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## I Had Not Screwed Up

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**Ken Mick**

**I HAD NOT SCREWED UP**

**10/28/19**

Most combat soldiers had several great fears while in the field with their unit. Fear of failure, arguably the most loathed, hovered close overhead with all Air Cavalry pilots. I was no exception to that rule. Letting my friends down was as true a fear in Vietnam as it had been with any team sport back home.

Do not embarrass yourself or your unit. Do not screw up!

I had not screwed up seriously with any of my first flights with the Centaurs. The missions had become a routine, inspiring little apprehension nor innovation. None of the Loaches we protected had suffered loss of life, although several scout ships were destroyed. I learned from each event and from the expert aircraft commanders with whom I flew. I dreamed of the time when I could do their job with the same expertise and flair they exhibited.

Tonight the O Club had a really special show planned. It allowed everyone to blow off some steam and down a few brews. Tomorrow with its scheduled missions seemed far away.

The entertainment by “the Peanuts” was loud and energetic, if not particularly professional, yet appreciated nonetheless by our aviators. The four- man Vietnamese band had just finished its rendition of “Proud Mary.” Needing a break, they went to the bar for a drink. Their go-go dancer waited patiently for another opportunity to enthrall the male Lai Khe Officer’s Club audience.

Lai Khe Airfield located about 70 km northwest of Saigon spread feebly to either side of regional highway 15. A small ville on the way to Tay Ninh, home to the Centaurs of F Troop/4<sup>th</sup> CAV and Silver Spurs of D Troop/3<sup>rd</sup> 17<sup>th</sup> CAV, it rarely received live entertainment, making the “Peanuts” a popular treat.

“Attention,” called our troop commander, Major Hatch, a small man who enthusiastically wore full cavalry regalia, including wide-brimmed Stetson hat, boots and a yellow scarf. “I have the names of pilots newly selected as Aircraft Commander.”

Becoming an AC signaled an important change of status, both professionally and socially. The AC flew and commanded the Cobra gunship. More importantly, he occupied the armored rear seat and fired the rockets. He no longer filled the tiny front compartment nor acted as bullet-catcher for the back seater. Clearly a step up in the longevity queue.

The hushed crowd listened as the names were read. The first two were second tour Warrants; no surprise. The third was a first tour Lieutenant: Me! A bright red face and grin signaled my glee at joining that august club. Excitement turned to shock as all existing ACs crowded around and energetically poured cans of cold Black Label beer on our trio of honorees. A waste of good beer.

The empty cans were hurled onto a heap in the center of our unit symbol, a tiled platform depicting a mounted centaur hurling a spear.

Now, the three of us would be treated to a troop initiation; drinking a flaming shot of tequila. Like most of the other Snake pilots, I sported a bushy moustache. The flaming liquid presented a fiery hazard to the imbibers and the “stache.”

The emcee who called candidates’ names ensured that the Troop customs were observed. Another AC held his zippo ready, while the third acolyte handed a full shot glass to the first selectee. He took the glass, extended it to be lit and coolly gulped it down. Roars all around marked his expert display. The second Warrant Officer repeated the process with élan. Again, roars boomed.

My turn came. Being something of a wise-ass, I decided to enhance the ceremony. I extended my glass for ignition and held it for a few seconds while thanking one and all. As the flame began to heat the glass and my hand, I jerkily raised the container, sloshed burning liquor on my nomex flight suit and swallowed the elixir, setting my moustache on fire. The assembled officers gasped as my gaffe was realized. I was saved by rapid infusions of the cheap beer from the audience and multiple poundings on the burning patches of my flight suit.

My performance had been a big hit and the band began to play "I'm Your Captain," by Grand Funk Railroad. Covering my seared lip, I was hustled off stage to visit our laughing flight surgeon for some not-so-tender ministrations to my wounded hair and ego. My remaining evening passed in a fog of free drinks and camaraderie.

The next morning announced itself with a roaring hangover. I was abruptly awakened by my co-pilot, CW2 Jeff, who hurried me along with a quick coffee and slosh of Listerine. I grabbed my flight gear and personal weapons, donned my black Stetson Cav Hat