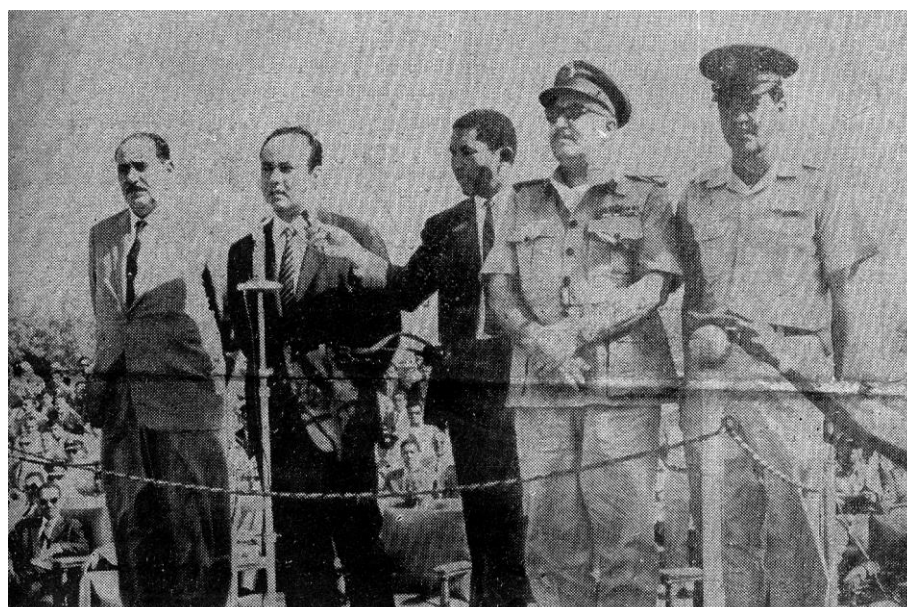


**Captain Bashir Mekeshber, RLA. Circa 1967**

There was another man I met on that first visit, Major Bashir Mekeshber, who, unlike the others, greeted me warmly. Indeed, despite the differences in our culture, language, politics, and religion, we formed an immediate bond; one that would serve us well during the most ambitious upgrade of the young Libyan Air Force’s combat capability. Bashir (like myself) had recently been promoted to major when—barely a month before the arrival of the new aircraft and the beginning of an intensive fighter training program—he found himself thrust into a position of responsibility he never anticipated happening so early in his career.

A month before the first F-5 landed at Wheelus, Colonel Husumi and Major Amrani—the two most senior officers in the RLA—were both assigned to attend military schools outside the country. Husumi was sent to the Air War College in

Turkey, Amrani to the Command and Staff School in Montgomery, Alabama. That left Bashir, a young bachelor with no experience in fighter aircraft, in charge of an entire Air Force. Granted, it was only five years old, and not much bigger than a U.S. Air Force fighter squadron with full maintenance support. On the other hand, it was also comprised of four different aircraft types: nine C-47's (WWII twin-prop cargo airplane), two T-33 jet trainers, one L-19 (A Cessna 170 tail-wheel airplane), and the soon to arrive ten F-5 fighter jets. Moreover, the immediate superior for the RLAFF Commander was none other than Libya's Defense Minister.



الاستاذ عبد الحميد البكوش يلقي كلمته في بداية الاحتفال بذكرى تأسيس السلاح الجوي الملكي الليبي وظهر الى جانبه منصة الشرف كل من: السادة حامد العبيدي وزير الدفاع و نورى الصديق رئيس اركان الجيش و امر السلاح الجوي

**(R-L) Major Mekeshber, the Libyan Army Chief of Staff, and civilian VIP's at the 5th Anniversary celebration of the Royal Libyan Air Force. Tripoli, Libya. 1968**

It was a daunting responsibility for anyone to shoulder, but Bashir proved himself as capable at the helm of an Air Force as he was at the controls of a C-47. Because of our friendship, and his trust in me to give him unbiased advice, we were prepared to receive the new aircraft, and had a training program ready before the arrival of Libya's first seven fighter pilots; whom I likened to our first seven astronauts. For theirs would be a comparable leap in technology and demands on their flying skills. We even laid the groundwork for a Forward Air Controller (FAC) program. Fighter pilots trained to direct air-to-ground attacks in support of friendly forces would add an important capability to Libyan Army and Air Force combat effectiveness.

FAC's operate from the air as well as from the ground, and I suggested to Bashir

that, as part of the training, we include a checkout in the only L-19 owned by the RLAF. I flew the same model—one fitted with rocket launchers and re-designated the O1E—as a Forward Air Controller in Vietnam in 1964, but had not been near one since. Nonetheless, he liked the idea and asked me to check him out in the airplane.

After a lapse of four years I was no longer current, and could have used at least one ride with an instructor before taking someone up who had never flown it before. *What the heck*, I thought, *this was Libya. How much trouble could we get into flying a light, single-engine prop-driven airplane that lands at a mere fifty miles an hour?*

What's that old saying, "famous last words?" The takeoff was uneventful, as were the aerial maneuvers; which included steep turns, barrel rolls, and a demonstration of the rocket delivery techniques used by the FAC to mark the target. The exciting part of the flight came in the landing. During our checkout in the O1E in Vietnam we were cautioned about the tendency of the aircraft to ground loop on landing. I never had one do it, despite the fact that I landed on grass fields in the middle of rubber plantations, and short dirt strips carved into the sides of mountains. But, that was four years ago.

My approach was normal and my airspeed was right at fifty miles per hour at touchdown. Then, shortly into the rollout, we went into an abrupt 270 degree left turn on the concrete runway, barely scraping the right wingtip in the process. Bashir and I got our first look at the dreaded ground loop. It was not my proudest flying moment, and I tried to play it cool. "You okay, Bashir?"

"Yes, but what was that maneuver you just did?" I detected a note of sarcasm in his voice.

"I was just demonstrating what could happen if you let one of these little tail-draggers get away from you on landing." I didn't think he would buy my explanation. He didn't.

"Sure you were. You forget, Vito, I know something about tail-wheel aircraft. I fly the C-47." He paused for a second, then, as diplomatically as he could phrase it, said, "Maybe we should leave the Forward Air Controller program for a later time. The new aircraft will be arriving soon, as will the first seven of our F-5 pilots. They will need to focus their attention on the *fighter* training program."



**Six of the original seven Libyan F-5 pilots are shown in their flying gear in this picture taken by the Tripoli newspaper. Major Bashir Mekeshber is standing to the far right, Lt. Fahti Tera, who was killed during the revolution, is to his right. 1968**

I agreed. What I didn't tell him, however, was that I was just as relieved as he was about shelving the FAC training program for the time being. Bringing the original seven Libyan F-5 pilots up to combat-ready status in air to ground and air to air tactics would be more than enough to keep us fully occupied. The initial training they received at Williams prepared them well, but the piling on of a second program, requiring dual aircraft currency, and additional academics, would have been too much for them, and for us.

That weekend—as he did most weekends—Bashir stopped by the house for breakfast before going to work. As a Muslim, his weekend was Thursday and Friday, whereas ours was Saturday and Sunday. That cultural disparity would naturally have some impact on the training program. Neither one of us liked it, but we managed to make it work.

Bashir took his usual place at the opposite end of the table from me. Our oldest son, Felix, sat to his right, with his brothers, Robert and Jimmy. Our number two son, Steven was on his left, with his sister, Ezdy Lynn. My wife, Ezdy—after whom our daughter is named—would take the chair next to her when she was through making the pancakes. She soon brought them out and handed the platter to Bashir, who served himself and passed it to Felix. When everyone was served she took her seat. Steven poured himself a glass of milk, leaving the pitcher in front of Bashir.

Jimmy saw his opportunity and did not hesitate. “Major Bashir, *Mid al haleeb*

*minfadlek*,” he blurted out, with a big smile on his face. I had taught the kids how to say “Pass the milk, please,” and a few other words in Arabic just that week. As usual, Jimmy had to be the first to show off his new found talent. He caught everyone by surprise, especially Bashir.

“Very good, Jimmy,” Bashir said, smiling. “Where did you learn to speak Arabic?”

A beaming Jimmy proudly replied, “My Daddy taught me.”

Ezdy and I looked at each other...proud of him, proud of all our children.

The original seven F-5 pilots completed their training at Williams and were back in Libya before the first of the new aircraft arrived in July of 1968. The aircraft were ferried over by USAF pilots and air-refueled by KC-135 tanker aircraft for the non-stop ocean crossing to Spain. From there it was a relatively short hop to Wheelus Air Base. The flight went without incident and, after a thorough inspection by maintenance, the airplanes were ready to fly the next day.

Bashir, Colonel Schneider, the Detachment Commander, Major Alexander, his Operations Officer, and I watched them taxi in and walked out to greet the pilots. After the introductions the flight leader walked Bashir around the airplane, explaining the features of the F-5 as he did. He also invited him to sit in the cockpit, and gave him a detailed briefing of the all key items: control stick, the afterburner function of the throttle, navigation system, armament switches, ejection seat, etc. It was obvious, that Bashir’s interest in the F-5 was more than just a passing curiosity.

Schneider and Alexander kept the ferry pilots entertained while they awaited transportation to take them to the VOQ (Visiting Officer Quarters) located on the American side of the base. While they were so occupied, Bashir asked me to join him in his office for cup of coffee. The orderly had already brought it in. Bashir poured two cups. I noticed that he put six heaping teaspoons of sugar in his cup, but did not stir it. I had seen him do it before, and never asked why. This time, however, curiosity got the better of me. “Bashir, you just put six teaspoons of sugar in your coffee, then left it unstirred. Why?”

“Because I like the sweet taste, but only when I get to the bottom of the cup.” He knew his answer was not going to satisfy me and changed the subject before I could react. “Vito, I have something to ask of you.”

“What’s that?”

“Can you teach me to fly the F-5?”

Having observed his keen interest in the new aircraft, I wasn’t surprised by his request. “Of course I can, but I’ll have to clear it with Colonel Schneider. He may want to do it himself.”

“He may, but I want you to do it. I will talk to him.”

The Colonel did, in fact, feel as though he should be the one to check him out, but Bashir insisted on me doing it. He suggested that Schneider be the one to give him his final check ride. The Colonel was not happy, but he saw that Bashir had his mind made up and did not press the issue.

Before Schneider arrived on scene, Bashir had seen me develop and write a flying training program for the new fighter pilots; one that included a comprehensive

ground school that taught aircraft engineering, weapons systems, emergency procedures, performance charts, etc., and flying training, covering all phases of fighter operations, weapons delivery and tactics. Add to that a flying safety program tied into the world wide information net and English language classes for his airman, I taught on the side, and you can understand why Bashir insisted I be the one to check him out in the F-5. He knew me well, and trusted me. He had also checked me out in his aircraft, the C-47, and I owed him one.

That little flap over Bashir's F-5 checkout was the first of many confrontations Schneider and I would have over the next year and a half. We did not see "eye to eye" on most things pertaining to the Royal Libyan Air Force.

Despite a background flying slow-moving, prop-driven cargo airplanes, Bashir was a quick study in the F-5. Indeed, he was one of the best students I have ever had the privilege to teach. I think he must have been a "closet" fighter pilot all along, because it took him only three or four rides to feel comfortable at the controls of a very fast, highly maneuverable jet-powered aircraft. Subsequent training flights would include instrument approaches, advanced aerobatics, and simulated bombing and rocket delivery techniques. By the tenth mission he was ready for his check ride with Colonel Schneider. He passed with ease.



**Bashir's check ride with Lt. Col Schneider. Aug 1968**

A few months later, with the training program progressing on schedule, Colonel Schneider suggested we take four F-5's on a cross country to England, Germany, or both, to bolster pilot confidence and "show the flag." Bashir told him he would run the idea by the Defense Minister at the next staff meeting. The request was

approved, but the DM thought it best to make the first trip to Athens, Greece, since most of their officers and pilots receive their initial schooling and flight training at the Greek Military Academy.

The flight would be comprised of two F-5B models and two F-5A's. Bashir would fly Lead in one of the "B" models, with Schneider in the back seat. The second F-5B took the element lead position (number three), with Lt. Jummah Zaid at the controls and me in the back. Lt. Fahti Tera and Lt. Nuri Lais would be flying wing positions Two and Four respectively. With only the limited capacity wing tip fuel tanks, and no air refueling capability, we would need to stop at the U.S. Navy Base in Sigonella, Sicily. Mount Etna, an active volcano, stood just seven miles to the northwest of the runway.



**F-5 painted with the new insignia of the Libyan Arab Air Force.  
On a training mission to El Quatia Bombing Range. 1969**

Upon our arrival at the Athens International, we were greeted by an official of the Libyan Embassy, who brought along two additional staff cars to take us to our hotel. Rooms were reserved for us at the Athens Hilton. He told Bashir that the Ambassador was holding a party at his residence and we were all invited. The staff cars would return to pick us up at the hotel at seven that evening.

One of the cars was a black, late model Cadillac sedan, driven by a serious looking little man who reminded me of Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda tsar; the other was a mid-sized 404 Peugeot, also black, and driven by a big burly Greek with a sense of humor. I fully expected him to entertain us with quotes from the ancient Greek philosophers. I wasn't disappointed. Bashir, Fahti, and I got into the Peugeot. Colonel Schneider, Jummah, and Nuri rode in the Caddy. We were the first



to leave, but caught the traffic light at a major intersection. The Cadillac pulled up beside us.

“Socrates” looked over at “Goebbels.” “Goebbels” turned to look back at “Socrates,” and the race was on. As soon as the light turned green we took off as though we were catapulted from the deck of an aircraft carrier, leaving the big Caddy in our wake. We sped across the intersection into the side streets of Athens, and never stopped, or even slowed down for another traffic signal or stop sign; relying on our horn and flashing lights to avoid colliding with an unwary driver coming out of a blind cross street. Our fate was surely in the hands of the Gods, as we raced through Athen’s foreign residential area like a resurrected Hermes .

We didn’t slow down until we pulled into the Ambassador’s driveway. Less than ten minutes had elapsed since “Socrates” launched us from that first stop light. He thought, as did Bashir, Fahti and I, that we had left “Goebbels” in our distant wake. Instead, we were the ones staring at the rear end of that big black Cadillac, and there was no one in it.

Bashir and I looked at each other in disbelief, and almost simultaneously exclaimed: “How the hell did he do that?” His Arabic was probably more colorful than my English. They not only beat us there, Schneider and the others were already sitting in the Ambassador’s living room having their first drink.

No matter how many times I tell the story, how “Goebbels” was able to maneuver that big Cadillac through the narrow streets of Athens faster than “Socrates” could in the smaller, more agile Peugeot, remains a mystery.

## **Part Two – After Gaddafi**

A young Army Lieutenant by the name of Moammar Gaddafi led the coup that toppled the Senussi regime. Gaddafi, was one of a group junior officers, known by their superiors to be planning the takeover of the government, and were thus quietly scheduled for reassignment to schools outside Libya. This was done to ensure their non-interference with the senior officers, who were soon to execute a coup of their own. Each knew of the other’s existence, but not their dates of execution. Fearing that he, and other key members of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), would be caught in the “purge,” Gaddafi was forced to make his move earlier than scheduled. Thus, he struck three days before the planned execution date of the senior group. Had he not acted when he did, the history of Libya might have taken a very different turn.



**A Libyan F-5 flying over King Idris International Airport towards the city of Tripoli, located on the Mediterranean coast. 1969.**

Gaddafi and his people took control of the country in less than three days, in a brilliantly executed and relatively bloodless coup—later declared a revolution. Once the Revolutionary Command Council had full control of the government, all Army, Navy, and Air Force officers over the rank of Captain were presumed guilty of collaborating with the corrupt regime of King Idris and thrown in prison. They would be held there until proven innocent.

Bashir had been attending the USAF Command and Staff School in the United States on that fateful day in Libya's history, but as soon as he learned of the revolution he immediately excused himself from Command and Staff School and flew back to Libya to lend his support to Gaddafi. Unfortunately, when he and Arusa, stepped off the airplane, he was arrested and thrown in prison. His wife and daughter were allowed to return to her parent's home.

Although it was little more than a year since Bashir pinned on his gold major's leaves, and despite the fact that he had been the acting Commander of the Royal Libyan Air Force for most of that time, his outstanding performance in that critical position would not exempt him from the purge.

Unable to find anything with which to charge him after three months in prison, Bashir was placed under house arrest. In January 1970 he was allowed to move freely outside his residence, but under surveillance. In May of that year, with the help of his friends, he eluded his "watchers" and escaped into Tunisia—about the same time Ezdy, the kids, and I departed Libya for Wiesbaden, Germany. Bashir continued his journey to Morocco, where he was met by other friends who provided him a place

to stay. His objective was to obtain an airline pilot's position with Moroccan Air; though he would have preferred to stay in Libya and continue his career with the Libyan Arab Air Force. However, he would never be allowed to return to active duty; despite the fact that the RCC could find nothing with which to charge him.

Bashir loved to fly, and wanted nothing more than to get back into the cockpit. Unfortunately, he was unable to obtain copies of his flying records before his escape. Without them, or some other proof of his flying experience, the Moroccan Airlines could not even consider his application.

He wrote me in Germany. How he got my mailing address in Wiesbaden, I don't know; but I knew of his resourcefulness and the many friends he had in Libya. In his letter he told me of his plans to apply for a job with Moroccan Air, and later send for Arusa and the children. Without his flying records it was not going to happen. He asked me for a letter of recommendation attesting to his flying experience, hoping the Airline would accept it—at least until he could obtain a copy of his flight records. A copy of my original letter follows:

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE  
HEADQUARTERS UNITED STATES AIR FORCES IN EUROPE  
APO NEW YORK 09633

DOCPE Maj, Vito Tomasino, Box 8841

Certification of Flying Time  
Whom It may Concern:

This (letter) is to certify that Mr. Bashir Buaglia Mekeshber has flown the following aircraft and flight hours as listed:

T-28A (Basic Trainer) . . . . .	203 hours (60 hrs Inst., 10 hrs WX)
C-47 (Conv Trans) . . . . .	815 hours (190 hrs Inst., 45 hrs WX)
F-5 (NATO Jet Fighter) . . . . .	19 hrs (All Contact)
C-140 (Jet Trans) . . . . .	2 hrs (Familiarization)

Mr. Mekeshber, whom I personally knew as Major Bashir Buaglia Mekeshber of the Royal Libyan Air Force (RLAF), left his country for political reasons and was unable to retrieve his military flight records prior to departing.

The validity of the above certification emanates from the fact that I had personal access to Major Mekeshber's flight records and training folder over a two year period, from April 1968 to May 1970. During that time frame, I was assigned to the RLAF as a USAF Instructor Pilot/Advisor. I had, on many occasions, flown with Bashir in the aircraft listed above. In my estimation, he is an excellent pilot with above average flying ability and an in-depth knowledge of aircraft systems

and aerodynamics. All of his basic and advanced flying training was accomplished through the exacting flight programs of the United States Air Force.

Bashir is a very intelligent man and is quick to learn new aircraft and flight techniques. Although he had no previous experience in jet aircraft, he soloed the F-5 (NATO Freedom Fighter) in less than 10 hours of dual instruction, encountering no difficulties whatsoever. Not only did he solo within that short time frame, but he demonstrated excellent proficiency in performing the many intricate aerobatic maneuvers needed to fly high speed fighters.

Bashir Buaglia Mekeshber would undoubtedly be a valuable asset to any flying organization fortunate enough to enlist his services. I can, without reservation, recommend him to your company for employment; and sincerely hope that this letter will serve its intended purpose.

Respectfully yours;

Vito Tomasino  
Major USAF

Bashir did not get the job with the Moroccan Airlines. My letter was obviously not enough to satisfy their certification requirements. It was also possible, perhaps probable, that one of Gaddafi's "Hit Squads" was getting too close, and Bashir was forced to leave the country. Be that as it may, he made it into Spain and caught the train for Germany. That would have been sometime in September of 1970, shortly after Ezdy, the kids, and I moved out of our temporary accommodations at the American Arms Hotel into base housing. The six of us (Felix left to attend Oklahoma State University in July) had endured three months at the "Arms," living in three small rooms. We were more than ready to move into a real home.

When Bashir got off the train in that big, very busy Wiesbaden station, he was quickly swallowed up in a sea of people. Hundreds of passengers were boarding, or getting off trains on a dozen different tracks. Porters were helping them with their luggage and escorting them out to the waiting taxicabs. A disembodied voice over a blaring loudspeaker was announcing arrivals, departures, and track numbers. Even if someone had been there to meet him, finding that person amidst such a dizzying swarm of human activity would seem to be impossible.

Bashir had no one there to greet him; but, for him, nothing was impossible. Like a man standing in the eye of a storm, he calmly scanned the huge terminal, spotted a tall man in a U.S. Air Force blue uniform leaning against the far wall, and walked up to him. "Do you know Major Vito Tomasino?" He asked. The man was surprised, to say the least. "Yes, I do. I work with him," the Captain answered. I can imagine the look on his face when a total stranger, apparently from the Middle East, singled him out of a crowd of a thousand people to ask him the whereabouts of a mutual friend. But, that's Bashir. He had the "luck of the Irish."

"Can you tell me where he lives?"

"I could, but who are you?"

"I am Major Bashir Mekeshber, formerly the acting Commander of the Royal Libyan Air Force. Vito was my advisor and good friend. He and I..."

The Captain interrupted. "Yes, yes, I know, he told me all about you. I'll do better than that, I'll take you to his quarters."

I was on duty at the Command Post the afternoon Bashir knocked on our door. I had no idea he was in town, let alone on his way to my home and, thus, could not warn Ezdy in advance. She told me later, that when she opened the door and saw Bashir standing there, she couldn't believe her eyes. "Bashir...what...how?" Words were not enough. Before she finished her sentence she gave him a big hug and invited him inside.

When I got home that evening, the three of us talked late into the night. He explained everything that had happened to him and Arusa since they flew back to Libya to join the revolution: his imprisonment, house confinement, escape into Tunisia, and his disappointment at being unable to obtain a position with the Moroccan Airlines—tempered, somewhat, by the fact that Gaddafi's "Hit Squads" were getting too close. That's what brought him to Germany. All of these improbable events took place within one year.

"What are your plans now, Bashir?" We asked.

"I met a man at Command and Staff School in Montgomery, Alabama. He gave me his address in Germany before Arusa, our daughter, and I left for the United States. Before leaving Morocco I wrote him a letter asking for his assistance in getting a job and permanent residence status in Germany. Since I was getting ready to leave Morocco, I asked him to reply to your address. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not," we said in unison. "You can stay here with us until you get everything worked out."

"Are you sure?" He had a worried look on his face.

"As long as it takes."

The letter from Bashir's friend, Major Peter Hanitzch, arrived a week later. He advised Bashir to contact the local German authorities:

"...Tell them what happened since Gaddafi took control of Libya. We have a law in Germany that allows you to ask permission to stay if you cannot return to your country without serious danger for your life. It grants you status as a political refugee..."

He also suggested that Bashir visit him in Hamburg to discuss the steps he should take to accomplish this, and the required procedures to obtain financial assistance to start a business in Germany.

Bashir did talk to the local German authorities, but to no avail. They would not grant him asylum. In the meantime, he arranged for Arusa and their daughter to join him in Wiesbaden. They arrived in Germany a week later, but were only with us three days when she received a call from her mother telling her that, if she did not return to Libya immediately, they would put her father in prison. The rest of her

family would also be in danger. Arusa could never allow that to happen. She and their daughter left Germany on the first flight out of Frankfurt International Airport, and got back to Libya just in time to prevent her father's arrest.

Shortly after they left, Bashir took a few days to visit his friend in Hamburg, but he was unable secure political asylum; without which, there was no chance of starting a business, or to find employment in Germany. I saw his disappointment when he returned. "Let me try," I said. I'll talk to my people in Intelligence...tell them your story; how you, as acting Commander of the Royal Libyan Air Force, played a key role in the success of the F-5 program. Given your help and cooperation on that project, not to mention the price on your head, I don't see how we can deny you asylum."

Early the next morning I went to the Command Post to explain Bashir's situation to the senior intelligence officers. I told them that, were it not for his cooperation as acting Commander of the RLAF, the F-5 program could not have gone as smoothly as it did. "Moreover, Bashir is my friend," I said, "and that friendship translated into a very successful working relationship. Major Mekeshber had nothing to do with the Senussi Regime, and was simply thrust into a command position he never wanted, or expected to assume so early in his career. Yet, despite his lack of experience, he took on that daunting responsibility and did an outstanding job overseeing the birth of the Libyan Air Force's fighter arm."

I told them about Bashir's return to Libya to join the revolution, his subsequent arrest and the reason for it, his release and escape into Tunisia, then to Germany, where his request for political asylum was denied. All I received for my impassioned request for help were blank stares. The lack of any positive response from them was puzzling, and left me with an empty feeling in my gut.

"Major Tomasino," the Colonel said, "thank you for coming to us with this information. We appreciate your concern for your friend, but there is nothing we can do to help. Asylum is out of the question."

"Out of the question? Why? I have never worked with a foreign national more pro-American than Major Mekeshber. For Christ's sake, his life is in danger!"

A man standing next to the Colonel—not wearing an Air Force uniform—looked me in the eyes and said: "Major Tomasino, the Colonel is right; we cannot help your friend. But you are also right, his life is in danger and, because it is, he poses a threat to you and your family. We strongly advise you to get him out of your house, and sever all contact with him."

"Are you kidding me? There's no way I will do that! Bashir is our friend, and he will stay in our home as long as he wants, or needs to. We are aware of Gaddafi's "Hit Squads." My wife and I have already discussed it, and we've accepted that risk. Bashir and Arusa would do no less for us if the situation were reversed." I could see by the shocked looks on their faces they were not expecting me to react as I did. To my surprise, and relief, they did not simply order me to throw him out.

When I got home I told Ezdy and Bashir what took place at the meeting. Ezdy gave me a big hug. "Good for you, Vito, I'm glad you told them."

"But they may be right," Bashir said, a worried tone in his voice. "If I cannot find work in Germany, there is no reason for me to stay here. I will go back to Morocco as soon as I can arrange it with my friends. There is still the possibility that the Revolutionary Command Council will allow me to fly for the Libyan Airlines. I am told that they are buying new airplanes and will be in need of more pilots. From Morocco, it will also be easier for me to communicate with my friends in Libya." My Moroccan friends will also insure that I stay a step ahead of Gaddafi's "Hit Squads."

"Do you really think there is a chance of that happening, Bashir?" I asked.

"Yes, I do. I trust my friends, and if they tell me Libyan Air will hire me, and that it's safe to go back, I will accept their word."

Ezdy and I looked at him. We saw the disappointment, but not a trace of despair. Bashir was an optimist, and a Muslim, who believed that, if it was meant to be, Allah would make it so. "We understand. You can take all the time you need to make your arrangements. If things don't work out as you hope, you will always be welcome in our home."

"Yes, I know, and I cannot thank the both of you enough for all you have done for Arusa, our daughter, and me. We will never forget the kindness you have shown us."

Bashir left for Morocco about a week later. He waited there until he was assured by his friends, that the Libyan Airlines would indeed hire him, that it was approved by the Revolutionary Command Council. He then returned to Libya to be reunited with his family in February, 1971, and begin a new chapter in his storied life.

# 32

## Pancakes and New Beginnings

We departed Germany in April, 1971, two months after Bashir returned to Libya. I was reassigned to South Korea as the Fighter Duty Officer for the Direct Air Support Center (DASC) at Camp Red Cloud, a U.S. Army Post, located near the town of Uijeonbu, twenty kilometers south of the DMZ (Demilitarization Zone). Ezdy and I thought it best to resettle the family in Clovis, New Mexico while I was in Korea for the year.

Clovis is a small cattle town in the New Mexico panhandle, and had been our home for seven years before going to Libya. Two of our children, Robert and Ezdy Lynn were born there; the other three kids, Felix, Steven, and Jimmy had gone to school there. It was the only “permanent” home we knew in the States. We enjoyed our time in Clovis, mainly because the people were very friendly, patriotic, and one hundred percent in support of our military mission. They made us feel welcome and very much at home.

I took more than thirty days of leave time. The first ten would be spent with Mom and Dad, in North Bellmore, New York, while we waited for our 1968 BMW 1600 to be shipped from Germany. Shortly after picking it up at the New Jersey Port, Steven, Jimmy, Robert and I were on the road to New Mexico. Ezdy and our daughter would fly out to join us when we got to Cannon Air Force Base, where we were given temporary housing. Our oldest son, Felix, was beginning his second year at Oklahoma State and did not make the move.

A week after the two Ezdys arrived in Clovis, we bought a home in Jonquil Park, a new housing development located northeast of the town. Jack Winton, the same realtor who had sold us our first home there eight years before, sold us our second. Two weeks later, our household goods arrived from Germany. By the time the family had settled in, it was time for me to leave—another routine episode in the nomadic life and times of the Tomasino’s.

It’s an all too familiar, but not unusual story for a military family. Most wives



were able to cope with the uncertainty of where they would be living next, even the long separations from husbands sent to the four corners of the world to fight “cold” and “hot” wars; not to mention the unnerving prospect of not knowing if they would ever see them again. It took a special kind of courage and strength to endure that kind of uncertainty, and Ezdy had both in abundance. She made it possible for me to do a job I loved and have a family to come home to. We were, *we are*, partners on an exciting and still unfinished journey.

I left for Korea in late May. A few weeks later, there was a knock on our new front door. Ezdy opened it and, once again, received the surprise of her life. “Bashir! What in the world are you doing here?”

“I was on my way to Denver,” he said, “and thought I would stop by to see you and Vito. Clovis was on the way.” He gave Ezdy a big hug. “Where is he?”

“In Korea,” she said. “He left just a few weeks ago.”

“He does not stay in one place very long, does he?”

Ezdy shrugged her shoulders. “Vito’s been running off and leaving me and the kids like this for more than half of the first ten years of our marriage. He’ll be disappointed to learn that he missed seeing you. We’ve been worried about you and Arusa.”

“I am sorry to have missed him too...another time, “in shah Allah.” Arusa and our daughter are both fine...better, now that we are together again. I did get a job with the Libyan Airlines and returned to Libya about the same time you and Vito left Wiesbaden. But, many things remain unsettled since the revolution. I think Gaddafi and his people are discovering that running a country is not something one can learn in a few months. I am afraid my country’s future is very uncertain.”

“I hope, for you and your family’s sake, things will return to normal soon,” Ezdy said, suddenly realizing that Bashir had been driving all day. “You must be hungry; let me fix you something to eat.”

“Thank you, Ezdy, but I can only stay a short while.”

“Long enough for a sandwich and a cup of coffee.”

“Yes, you are right, and very kind. But, instead of a sandwich, do you think you could make me some of your delicious pancakes?”

# 33

## The Dragon Lady Signs Off

Korea, July 1953 – October 1954

Looking back at my time in Korea and the many remarkable things I was either witness to, or a part of, I asked myself how a nineteen year old youngster could have seen and done so much, and not only remain unshaken in his beliefs, but richer for the experience.

Was it was my youth and naïveté that protected me from being overwhelmed by the events? Perhaps. My Marine Corps training had prepared me well. I believe that it was also due to an unshakeable confidence in my ability to take on any challenge, my love of adventure, and a faith in the people I looked to for leadership (a faith I no longer share with my younger self). More than any of these things, however, was the love and support of a mother and father who instilled in me the values that forged my character as a man.

I arrived in Korea on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July and a week later found myself looking across a thousand yards of “No Man’s Land” into the unseen faces of countless Chinese and North Korean soldiers. The 7th Marine Battalion consisted of Able (my unit), Baker, and Charlie Companies, plus one weapons company—about 600 men. We were tasked with defending a front more than a half a mile across. The Chinese and North Koreans defended that same front with thousands of their best troops, while I stood alone in a trench-line that followed the curved contours of the hill and allowed no visual contact between me and the Marine on either side of my position.

My “home” was a four foot square, nearly five foot deep hole carved into the trench wall; big enough for me to see out of and fire my rifle. Under my feet was a “grenade sump,” which, theoretically, would protect me against the blast of an enemy hand grenade without having to expose myself to his fire—should one find its way into my little sanctuary.

It was a theory I never felt comfortable with and, thankfully, never had to test. Armed with an M1 Garand semi-automatic rifle, two bandoliers of ammunition, and three hand grenades I felt decidedly out-gunned and outmanned. Each bandolier carried seven, eight round clips of 30 caliber ammunition, for a total of 120 bullets (counting the clip already in the rifle). Somehow, I didn't think General Thomas, Commander of the 1st Marine Division, believed that his Marines would make every one of those rounds count for a dead Chinese, or North Korean soldier. Obviously, he was relying on more than the 7th Battalion to prevent them from overrunning that sector of his command. The equalizer for the enemy's superior numbers was, of course, concentrated artillery fire and close air support. It's what enabled the Fifth Marines to recapture the strategic hills of "Berlin" and "East Berlin"—though not without heavy casualties on both sides.

Nonetheless, our sector was relatively quiet—apparently not as important to the outcome of the peace negotiations as the hotly contested "Berlin Hills." Most of our time was spent manning fighting positions, and occasionally sending a patrol into "No Man's Land." There was also the LP (Listening Post). It consisted of one Marine armed with an M1 and a few grenades, who was sent out each night to man a shallow "foxhole" about eighty yards in front of our lines. If enemy activity was detected, he would radio it in and get back to the trenches as quickly as possible. It was a job none of us looked forward to.

Ironically, one of the things that made it less intimidating was hearing the voice of the "Dragon Lady," a Chinese "psy-war" propagandist, who would read us "Dear John" letters confiscated from prisoners of war, while playing the latest American hit tunes over a powerful loudspeaker. It was supposed to demoralize us, but it did just the opposite. It kept us alert and we enjoyed the music. She was our own "Tokyo Rose."

The truce was signed on July 27, 1953, at 2200 hours (10PM). That night the "Dragon Lady" interrupted her music and letter-reading to make a special announcement. "To honor truce," she said, in strongly accented English, "the Chinese People's Liberation Army wish to express good will by presenting American friends with small gift. Soldiers hang them on bush in front of your lines this evening."

I assumed it had already been coordinated with our commanders, because the Chinese troops did approach our lines that night and left the packages. We were ordered to hold fire, and not to touch the "gifts." The bomb disposal teams would clear them the following morning—another curious twist to the one of the most costly (in lives) "non-war" we had ever fought.

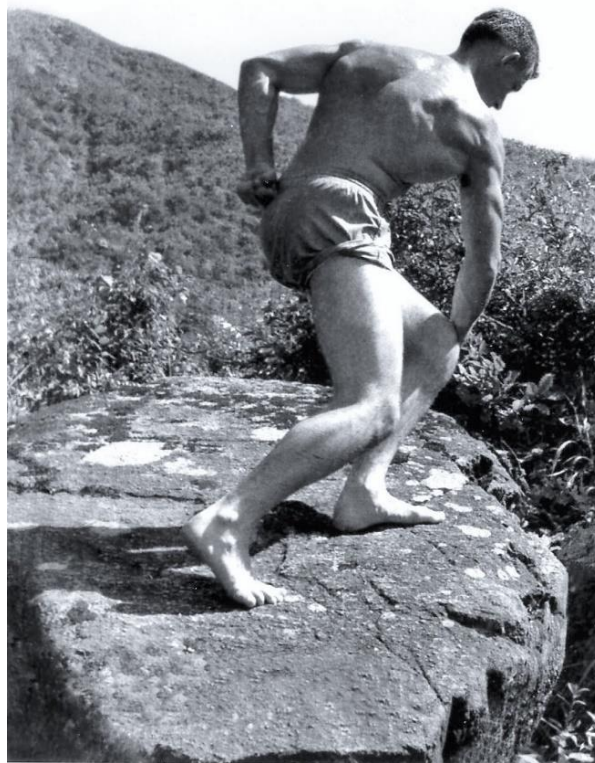
That morning we also learned just how high the odds were stacked against us. On the ridgeline a thousand yards in front of us—standing shoulder to shoulder from one side of our sector to the other, as far as the eye could see—stood thousands of Chinese and North Korean Regular soldiers. Moreover, that awesome display of manpower was repeated on the ridgeline behind theirs, and on the one behind it. Had the "Truce" not come about when it did, there would not have been enough artillery rounds, or close air support aircraft to stop them from overrunning our

position. Every Marine who saw the staggering number of enemy troops we had been facing let out a sigh of relief and silently thanked his “Maker.”

Five days later we left the front, but not before destroying all of our fighting positions and bunkers, and as much of the trench-line as we could. Able Company set up camp in a relatively level area at the base of the highest peak in the 7th Battalion’s new sector of responsibility. On Hill 443 we would dig new trenches, rebuild our fighting positions and bunkers, and lay down more concertina barbed wire forty yards in front of it all. The machine gunners positioned their guns to provide the best field of fire.

Not only did we do all of that back-breaking work ourselves, we had to carry enough food and water up the hill to sustain us for ten days—the normal rotational cycle for the First, Second, and Third Platoons of Able Company. A case of C-rations weighs thirty six pounds. We strapped two on our backs and lugged them up the hill with all our personal gear (rifle, ammo, helmet, web belt, canteen, sleeping bag, personal items). Sometimes, instead of C-rations, we carried a five gallon can of water. It wasn’t quite as heavy as two boxes of C-rations, but the water sloshing around on our backs made the climb a lot trickier.

I was in good physical shape before we started work on Hill 443; but, by the time we completed the job in early December, I was ready to run a marathon, cycle over a hundred miles, and swim three more. The “Iron Man” competition didn’t exist back then, but I was definitely ready for it.



**Posing on Hill 443, Korea. 1953**

We completed work in our sector of the DMZ in early December of 1953, and looked forward to a little normalcy in the life of a field Marine. Of course, keeping constant vigil along the newly drawn line of demarcation never stopped, nor did the day and night recon patrols along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. Training was also ongoing at Company level, but there were no scheduled major exercises until after the holidays—in early spring, perhaps. This would be our quiet time. So we thought.

One cold morning, when Able Company assembled for the 0600 roll call, our Commander ordered the 2nd Platoon Leader to send a squad of Marines to Charlie Company's sector to help them complete their defensive positions before Christmas. Then he made some uninspiring remark about how Marines always help one another; not realizing, that his order would have been easier to take if he had not tried to justify it with a meaningless platitude. Marines may be "gung ho," but we're not stupid.

My platoon Sergeant looked at me and said: "Tomasino, you've got it. Move your squad out right after breakfast."

It was a two mile trek to the Charlie Company sector, and none of it over level ground. At least the weather was good. When we got there, however, there wasn't a soul from Charlie Company to be found on the hill. They weren't there because they were holding a Christmas Party for the local Korean children in a nice warm building in their base camp. You can imagine the reaction of my men when they heard this. I

had just marched them over some of the roughest terrain in the country to help out Marines who weren't even there to greet us. They were pissed, to say the least. So was I; not at Charlie Company, but at my Commander for sending us. Maybe he didn't know about the party before he issued the order. I don't know, and never found out one way or the other. It was probably best that I didn't.

On the other hand we were there and it was a relatively nice day. Why not, I thought, lay a few coils of barbed wire before we head home, and show something for the time and effort we had already invested coming this far? That's the way I put it to my men, but they weren't buying it.

"Christ, Vito, why the hell should we do a goddamn thing for these guys. They're down there holding a cozy Christmas Party for the kids, and we're up here freezing our asses off. That's not right!" Some of the guys had already broken out their C-rations and were about to light up the canned-heat. "Why don't we just rest and have something to eat before we head back to Able Company?" I certainly understood where they were coming from and wasn't about to argue the point. For me, however, it was personal. I just couldn't see walking all that way without showing some result for our trouble.

"Okay," I said, "you're right. You guys stay here, have your lunch, and relax. Me, I've got to get something done before we leave. I'm going to string out a few coils of wire. When I'm done, we'll pack up and head home." They looked at me kind of funny, but said nothing.

I started down the hill and found the rolls of new barbed wire. Before I could get the first bundle of concertina wire fully deployed, I heard the sound of twelve other pairs of combat boots stomping down the hill. Every man in my squad joined me on the side of the hill. We strung about fifty yards of wire in standard cloverleaf design (triple stacked), then "chowed down" on some warmed up C-rations before walking back home—this time with a little more bounce in our step.

I have often thought about that day, and what it meant to me. Writing about it now, years later, I realize that it happened shortly before Christmas, and could possibly have occurred on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December, my birthday. I don't remember.

Marine training had instilled in me the belief that I could take on any task and assume any responsibility, regardless of position or rank. Indeed, as a nineteen year old Private First Class, I had risen from rifleman, to Fire Team Leader, to Squad Leader in a few short months after the truce was signed. In the months that followed I would sew on corporal stripes and temporarily fill the role of Platoon Sergeant, until a replacement for him could be brought in. And, when the Lieutenant was unexpectedly called back from a field training exercise for a meeting in Battalion Headquarters, I assumed his position as Platoon Leader until he got back. The rapid advancement in leadership positions I had experienced in just fourteen months certainly bolstered my self-confidence.

But, it was on that day, the day I led my squad to the top of a deserted Charlie Company hill, that my ability to lead other men was truly validated.

# 34

## Spirit of the Samurai

An Air Force transport plane flew me, and a dozen other Marines to Kyoto, Japan for two weeks of “R&R” (Rest and Relaxation).

Kyoto is a beautiful city of Buddhist Temples, Shinto Shrines, and enchanting floral gardens, untouched by the war. Preserving the beauty and history of that ancient city and other national treasures—particularly after witnessing the total destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—may well have been one of the reasons for Japan’s surrender during World War II.

We checked into a downtown hotel, dropped our bags in our rooms and headed down to the lounge bar for a cold beer. I had my usual coke, but didn’t stay long. There was something else I had planned to do while in Japan and it bore little resemblance to what Marines on “liberty” usually do with their free time. Before my friends ordered a second round, I walked over to the check-in counter and asked the clerk if he knew of a Judo school near the hotel. He personally didn’t know of any in Kyoto and referred me to the hotel manager. The manager confirmed the clerk’s information. He also told me that there was a famous Judo school in Tokyo, but it was a two hour commute in a train usually so crowded, that just getting on it would be a problem. With less than two weeks to get in any effective practice it was not a practical option.

“But, there is a police station nearby,” he said. He seemed pleased, even relieved, that he could offer me a possible solution.

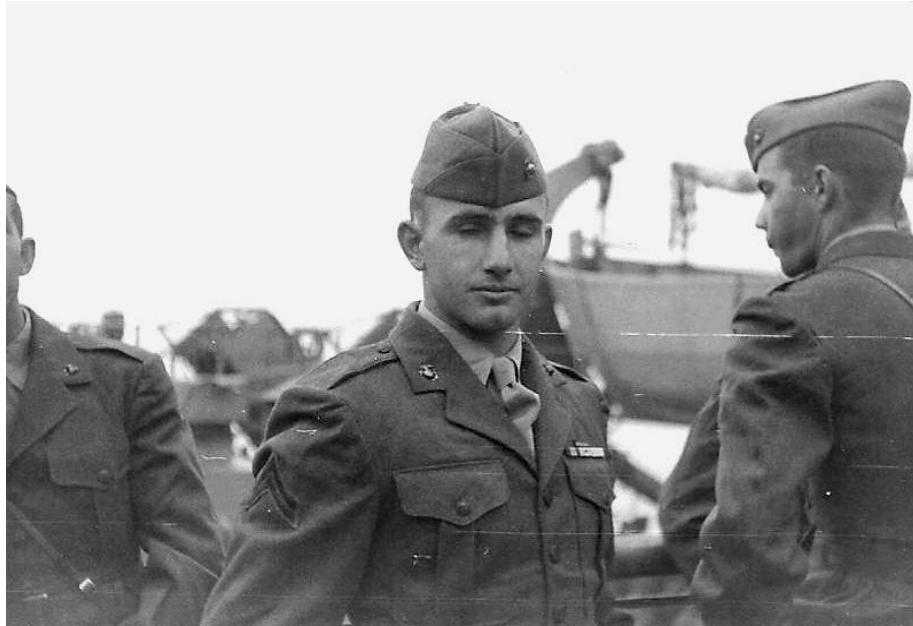
“A police station?”

“Yes. They have a Judo team. Maybe they can provide the training you seek. They are only a short distance from here.” He drew the directions on a piece of paper and handed it to me.

“Thank you,” I said, thinking that I must learn to say it in his language before I leave Japan.

Early the next morning I walked over to the station. A young officer was sitting

behind a desk just outside the entrance. I tried to explain to him what I wanted to do, but his English, like my Japanese, was non-existent. Before I go any further, it's important that I draw a more complete picture of a scene that, from his perspective, must have seemed strange at best.



**Incheon, Korea. Boarding the ship that took us home. October 1954.**

Standing before him, wearing my Marine Corps dress green uniform, with newly sewn on corporal stripes and a single row of combat ribbons, I literally represented what he and his countrymen probably regarded as the most hated and feared branch of the United States military. It had been less than ten years since the Japanese Army and the U.S. Marines faced each other in the bloody battles of Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Kwajalein, Iwo Jima, Eniwetok, Saipan, Guam, Corregidor, Iwo Jima, and every other island of strategic importance from Hawaii to the shores of Japan. The cost in human lives totaled in the tens of thousands of men and women on both sides.

The policeman in front of me may have been too young to have participated in those battles, but I'm sure he had friends and family that did, and that some of the older men in the station behind him had indeed been there and returned to tell their stories.

Even though the horrific images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had to be indelibly imprinted in the minds of every surviving Japanese citizen, he didn't just dismiss me, tell me he spoke no English, and send me on my way; which he would certainly have been justified in doing. Instead, he escorted me inside and introduced me to the station Chief.

The Chief also spoke no English and immediately called in someone to interpret for us. As soon as he understood what it was I was asking, he swung around in his

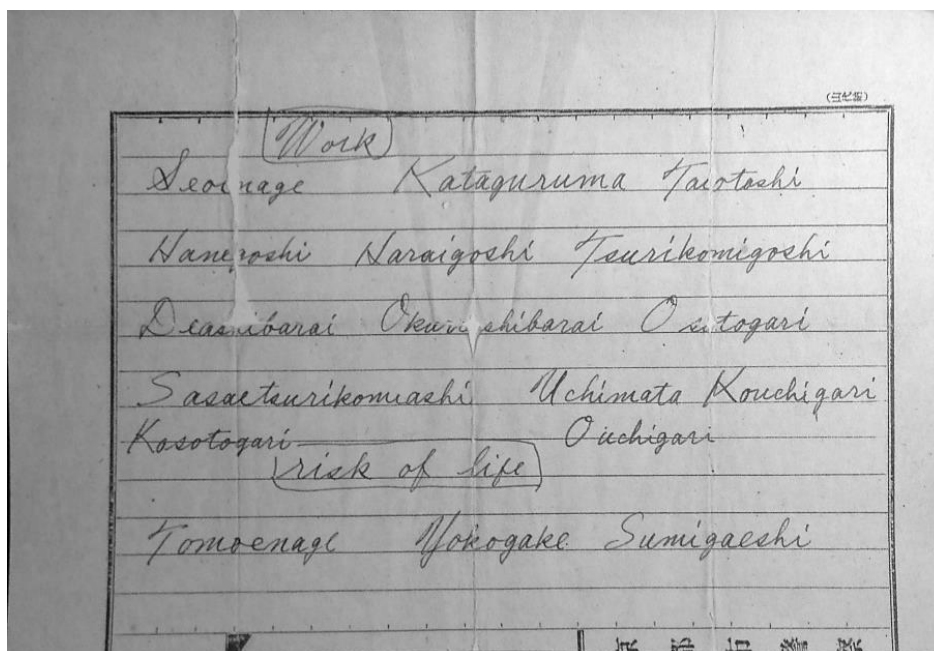


swivel chair to open the cabinet behind him, and carefully pulled out a neatly folded Gi (a white Judo uniform) with a rolled up black belt lying on top—his, no doubt. He bowed his head as he ceremoniously handed it to me. I tried to refuse the belt—saying something about my being a beginner—but he insisted I take it. I did, and respectfully returned the bow. He then called upstairs to summon the Captain of their Judo team.

I caught the questioning look on his face when he walked in. So did the Chief, who quickly introduced us and explained why I was there. The Captain was in his early thirties, stood about five foot seven, and looked to be in remarkable physical condition. He exuded a level of confidence and strength I have sensed in few other men. He never took his eyes from mine as he bowed, and I instinctively did the same.

Minutes later we were in a backroom Dojo throwing each other onto the hard straw tatami mats. We were not alone. At least ten other officers at the station, including the interpreter, had filed in with us; no doubt, wondering what this young American Marine was all about. Actually, my instructor did not teach me any throwing moves until he was satisfied I knew how to fall. So, for the first twenty minutes he taught me how to safely absorb the impact of a hard fall to either side and to my back, and how to roll over my right and left shoulders to quickly recover on my feet facing my adversary—techniques not unlike those I had learned in four years of high school wrestling. Nevertheless, He would not show me even the basic throws until I could do the falls to his satisfaction.

That first session lasted about an hour and a half. We would get in only seven more before I had to go back to Korea. Despite the short time we practiced together, he was able to teach me sixteen powerful throwing and submission techniques. The interpreter wrote them down for me in Japanese on a piece of paper that somehow survived Korea and the many other military assignments that followed.



Judo throws taught to me by the Captain of the Kyoto Police Team, 1954

Thus, my exposure to the ancient martial art of Judo was only a brief one, but what I learned was taught to me by one of the finest instructors in Japan. He was a true master of his art. More than that, he was a good, honorable man; a man I hold in highest regard, and whose friendship I will always treasure. I only regret that I am unable to recall his name. It wasn't written on the paper given me by the interpreter. Nonetheless, I should have done it myself.

After one of our practice sessions, he invited me to his home for dinner to meet his family. I was surprised and honored. On the way there, I stopped at a sidewalk food market to buy some fresh fruit and vegetables. He met me there and escorted me to his home; a humble, but nicely arranged living space in a crowded section of Kyoto. I could never have found it on my own amidst the hundreds of other similar dwellings. We took off our shoes and left them outside the door of his home before entering. Waiting for us was his mother, his wife, and a young girl I believe was his sister. I don't recall meeting his father—the War had taken so many.

After the introductions, I handed the groceries to his mother. She smiled and bowed. I responded in kind. Despite our inability to communicate verbally it was not at all uncomfortable for me, or for them. In fact, I felt very much at ease. It was also my first taste of home cooked Japanese food and it was delicious.

On the last day of my Judo training, the Chief of Police dropped in and, through his interpreter, invited me to attend the opening of a new sports arena for Judo and Kendo (Japanese fencing). There would be a ceremony honoring the Judo and Kendo Gods, a Samurai sword demonstration, followed by a Judo and Kendo competition between the police and other teams in Kyoto. The Chief insisted that I sit with him,

the Mayor of Kyoto, and other local dignitaries. Had there been a photographer there to take a picture of us, I can only imagine how odd that scene must have appeared through his lens.

Framed in the viewfinder of his camera, he would see the Mayor, the Police Chief, a number of other local VIP's, and a young United States Marine Corporal in a dress green uniform with a single row of ribbons over his left breast pocket. I should have felt out of place among all those distinguished gentlemen, but I didn't. Perhaps, it was because I was too young to fully comprehend the singular honor accorded me by my Japanese hosts. It may have also been, because the men that sat on either side of me were not in the least uneasy with my presence. Indeed, they made me feel as though I belonged there with them.

The ceremony began with a prayer of homage to the Judo and Kendo Gods, and an impressive demonstration of the amazing skills of Samurai swordsmen by two men dressed in black robes, wearing no protective armor or head gear. They moved with astonishing speed and precision, wielding their glimmering, razor sharp blades in a blur of motion, missing each other by mere inches.

After an unbelievable display of fencing techniques, one of the men raised his sword high overhead and, with what appeared to be a full-force striking blow, brought it straight down on his partner's head, stopping it so close you could not see daylight between hair and blade. The picture of that final spectacular move was indelibly etched in my mind.

In the Kendo competition that followed, the competitors did wear heavily padded jackets and masks, and the sounds of their bamboo swords striking their "protective armor" left no doubt that they were holding nothing back. They fought with equal fervor and skill.

I believed my instructor to be one of the best Judo Masters in Japan. After all, he was the Captain of the Kyoto Police Team. On that day, however, I saw just how good he was. In his match, he took his opponent down and forced his submission in less than a minute. I was amazed at his speed and agility, and humbled by the realization that a modern day Samurai had taken time out from his work to teach his art to a young Marine, who, less than ten years ago, was his mortal enemy. Only now, writing this story sixty years later, do I truly understand and appreciate the significance of our fateful meeting.

When the matches were over, all the contestants respectfully acknowledged each other, then filed out of the competition room and walked upstairs for the celebration banquet. I was surprised to see that the dinner was only for the men. The women, who were dressed in the traditional Japanese Kimono, were there to serve us. They gave each of us a box containing sushi, rice, vegetables, an assortment of other foods, and a set of chopsticks. The box was wrapped in a silk cloth called a Furoshiki. Warm Saki (Japanese rice wine) was also served.

Twice now, I have used the word "serve" to describe what the ladies were doing, but it was so much more than that. Everything they did—placing the boxes of food on the tables, pouring the wine, and the graceful way in which they seem to glide across

the room—seemed to be beautifully choreographed. I felt as though the banquet itself was more of a ceremony than the one we had just attended.

No one touched their food, or the Saki, until all were served and the Mayor said a few words about the occasion. He then ceremoniously unwrapped the Furoshiki from his box; which was our cue to start.

I had never used chopsticks before and tried to mimic the man sitting next to me, but with little success. He saw me fumbling with the little wooden sticks and showed me how to hold them. I started with the easier items of food, and soon gained enough confidence to try the rice. He had obviously been keeping an eye on my progress, because half way through the dinner he smiled and said: “You learn very fast.”

I smiled back, and said: “Arigatou gozaimasu.”

# 35

## I'll Take It

I was discharged from the United States Marine Corps in January 1955. Standing on the civilian side of the gates of the Brooklyn Navy Yard, with discharge papers in one hand and a few hundred dollars in mustering out pay in the other, I thought I might go just home and do nothing for a month before getting back into the work force.

It took less than a week to exceed my personal leisure time limit before I started looking for a job. I needed something to do while I explored the possibility of getting into the USAF Aviation Cadet Pilot Training Program. I knocked on the doors of about a dozen different businesses and asked for a job with the same results: "Sorry, we just don't need anyone at this time. After a week of hearing that sad refrain, I drove over to Hicksville, a town on Long Island, New York, located about five miles from Mom and Dad's home in North Bellmore.

I parked the car at the end of a street lined on both sides with wall to wall businesses of all types. Before getting out, I made up my mind to take the first job offered me no matter what it was, or what it paid. Three or four rejections later, I found myself in front of the owner of a feed-grain and fertilizer business. He told his warehouse foreman, could use someone to help stack bags of grain and fertilizer, load the truck, and make deliveries. He offered me 80 cents an hour. I said, "I'll take it."

I started the next day. It didn't take me long to learn how to stack those fifty and one hundred pound sacks as fast as the foreman I worked with—whose name I cannot recall. Nonetheless, he was pleased with my work, and we made a great team. I don't remember how it came up, but when he found out I was only making

only 80 cents an hour, while the boss had just hired two other guys at a dollar an hour, he was angry. He told me he would see that I was given equal pay. He did, and I was.

A month later I received a letter from the Air Force approving my application for the Aviation Cadet Program, with an invitation to take the qualifying examinations being held at Sampson Air Force Base in upstate New York. The testing would take about three days. I told the foreman about it, and that I would need some time off. "Don't worry," he said, "I'll clear it with the boss."

It was the middle of February, and very cold in upstate New York, with snow still on the ground. The testing covered just about everything they could subject your mind and body to; starting with a thorough physical examination. It also included comprehensive written exams covering a multitude of subjects, coordination exercises, physical strength and endurance tests, and more. I passed everything, qualifying for both pilot and navigation training. I, of course, chose pilot training. However, there were no school slots open for pilots at the time, and I was sent home to await notification from the Air Force. The expected wait time was about one year.

When I got back and told my foreman about it, he congratulated me, relieved that I would not be leaving for a while. For the next month, he and I got back into the swing of things, stacking fertilizer, loading the truck, making deliveries, etc. One day, during our lunch break, I told him, that as soon as the weather started warming up, I would try to find work in construction as a carpenter's helper. "I want to learn a trade I can fall back on if this pilot thing doesn't work out," I said.

He had a concerned look on his face. "You don't need to do that, Vito. I'll talk to the boss and ask him to raise your pay to a buck twenty five."

Mind you, he was only making a dollar fifty an hour as a foreman. I told him not to worry about it, but he insisted on talking to the boss anyway, and I was called in to see him the following day.

"My foreman told me you were a good worker and didn't want to lose you; that I should raise your pay." I just gave him a blank stare, waiting for the rest of the pitch. "I'll give you a dollar ten an hour," he said. I could not believe this guy. He was advised to offer me a quarter raise and he offered me a dime. "Keep your dime," I said, "I won't be staying." When I told the foreman about it, he was more than disappointed—pissed would be a more precise way of putting it.

Driving home that afternoon, I spotted a new housing construction site. I stopped the car and walked in. A man, the foreman, I assumed, came out to greet me. "What can I do for you, son," he asked. I told him I would like a job as a carpenter's helper.

He asked if I had any experience.

"A little," I said. "I worked as a carpenter's helper one summer between my Junior and Senior years in High School. We framed a complete house in one day. When we were done, and had nailed a small pine tree on the roof, the foreman bought us some ice cold beer. I didn't drink beer at the time, but that one really tasted good."

He smiled. "Well, we could use a good helper, but this is a union job. Are you a member?"

"No, I'm not."

"That's okay," he said, "Whenever the union officials visit the site I'll find you some inside work. How much do you want in hourly wage?"

*Holy smokes*, I thought, *I got the job. Now he's asking me how much I want to get paid.* I had to think fast. I had set a goal for myself of making \$100 a week before I entered the Aviation Cadet program. Off the top of my head, I told him I needed \$2.25 an hour He said, "I'll give you two." I said, "I'll take it."

"Can you start tomorrow morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"You can drop the sir; just call me Chick."

"Thanks, Chick...you can call me Vito." We shook hands. When I walked across the lot to my car I don't remember my feet touching the ground. It took me a while to have all that just happened really sink in.

Keeping the carpenters supplied with lumber and nails at each new house being built was hard, challenging work, but I was up to it. My job was to ensure they had everything they needed to stay focused on getting the house "framed out." When I wasn't running from house to house doing that, I cut and fabricated the headers, jacks, and rafters they would be using. I loved the smell of fresh-cut lumber. True to his word, when Chick saw the union guys approach, he moved me inside a fully framed house. As a result, I learned to do some things that a Carpenter's Helper would not normally get to do.

About two months later I received an unexpected call at home from someone I never heard of. "This is Ole Ian," he said. "Who," I asked. "Ole Ian. I am a Carpenter Contractor for custom homes. Your friend Ralph used to work for me, but quit for another job. He recommended I call you...told me you were a good worker. I want you to work for me.

I had to think about it. Ralph was about five years my senior and a mentor to me as I was growing up. I felt honored that he would recommend me for his old job. To work on custom homes would also be good experience. Nonetheless, I played it cool. "I don't know, Ole, I have a job now and it pays pretty good."

“How much are they paying you?”

*Okay, now this is getting serious.* I thought about my goal of making one hundred dollars a week, and said, “Two twenty five an hour (I lied). My math was also off. He said, “I’ll give you two fifty.” I said, “I’ll take it.”

Ole was a six foot tall Norwegian, weighing in with over two hundred pounds of solid muscle, who could hoist at least that much in lumber to his shoulder in one lift and never tired. Nobody could keep up his pace, certainly not the union carpenters. They never even tried; or worse, thought they should. I, on the other hand—just coming out of the Marines, and still working out with weights—I was in the best shape of my life and thrived on competition. In less than two months I could hold my own with Ole, physically, and mentally.

A hard taskmaster, Ole had little patience with anyone who did not meet his high standards. If you didn’t, he would let you know in no uncertain terms. The union guys would cringe when he yelled at them, but weren’t concerned about losing their jobs. I was non-union, and probably less concerned about keeping my job than they were. That aside, no job was so important to me that I would take verbal abuse from anyone. So, when Ole yelled at me, I yelled right back at him. He knew when he hired me I had little experience in carpentry, but was a hard worker and willing to learn. Our first heated exchange of words was our last. We developed and maintained a mutual respect for each other for the time I was with him; even after I left to enter the Aviation Cadet Program in March 1956.

I had let Ole know, before accepting his offer, I would be going into the Air Force in less than a year. I never asked for a raise. I didn’t have to; he kept raising my pay every two or three months. By the time I left him, I was making \$3.50 an hour. Heck, I would have been perfectly happy to stay at \$2.50. It didn’t quite get me to the hundred a week I was shooting for, but it was close enough. I didn’t know, at the time, that union carpenters only work a 35 hour week.

Whenever the union officials approached Ole on our work site, I could tell they were talking about me, and neither they, nor Ole were very happy. After several such encounters, I approached Ole. I told him I didn’t want to cause any trouble; that I would just go ahead and join the union. “Don’t worry about it, Vito, those guys don’t scare me. I hate the union. You don’t need to join.” But, Ole had enough to worry about, dealing with the builder, sub-contractors, and the other two union guys. That night, after work, I attended a union meeting in Brooklyn, where I raised my right hand and swore to buy only union made overalls. I then paid them a hundred “bucks” picked up a Third Year Apprentice Card and drove back to North Bellmore. I hadn’t even completed my first year, but was getting third year pay. They just took my



money and handed me the card. No questions asked.

I enjoyed every minute of my time working with Ole, and learned a lot from a true master carpenter. He even asked me to help him with a high end custom home he was building on the weekends. That's where I really learned the trade. We were a good team, and I had some reservations about leaving, but becoming a fighter pilot was my ultimate goal.

Once in the Air Force, I rarely got back to North Bellmore. When I did, however, I would always give Ole a call. On one of those occasions, some ten years later, his wife answered the phone. I asked her how Ole was doing. She went silent for a moment, then told me he had died of cancer the year before.

I still miss my Viking friend, and the conversations we shared after a hard day's work, relaxing on the white sands of one of Long Island's fine beaches, a short block away from our construction site.

# 36

## The Unforgotten War

David (Lee Yosep) and Sarah (Lee Yeyeong) stepped off the big Korean Airlines jet into the chilly afternoon air of McCarran International Airport on December 20, 2015. They were surprised to find, that the Nevada desert was not as hot as they had read about in books. Dan Stegemann—a man who had befriended them and taught them English when he was working in their country—was there to meet them. He had brought “his kids”—as he calls them—to Las Vegas several times before, along with their younger sister, Esther (Lee Yejoo); who chose to stay home this trip to study for her high school entrance exams.

Yes, I said high school. The competition for students to be able to attend a top level high school in Korea is even tougher than it is for American students vying for slots to attend prestigious universities like Harvard, Notre Dame, or Yale. And, if that student happens to come from a poor section of Korea, as does Esther, she must not only do well on her exams, she must score among the top students in the nation. She did.

In those previous visits Dan tried to show them as much of the western part of the United States as he could in the time they had. He took them to places like San Francisco, the Redwood Forest, Grand Canyon, Yosemite, San Diego Zoo, Disneyland, and more. He even took them glider flying. They loved and appreciated everything he did to make each visit a memorable one. This time, however, their number one priority was to meet with an American soldier who had actually served in Korea during the war so they could personally thank him—and through him, every American who had sacrificed so much for their freedom. They literally pleaded with Dan to make it happen; and make it happen he did.

I received a call from Keith Rogers, military reporter for the Las Vegas Review

Journal. He told me that someone by the name of Dan Stegemann had called to ask if he knew of a Korean War Veteran in Las Vegas that would be willing to meet with two Korean teenagers coming to visit him in December. Dan had apparently seen Keith's article regarding my reunion with Don Powell, a Marine I served with in Korea and had not seen in sixty years. The article, published in April 2013 edition of the Review Journal, was entitled, "Brothers in Arms," subtitle: "Korean War Marine Buddies Reunite, Remember the 'Forgotten War.'" It was good to see my old friend again, and Keith, as usual, did a great job with the story.



**PFC Don Powell with the Company mascot. On the march in South Korea, 1953**

Keith told him that he knew of a few in Vegas and would see what he could do. He called me. "Of course," I said, "I would be more than happy to meet with them." I immediately called Dan, who was so anxious to arrange the meeting he never heard my yes before going into his sales pitch. He had already been turned down by the first two veterans he asked, and kept trying to sell me on an idea I had accepted even before I called.

"You would?" He said, still not sure he could believe what he heard.

"Of course, I'd love to."

"That's great." I could sense the relief in his voice. "You just made my day, sir. I can't wait to call the kids and give them the good news. Thank you!" Dan didn't know it at the time, but he had just made mine.

Can you imagine, two youngsters from Korea wanting—even more than another trip to Disneyland—to meet with an American soldier so they could personally thank

him for his part in keeping them free from communism in a war that ended more than sixty years ago?



**David and Sarah are the fourth generation of Koreans since the War ended who have never forgotten what we did for their freedom. Jan 2016**

The meeting took place in the home of my wife and I on 16 January 2016. David and Sarah—and, through them, a grateful nation—did indeed thank me for my service, which I humbly received on behalf of all who served in that war; particularly the 33,000 men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice.

I, in turn, thanked them for coming half way around the world to bring such a heartening message to me. It was an “award” I never expected. Indeed, it brought closure to my Korean experience.

I was with the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division during the war, and returned again eighteen years later as an Air Force officer. To now learn from these remarkable youngsters—more than sixty years after the war ended—that the people of South Korea were still so grateful for what we did for them, they made sure that their children, and their children's children kept the memory alive. It touched the heart of an old warrior and reinforced my belief that, sometimes, *we do get it right*.



**Dan, Ezdy, Sarah and David Lee. Jan 2016**

Sitting across from “Dan’s Kids” in our family room, I could see they had many questions, but were a little too shy to ask, not knowing how I might react. Dan urged David to speak up. “Go ahead, David, ask him some of the things we talked about before coming here.” It was all he needed.

“I would like to know more about the ‘War.’” What it was like, how you felt about it personally, what you did... ” David stopped before he got all of his questions out, but they were more than enough to start with. What was supposed to be a short fifteen minute visit ran into a 2-3 hour conversation that revisited my Korean War experience.

“I was only nineteen when I came to Korea, your age,” I began, “and had no idea what to expect, but it wasn’t what I found. When we walked up the hill to man our fighting positions, the first thing I noticed was the absence of the noise of war. There were artillery rounds flying overhead, but most of them were outgoing. On the other hand about a mile to the east of us, on hills ‘Berlin’ and ‘East Berlin,’ the 5<sup>th</sup> Marines were engaged in one of the bloodiest battles fought in the war. Both sides wanted those strategic hills to be in their possession when the truce was signed on July 27, 1953.

“The battle raged through the night, each side taking, losing, then retaking the same ground, as Marine, Navy, and Air Force fighter jets dropped bombs, rockets, and napalm in close air support. When the fighters finished their work and departed the target area, Marine artillery filled the void. At night it looked like a Fourth of July fireworks display. I could only observe the battle from my relatively safe fighting

position, feeling guilty that I was not standing with my Marine brothers on those blood soaked hills. Hell was breaking loose less than a mile away from us, while I could only watch. *Strange war*, I thought.

I told them about some other unusual things that happened to me while I was in Korea—before and after the truce was signed—stories I wrote about in previous chapters of this book. Then, David asked me a question I would have never expected from one so young. “Why,” he asked, “did you sacrifice so much to help a people that you hardly knew existed before the war?”

A profound question, one that deserved an equally profound answer. As I searched my mind for the right words, I remembered a talk I had with two of my childhood friends, Hans Mobius and Don Schadt, shortly after we graduated high school in 1951. As teenagers are wont to do, we were discussing what we would be doing with the rest of our lives. I told them I was going to join the Marines and go to Korea. They looked at me kind of funny...not sure if I was serious.

“People are getting killed over there,” they said.



**Hans and Don with my Dad's '55 Packard**

“Yes, that’s why I have to go. I don’t want anyone else doing my dying for me. If there’s a bullet with my name on it, I have to be there to take it.” I was seventeen at the time, and had no idea where those words came from. They were as much of a surprise to me then, as the explanation I was about to give David and Sarah.

“America is a nation of immigrants,” I began, “who came here seeking freedom from an oppressive King, or dictator, and the opportunity to forge a better life for themselves and their children. The early immigrants were the poor and destitute people from the European nations; soon followed by the Chinese and other Asian



peoples. They asked for nothing more than the chance to find honest work to feed and house their families, but were not greeted with open arms; nor were they given anything for free. They fought for everything they got. Nonetheless, they were in a country that would reward their hard work and perseverance. And persevere they did.

Their ultimate goal was to become an American citizen, and they did.



**These kids, and the millions more in this world, make any sacrifice worthwhile. A schoolroom in Seoul, Korea. 1954**

“In that struggle for freedom—won for us by our founding fathers, and later reinforced by our immigrants—the unlimited potential inherent in every human being was unleashed. Our history, and that idea is etched in the psyche of every American. It’s in our DNA. America is a unique phenomenon of the ‘New World,’ a country unencumbered by thousands of years of the subjugation and oppression experienced by almost every other nation on earth. No other people on this planet identify with the plight of the downtrodden like the American people; because, not too long ago, we were them.



**Able Company Flag. DMZ, South Korea, 1953-54**



**Bien Hoa Air Base, South Vietnam. Oct 1965**

"So, when asked to pick up a rifle, or strap on fighter jet to help those in a little known country on the other side of the world secure their freedom, we feel a special obligation to answer the call, and welcome the opportunity to pay it forward. *It's*



*who we are."*

When I finished speaking, David and Sarah, and Dan, were momentarily silent. They were probably as stunned by my answer as I was. It felt like a reenactment of the scene played out that summer of 1951, when my high school friends questioned my decision to join the Marines. Just as they did then, the words flowed easily and true; this time, however, with sixty-one more years of life experience to draw from.

Sarah and David are now back home in their country with their mother, father and sister, Esther (currently attending one of the best high schools in the nation), sharing their recent adventure with family and friends...ensuring that America's legacy in South Korea is passed on to the next generation. Thus, while we, and the rest of the world may have forgotten the Korean War, the people of Korea never did.

# 37

## **We're Not the Best, Not Yet**

One of the most challenging and most gratifying assignments of my Air Force career was my last. Although a non-flying job given me in the twilight of my career, it gave me the opportunity to reaffirm my ability to lead other men on the ground—something in which, as a fighter pilot, I had not truly been tested since I led a squad of Able Company Marines across the frozen hills of Korea to help a sister Company complete work on its defensive positions along the newly drawn DMZ.

I was assigned to the Flight Test Section at McClellan Air Force Base, Sacramento California in February 1974 as test pilot for the F-100 and F-111. Three years later—less than one year to retirement—I was reassigned to the Base Life Support Section. I didn't ask why. I didn't have to.

Base Life Support had not only failed the last two Inspector General inspections, it had an equal opportunity charge leveled against it by one of its senior NCO's. The Captain in charge of the section had been unable to "re-right the ship" and relieved of his duty. That said, I doubt my reassignment to this troubled unit had anything to do with the Air Force's confidence in my ability to turn things around. The senior officers who arranged the transfer may have even expected me to fail; assuming, perhaps, that with less than a year to retirement I would have little incentive to even try. *They did not know me.*

In my previous 21 years of active duty flying I had accomplished just about all there was to be accomplished in fighter operations, except the attainment of "ace" status, and I was looking forward to ending my career in the cockpit. On the other hand, the "impossible" job I was given, was just the kind of challenge

I needed. Indeed, it would prove to be one of the most defining chapters of my twenty five years of military service.

When I walked into Base Life Support for the first time you could feel the tension in the air. People could not brush close to each other in the hallway without getting into a shoving match, or fist-fight. No one got along with anyone. We were a mixed group: African American, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Polynesian, Anglo Saxon, and an Irishman (my NCOIC).

My first order of business was to call everyone into my office. When they were all in and settled I got up, walked in front of my desk, and said: "Gentlemen, I'm Major Tomasino. I was sent down here to take command of the Base Life Support Section. I'm aware of the problems you've been having, particularly the personal differences that exist among some of you in this room; which, I believe to be the primary reason for your failure to pass the last two IG Inspections. We cannot, *we will not* allow that to happen again. Life Support has one of the most critical functions in the Air Force; that is, to provide our aircrew with the safest equipment and the best training in its use. It is absolutely crucial that we do not fail to do this. That is the mission of Life Support, *our only mission*, and I am here to tell you—despite my pending retirement, or what you may have heard as to why I was given this job—I intend to devote one hundred percent of my energy to the fulfillment of that mission. I expect no less of an effort from you. *Failure is not an option*. Let me be very clear; we *will* honor the responsibility with which we are charged, and we *will* pass the next IG Inspection.

"I can see the skepticism in your faces. Given the personal conflicts that exist in this unit, I can understand your reluctance to believe it possible. But, it is. We have a saying in the Marines: "The difficult we do immediately; the impossible, takes a little longer." Leading twelve other strong-willed men from diverse backgrounds, during and after the war in Korea, honed my leadership skills in ways that could never be taught in the classroom. I learned that I could. It's why I am confident we will resolve every one of the problems that have led to this unit's past failures."

I paused for a minute to give them a chance to process what I had just said. "Any questions?" I paused again. "No? That's it for now."

As they were filing out of my office, I stopped my NCOIC. "Sergeant Kelly, hold a second."

"Yes sir."

"I will need to speak to each of the men privately. Make up a schedule for them, including yourself, to see me in my office tomorrow; one that would best fit in with their daily routine. I'd like it before we leave today."

“Yes sir, will do.”

The following day I held private talks with each of the men in Life Support. I wanted to learn more about them personally and, in a one-on-one setting, they would be more likely to speak freely. They were, at first, understandably cautious in answering my questions, but soon realized I was genuinely interested in who they were, where they came from, their aspirations. As a consequence, they opened up to me about their concerns; which had as much to do with their failure to pass the last two Command Inspections as it did their personal goals. That was just what I needed to hear.

From those same conversations they also learned more about me. As a result, I was able to establish varying levels of rapport with each of them; which helped me gain their confidence and trust. I wanted them to know, that while mission was first and foremost, it was also my job to help them reach their career objectives.

Gaining their trust was an important, perhaps crucial, first step, but it would take more than that to channel their energies in a more positive direction. They needed a larger goal to strive for; one that went beyond passing the next inspection. I took a few more days to ponder the issue and formulate a plan that would define our goals and outline the steps we needed to take to achieve them. I even came up with a slogan that would later be painted on a sign posted at the front entrance to Life Support: **“We’re not the best, not yet.”** Every day we walked through the front door of our shop, it would serve as a reminder of what we strove to be.

Later that week, I laid out those goals: 1) pass the next IG Inspection and take our position at the table as one of the best units on McClellan Air Force Base; 2) earn recognition as one of the best Life Support Shops in the Air Force Logistics Command. I then asked each of them to write down any items of concern they have about their individual areas of responsibility, what they needed to correct any discrepancies and enable them perform their job tasks more efficiently. When I was through, I asked if they had any questions, or comments.

Sergeant Tiapola spoke first. “Yes, sir, I have. I think your slogan, “We are not the best, not yet,” is a negative statement.”

I noticed the nods of agreement by a few of the other men, and wondered how this was going to go. “Well,” I said, “consider where we are today. We failed the last two IG Inspections, we are under investigation for violation of Equal Opportunity Directives, and the tension created by the personal differences that exist among you is probably the cause of both. Given that, can anyone here claim that we, at this moment, are the best? Of course not. But we can be, and, in time, *we will be*. This slogan, *our slogan*, forcefully echoes that sentiment, and our commitment to

excellence. It will be our rallying cry.”

It did not happen immediately; personal animosities are not that easily set aside; but it did happen. Less than three weeks after my arrival, the same people who could not stand to see each other in the hallway were now working shoulder to shoulder. They had a goal to strive for, and the motivation to reach it. They also had someone they could trust to take them there; someone who “had their back.” It was all they needed.

A few weeks later—it may have been the Memorial Day weekend—I invited all of the men and their wives to my home for a barbeque. The more informal setting would put them at ease and allow them to get to know each other for the first time. They also met my wife, Ezdy, and four of our five teenage children (our oldest son was attending Oklahoma State University), who made them feel right at home. Having lived and gone to schools in Libya, Germany, England, and France, the kids embraced all peoples and cultures with equanimity. They were natural ambassadors.

On that day the men of Life Support did find common ground, and a respect for each other that had not existed before. I knew then, we would be ready for the next IG.

Some readers, familiar with military protocol regarding socialization between officer and enlisted ranks, may know that it is discouraged, if not a violation of Air Force policy. Most of my senior officers, and many of my peers would disapprove of it. They would claim it undermines the unquestioning obedience to orders that must exist between the ranks, particularly in combat. And, I would agree with the latter, that when it concerns leading Army and Marine warriors on the battlefield, orders must be followed without hesitation or lives are lost. I would point out, however, that General “Chesty” Puller, one of the highest decorated, and, no doubt, the most famous Marine that ever wore the “green,” would often eat his meals in the enlisted mess.

Fighter pilots, on the other hand, place their lives in the hands of the airmen who maintain their aircraft every time they climb into the cockpit. Like our Marine and Army counterparts on the ground we are the aerial version of the “tip of the spear.” However, we could not get off the ground without the effort of dozens of enlisted personnel, particularly our crew chiefs. Without them, we would spend most of our time at the bar retelling war stories that never happened.

I was able to compile one hundred missions in just one hundred days during the Vietnam War, and helped save the lives of many of those marines and soldiers on the ground. That could never have happened without the tireless effort of my Crew Chief, AIC Brackenbury, to keep me in the air. Our focus was always on

mission, and our positions had nothing to do with the respect and trust we held for each other. It was why I had him leave off rank when he painted our names on the side of *our* aircraft. I've never allowed the metal I wore on my shoulders determined how I interacted with anyone. I have always believed that, if I could not earn the respect and confidence of the men who looked to me for leadership without resorting to my rank, I did not deserve it.

My Marine Corps training and experience did more to bolster my confidence to lead other men in peace and war than any training or education I completed since walking out of the front gate of the Brooklyn Navy Yard more than twenty years ago. I carried that same confidence with me when I walked into the front door of Life Support. "Once a Marine, Always a Marine."

Three months later McClellan would again be subject to an IG Inspection. Life Support not only passed it handily, we earned two rarely awarded, "Outstanding" citations; one for excellence in our classroom instruction, the other, for the quality of work performed by our men in the parachute packing shop. Goal number one had been achieved. In only three months we had accomplished what was thought by others to be highly unlikely, if not impossible. We celebrated the achievement of that goal with a cold beer/soda, then turned our attention to the next.

Five months later the IG Team descended upon McClellan Air Force Base for a second look, and, again, Life Support passed with flying colors, garnering two more "Outstanding" citations; one for the high level of professionalism and morale displayed by our people in every department. The second was again given for our excellent training curriculum. They were so impressed with the latter, that they asked for copies of our lesson plans; which were distributed to every Life Support Section in the Command for their study and possible adoption (with modifications) into their own training programs. Thus, goal number two, "...recognition as one of the best Life Support Units in the USAF Logistics Command, was checked off.

Our two stated goals successfully met, it was time to really savor the moment. Sergeant Tiapola and his wife suggested we celebrate with a Hawaiian Luau. They were both native Hawaiians. His wife, a beautiful young woman, had been cast as a teenage native girl in the movie Hawaii. She and Sgt. Tiapola, himself a tall, handsome man, made a striking couple, turning heads wherever they went. They planned the event to be held in a small park on the base and prepared the roast pig Hawaiian style—baked in a pit over hot lava rocks and covered with banana and tea leaves. With help from the other wives and men, the Luau was a huge success, one that everyone would long remember.

What I will remember most, however, even more than the fun and great food,

was the pride I felt as I observed the camaraderie on display by the men and their wives. We had come a long way from fighting in the hallways of Life Support just nine months ago.

Do you recall the NCO I mentioned earlier, the one who had filed the Equal Opportunity charge? He had been attending the NCO Leadership School and missed the last IG Inspection. He graduated at the top of his class, in time to join us at the Luau; albeit with a new perspective. The charge was closed out.

Shortly after the picnic, Staff Sergeant Kinney, the young man who developed and taught classroom academics, and was awarded an "Outstanding" in both inspections, filed for a "Hardship Discharge." His father was ill and could no longer work to support the family. From the outset, I had found him to be one of the most level-headed and dedicated airmen in the Life Support Section. He was also a good son, and his responsibility to family took precedence over his desire to pursue a very promising Air Force career. A job would be waiting for him when he returned home to Seattle, Washington.



**SSgt Kinney receiving the AFLC Life Support Training award for 1977**

My letter requesting he be awarded the Air Force Commendation Medal was approved before he was honorably discharged. Normally, I would have presented

it to him in a simple ceremony at a Life Support meeting, but I had a better idea. I called him into my office: "Sgt. Kinney, I am going to forward your medal and citation to the president of the company you will be joining, with a cover letter explaining the significance of the award, and ask him to present it to you. As much as I would like be the one to pin this well-deserved medal on your chest, I will defer that honor to him. Why? Because I want him to know, that the man standing before him is one of the best the United States Air Force has ever produced."

"I don't know what to say, Major, except, thank you."

"On the contrary, I thank you. When I first got to Life Support you were the only positive note I had to support my belief that I could turn things around. No one is more sorry to see your Air Force career cut short. Nonetheless, I respect and admire you for your decision. Your father may also have mixed feelings about it, but none that would overshadow the immense pride he must have for his son."

SSgt. Michael K. Kinney left us just before Christmas, 1977. I retired two months later. The ceremony for such an occasion is usually held at the flagpole in front of McClellan Base Headquarters. A citation is read, then presented to the retiree by the Depot Commander, who would then say a few words about my Air Force service and a grateful nation, before we shook hands and exchanged salutes. I chose another venue.

Instead, I asked my immediate supervisor and Base Operations Officer, Lt. Col. McDowell to do the honors in his office, with Ezdy, and all the men and wives from Life Support present. It would hold more meaning for me.

However, my story didn't end there. I still had a few days left before cleaning out my desk, and I took the opportunity to hold one last meeting to thank everyone for all their hard work in taking McClellan Life Support from the "cellar" to one of the best in the Air Force Logistics Command. Before I could conclude my remarks with a final goodbye, Sgt. Kelly interrupted.

"Sir, may I say something?"

"Of course, Sarge." I waved him up and stepped aside.

Kelly walked up to the podium carrying something in his hand. Looking at me he said, "Sir, the men and I wanted to do something special for you before you walk out of Life Support for the last time; something that would not only remind you of us and the time you spent here, but would express our thanks for all you did to refocus our commitment to mission...for leading us to top of our profession.

I, for one, did not give you much of chance to do this. None of us did. But, you set the goals, gave us the tools and backing we needed to achieve them, and, by God, we did. We even questioned your slogan; which brings me to this."



Kelly held up the object he was carrying. "Before I present it to you I'd like to read what we had engraved on it: 'Maj. Tomasino, Mar 77 – Feb 78, We're not the best, not yet. Thanks to you we're trying.'"



He handed me the plaque, saluted sharply, and walked back to his seat amidst a standing ovation from everyone in the room. I was moved beyond words. To be recognized in this way by the men I led meant more to me than any medal, or any accolade I had ever received in my twenty five years of service. I could not have chosen a more fitting assignment, or higher note on which to end my military career.

## “HITS” REVISITED

My son, Robert—who wrote the Foreword and helped me edit this book—thought that anyone reading “The Hits Kept Coming” (the first chapter), would want to know, would *need* to know about my personal feelings after returning from the most action-packed, tension-filled, incident-plagued mission I ever flew in Vietnam. Our conversation went something like this:

“Dad, let me try to summarize the story. You led a flight of three F-100’s to an unplanned target in the central highlands of Vietnam that was rapidly going dark with no flare ship to illuminate the area, flew through a barrage of high-explosive anti-aircraft cannon shells to neutralize the Vietcong’s air defense threat, and saved a U.S. Army Special Forces convoy from annihilation. Then, you departed the target area with less than minimum fuel remaining, led your flight through a wall of thunderstorms you could not go over, or around, and recovered safely on a partially lighted runway with little more than fumes left in your tanks. And all of that took place in less than two hours. Is that about right?”

“Yeah, that sums it up pretty good.”

“That’s it, that’s all you’ve got to say about it? I mean, how did you, and the men with you, *feel* about the mission? Did you shrug it off as just another day at work? Did it cause you to reflect upon your own mortality...what? That’s what I want to know. I also think, that anyone reading the story would be as curious to know as I am.”

In a further effort to get me to open up he asked: “What did you guys talk about at the club that night while you were enjoying that cold beer?”

“The usual things, girls, airplanes, and fast cars...not necessarily in that order.” I was just joking; although they are the three most often discussed subjects by fighter pilots in a bar.

“Very funny, pops...you know what I mean.”

“Yes, I do son, and you’re right. However, until you brought it up, I didn’t realize that a reader would be as curious to know as you are. We go through a thorough debriefing after every mission we fly; but, with this one we did have a little more to cover. It was rehashed again at the Officer’s Club that night and, unlike many of the missions flown in Vietnam, needed no embellishment. It was, as I told the Army Lt. Colonel who risked it all to ‘carve out’ those targets for us, ‘the kind of mission every fighter pilot wants to be a part of.’ Indeed, it was the most personally satisfying mission I flew in Vietnam. We saved American lives that night.”

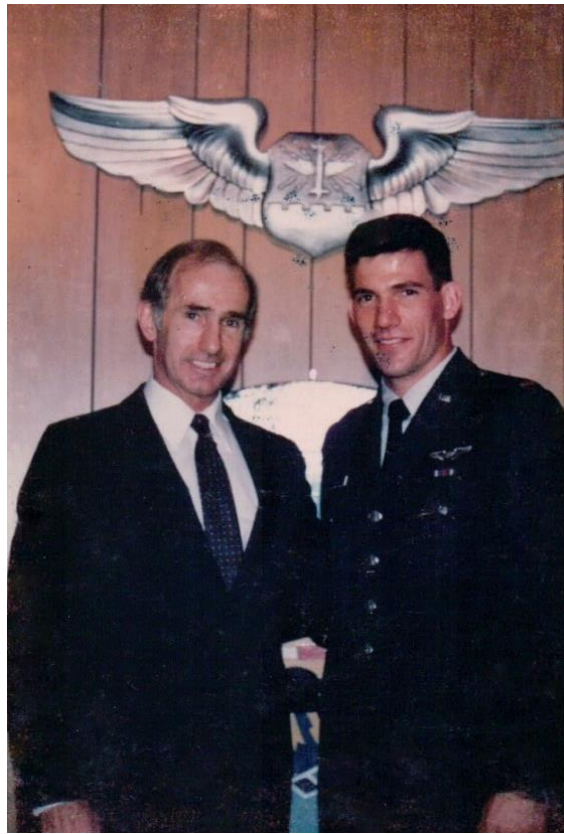


**My son, Capt. Robert “Bert” Tomasino, in the cockpit of a Canadian F-5.**

“That’s good, Dad, but I was looking for something else, something even more personal to you. I mean how did you really feel after flying a mission that challenged you and your wingmen at every damned turn? I know, that when you were actually going through it, you didn’t have time to ponder the question; but later, at the club?”

“You’re right, we did have a lot more to talk about than girls, airplanes, and cars, and more than a few words were said about how lucky we were to be enjoying that cold beer. ‘I cheated death again,’ is a phrase often jokingly used by pilots returning from a mission...any mission. We may have even expressed those very sentiments at the bar that night. If we did, it was with a far greater appreciation of the words.”

“Bert” didn’t press me any further on the issue that evening. Early the next morning he, his beautiful wife, Nancey, and their two dogs, Bella and Duino, would be driving back to Penn Valley, California. They had spent the Labor Day weekend (Sep 5, 2016) with Ezdy and me in Las Vegas. I’m sure he left as unsatisfied with my “answer” as I was.



**Robert's graduation from Navigator Training.  
Mather AFB, California. 1986**

Even now, as I write the postscript to the story, I am not at all sure of what additional insight I can offer, if any. Most people would no doubt shy away from delving into a subject in which they have no expertise. But, I am a risk-taker, and “pushing the envelope” is something I did before I ever “strapped on” an airplane. Indeed, I feel compelled to do so as long as I draw a breath. Nowadays, however, my risk-taking is limited to speaking out on the issues of concern to me with words rather than bullets.

Would it be fair to describe anyone who flies a jet-fighter aircraft for a living as a risk-taker, someone who knows, that any day he climbs into a machine capable of transporting him into a world only a handful of mortals will ever know might be his last?

Flying has been portrayed by an earlier aviator as “long hours of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror.” Whoever that pilot was, he may have been describing the kind of flying he did in multi-engine transports, or in carrying the mail across the country in an old bi-wing airplane, but he damned sure was not describing the fighter pilot segment of our profession.



**The guys I flew with. The 429th TFS "Black Falcons"  
Bien Hoa Air Base, South Vietnam. 1965**

"The Hits Kept Coming" may not be typical of most missions flown in Vietnam, but not once did any of us lift off the runways at Bien Hoa, Tan Son Nhut, Danang, Tuy Hoa, Phu Cat, or Phan Rang with a fully armed F-100 without some apprehension of our chances of making it back. A little boredom would have been welcome, but fighter pilots don't have that luxury.

Yes, we celebrate when we do get back, just as we did after the "Hits" mission; retelling our story to the last man standing at the bar. Nonetheless, we did so with the sobering knowledge that tomorrow we would be going up again, and the cold beers toasted on that night might be the ones raised in our memory.

"Throw a nickel on the grass," a phrase taken from a favorite song sung by fighter pilots in Officer's Clubs all over the world, was soon adopted as their way of honoring a fallen comrade. The complete line in the song reads: "Throw a nickel on the grass, save a fighter pilot's ass."

## EPILOGUE

Writing the first edition of *Close Calls and Other Neat Stories* gave me the opportunity to revisit some of the most exciting, most memorable chapters of my military career. In this second edition, *Close Calls (Revisited)* I have added three more “neat stories,” several new pictures, and a designed a new cover.

It is as close as I will come to writing a memoir, or autobiography. Indeed, each time I re-read a story during the editing process I wondered how I had survived so many life-threatening encounters. Some of the predicaments in which I found myself were self-inflicted; the inevitable result of reaching a little too far each time I climbed into an airplane, picked up a rifle, or engaged in any kind of competition. Indeed, I was always my own biggest competitor. No matter what I was doing it was never enough for me to just get it done, it had to be done better than I had done it before.

Yet, despite a strong personal drive to perfect my flying skills, it was never important for me to be better than everyone else. I did not have a need to be first in anything; I just wanted to be better than me. Thus, by never accepting my best as my best, I believed I would eventually stand with the finest in my chosen profession. That is what was important to me. I knew (we all did), that being number one in the fighter pilot business is something that could change on any given day.

Having said that, however, there was one title I had hoped to attain before I hung up my “g” suit for the last time, “Top Gun.” For a fighter pilot it is the most sought after prize; one that I achieved twice in my Air Force career. The first was earned in a peacetime setting in which no one was shooting back at me; the other, when they were. The former got my name engraved on the side of a trophy that once stood in a glass cabinet in the operations building for the 522nd Tactical Fighter Squadron, Cannon AFB, New Mexico—a squadron that no longer exists. The latter, and the recognition that is eminently more meaningful to me, came from the men with whom I flew combat in Vietnam.

In my twenty-five years of military service I’ve earned my share of medals and awards, but none were as satisfying to me as the recognition and respect I received from my peers in the Air Force, the United States Marines, and my co-workers in the civilian companies I worked for after retiring from the Air Force.

Recognition as “Top Gun” was professionally gratifying, but there were many other highlights in my military career. Perhaps, the most personally rewarding came when I marched my squad across the frozen hills of South Korea’s northern border to help fellow Marines complete work on their defensive fighting positions and found no one there to greet us. The men of Charlie Company were in their base camp holding a Christmas party for the local Korean kids; an admirable endeavor,

to be sure, but one we found difficult to accept. Our disappointment aside, what transpired between me and my squad on top of that deserted hill served to remove any doubt I may have had about my ability to lead other men.

That singular event in my life took place just a few days before Christmas, and may well have happened on my twentieth birthday. If it did, I could not have received a greater gift. It bolstered my self-confidence and validated a belief in myself that there was nothing I could not do, or, at least, try to do. It literally opened a whole new world of possibilities, and saw me through the many difficult situations I would confront in the future.

I was a Junior in W.C. Mepham High School, Bellmore, New York, when I made my decision to Join the U.S. Marines after graduation and did, but not immediately. My older brother, Vince, was a Marine, and had already served in the Korean War. My younger brother, Joe, had also declared his intentions of joining the Army as soon as he was seventeen. If my sister, Marie, had been old enough (she came along about ten years after Joe), I'm sure she would have joined the Navy, or Coast Guard, and our parents would have had a "Four Star Banner" hanging in the front window instead of three.



**Vince, Joe, and me, at home in North Bellmore, New York. 1956**

Given those circumstances, I couldn't just leave Mom and Dad—not right away. So, I took a job as a plumber's apprentice to help with family expenses. It paid only a dollar fifty an hour, but that wasn't bad back then, and I was learning a trade I could use when I got back.

I joined the Marine Corps on the 17<sup>th</sup> of January 1952, barely a month after my



eighteenth birthday. The words of my friends still echoed in my mind as I signed the papers: *"Join the Marines and go to Korea? Are you crazy? You'll get yourself killed!"* They may have been half right.

But, that was then. Now, more than six decades later, if I were asked to sum up my life in one sentence, define who I am as a man, I would do it by paraphrasing the response of that seventeen year old idealist: *"I don't want anyone else doing my dying, or my living, for me."*

I spent only three years in the Marine Corps, but they were life-changing. When I walked through the main gate of the Brooklyn Navy Yard in my dress-green uniform and "spit-shined" shoes—honorable discharge papers in hand—it was with an unshaken confidence that I could face any challenge...do anything.



***I would become a fighter pilot.***



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

How do you thank every person you have ever known in your lifetime who has, by his or her personal example, influenced your thinking and helped mold you into the person you are today? Any attempt to do it would require a book of its own. Yet, each and every one of my family, friends—even my enemies—has played a part in shaping my thinking and, by extension, my writing. So, I'll start with a sweeping thank you to all of them; many with whom I have had the privilege to serve, and/or know as a friend: Karvonan, Neubeck, Bode, Craig, Whisner, Brackenbury, Valencia, and so many more.

A special thanks must go to my son, Robert—a retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel with twenty eight years of service—who not only read the book, but took the time to scrutinize every word, sentence, and paragraph for “typos,” misspelled words, incorrect grammar. He also made a number of insightful suggestions that enhanced the story itself and inspired me to revisit a particularly event-filled saga to make the list of “Close Calls.” If that were not enough, “Bert” honored me by writing one of the most poignant and brilliantly written forewords to a book I have ever read.

His effort was augmented by that of my friend, Dan Stegemann, a former police officer and English teacher, who studiously examined every page in the manuscript, to lend a practiced third set of eyes to the editing process. He also brought closure to my Korean War experience when he brought “his kids,” David and Sarah Lee, from Korea to meet a veteran who had fought in the war that secured their freedom. I learned then, that the Korean War was *not forgotten*...not by the Korean people.

Steven Vito, Robert's older brother, took the picture of me and my friend the “Red Baron,” used for the “Author Bio.” Steven Vito, himself, has his own comeback story worthy of a book of his own.

And then there is my good friend, Frank LaDuca, the best damn PR guy anyone could have to promote his book. Frank has handed out hundreds of my business cards, along with a healthy dose of praise for my books and service in two wars. He is more like an older brother to me; a WWII Navy vet who literally walked in the ashes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki just weeks after the bombs were dropped—without benefit of protective clothing to shield him from the radiation. He and his mates were simply hosed down on the deck of their ship, the USS Waukesha, after discarding all of their clothing. Little was known then of the effects of radiation. Frank survived that, and a few more “close calls” of his own during his tour in the Pacific. He is one of “The Greatest Generation,” and I am proud to call him my friend and brother.

There is one other person whom I could never thank enough, who is an innate part of every story in this book, whether she is mentioned in it or not. That person is

my beautiful and courageous wife, Ezdy.



**Ezdy and I with our boys: Robert, Jimmy, Steven, and Felix (l-r). Ezdy Lynn, our little girl was still "in the hangar." 1963**

While I was up there, having an affair with a mistress that could never be conquered, or just saving the world, she was taking care of our home and five kids; never knowing from one day to the next whether she would ever see their father walk through the front door again. While Felix, Steven, Jimmy, Robert, and Ezdy Lynn may have been too young to fully understand the ramifications of their father's work, and why he was gone so much of the time, they too missed their dad, endured the same pain of separation. At times they must have also seen the worried look in their mother's face in one of her unguarded moments.

Every time I walked out the door to "go to work," particularly if I was flying that day, Ezdy bore that burden—never more so than when that flight was in Vietnam. Nonetheless, she was with me in spirit on every mission I flew—her name graced the nose of my aircraft in Vietnam. I can only imagine the anxious moments she counted and the stress she endured for the twenty two years we served in the Air Force.

Thousands of military wives from every service, and every rank, bore the same burden, shared the same fears. Most were able to survive the lonely nights and

problem filled days; some were not. Ezdy, like no other fighter pilot's wife I have ever known, not only survived, she embraced my chosen career with a passion for flying that matched my own. It was only because of her that I was able to do the things I did and loved so much to do, and still be able to come home to a wife and family I love even more. She is, as the words in an old song put it so well, "...the wind beneath my wings."



The "Red Baron and me. Las Vega, NV 2020

## AUTHOR BIO

He was only a boy when the bombs rained down on Pearl Harbor pulling America into WWII. As he watched the grim images of war flash before him in a darkened theater in Bellmore, L.I. he silently vowed to be in the next one. When his high school friends questioned his decision to join the Marines and go to Korea, he replied: "I don't want anyone else doing my dying for me."

He joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division just weeks before the truce ending the Korean War was signed—time enough to get “shot at and missed,” he would say. *His war* over, he pursued his boyhood dream of becoming a fighter pilot in the U.S. Air Force, flew two combat tours in Vietnam, earning two Distinguished Flying Crosses. And, when he wasn't getting shot at, stood watch on bases surrounding the old Soviet Union during the *Cold War* to ensure that Russia remained behind her “Iron Curtain.”

When Muammar Gaddafi brought down the Senusi regime of King Idris, Vito was there, training the fighter pilots of the Libyan Air Force; one of whom was killed on a night mission over Tripoli. When he suggested that a special ceremony be flown honoring his fallen friend, the Libyan Commander insisted—despite the risk to his career, even, perhaps, his life—that Vito lead the “Missing Man Formation,” or it would not be flown. It's one of the many intriguing tales in his book, *Close Calls and Other Neat Stories*—re-titled *Close Calls (Revisited)* in this newly revised edition.

Indeed, it was from a life lived during one the most tumultuous periods in recent times that inspired the author to record his participation in those events while they were still fresh in his mind. Vito Tomasino started his writing career rather late in life

and has written three books, each in a different genre. Yet, each of them ring with the same passion, the same wonder of life, and the same truth that could only come from a man who “walked” in that history.

For more about the author and his books go to: [www.kracek.com](http://www.kracek.com).

**In memory of my friend and mentor, John R. Bode, a man with the heart of a warrior and the mind of a philosopher/scientist.**

## Cover

"Vito encapsulates the pilot/aircraft synergy the F-100 inspired in its aircrews better than any documentary I have ever read. In Vietnam, his performance marked him as a gifted aviator and iconic combat leader."

F. Gregory Neubeck, a fellow Fighter Pilot

"A U.S. Marine before his Air Force life, Vito is the guy I want in that foxhole with me, or flying my wing. He's not too bad with words either."

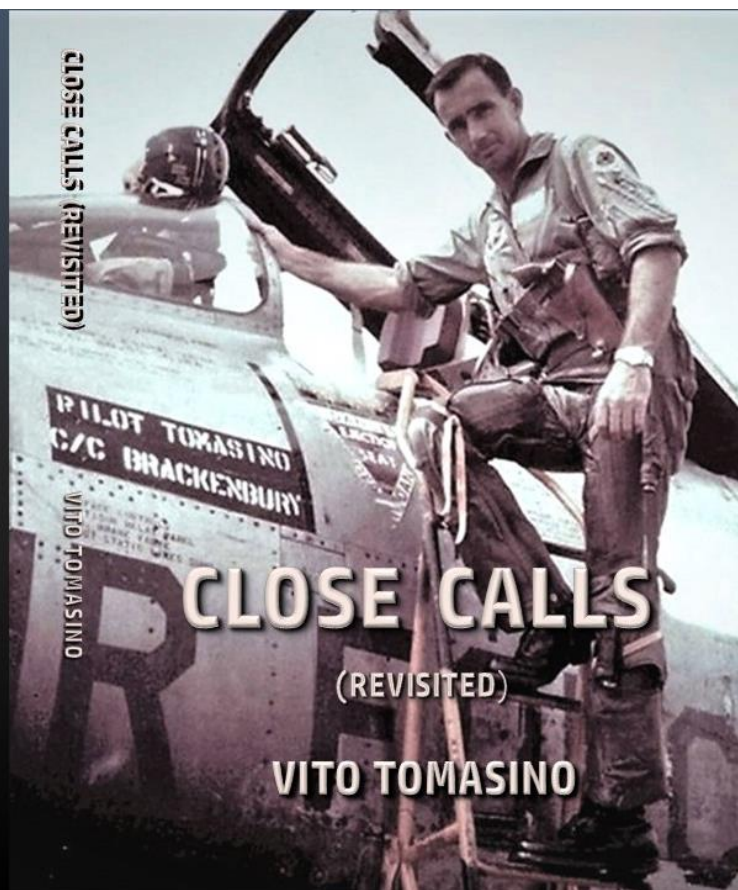
James E. Craig, Col. USAF



"Close Calls (Revisited)" adds a few more "neat stories" to the many close ones I faced in a military career spanning three wars and a revolution; taking me from the hills of Korea as a U.S. Marine, to the skies over Vietnam as an Air Force Fighter Pilot who, between wars, stood watch over the U.S.S.R. to ensure that Russia remained behind her "Iron Curtain."

The revolution? That was Libya, Sept 1, 1969, and a young Lieutenant by the name of Muammar Gaddafi...one of my most memorable encounters.

Ezdy was with me on that one too.



"*Close Calls* should, no, will amaze you with the many situations my father faced in his career. Once these stories were put to paper, the details were nothing short of amazing; or as Dad puts it, neat. I don't know of another book that puts the reader in the cockpit of an F-100 during a combat mission in Viet Nam, in the trenches during the end of the Korean War, survival training in the forests of West Germany, or in a flaming F-111 during a test sortie in Northern California—to name a few.

I have no doubts you will enjoy this newly revised and expanded edition of his original manuscript, aptly renamed *Close Calls (Revisited)*—so kick the tires, light the fire, and enjoy the ride."

His son,  
Robert "Bert" Tomasino  
Lt Col, USAF (ret.)



"The words of my high school friends still echoed in my ears as I signed the papers: 'Join the Marines and go to Korea? Are you crazy? You'll get yourself killed.' They may have been half right."

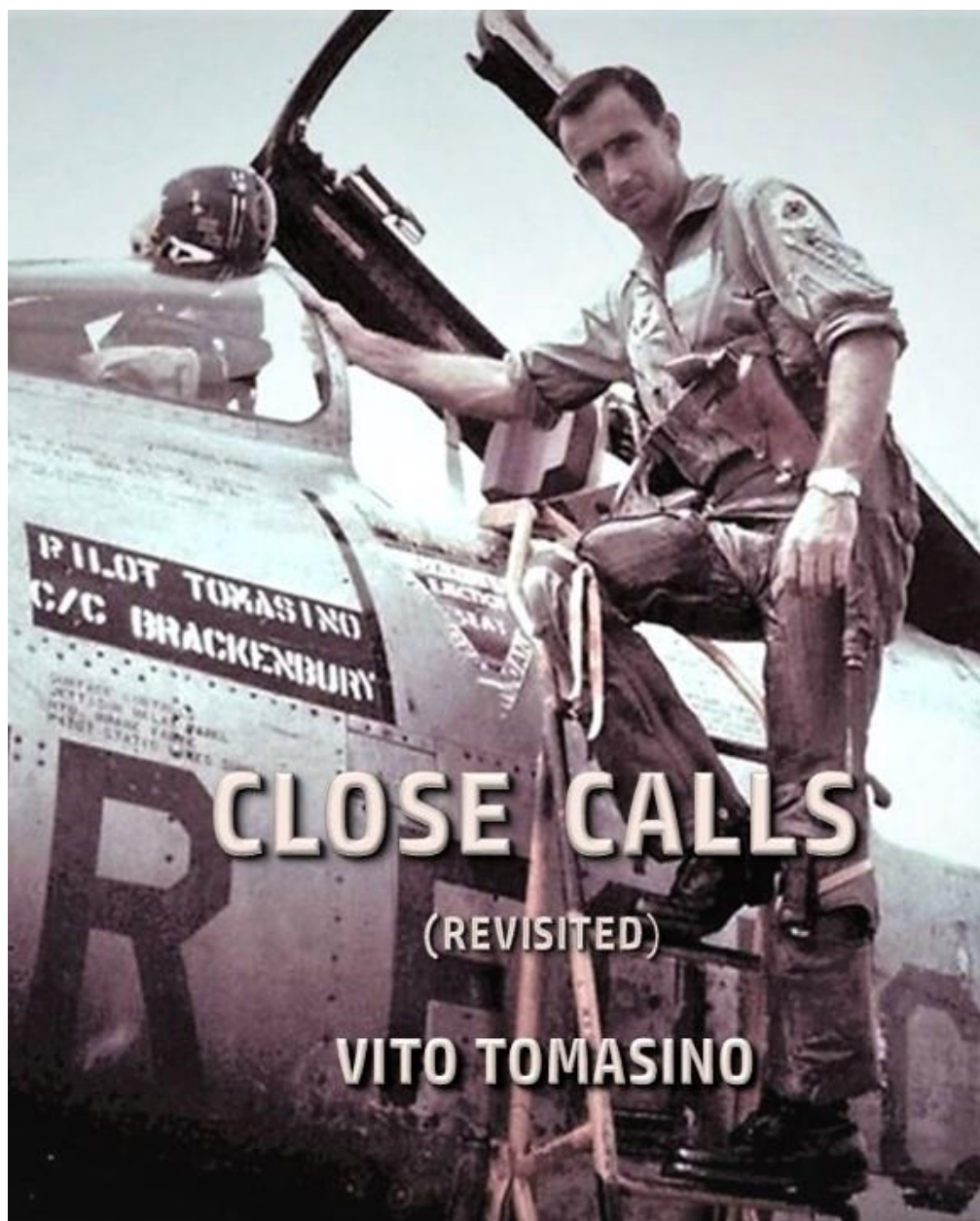
The innocence and hope I saw in her beautiful face, brought home, for me, what the Korean War, any war, is really about... the kids!

No other people on this planet identify with the plight of the downtrodden like the American people; because, not too long ago, we were them.

"So, when asked to pick up a rifle, or strap on fighter jet to help those in a little known country on the other side of the world secure their freedom, we feel a special obligation to answer the call."

"It's who we are."





Thumbnail for Amazon, B&N, et. al.

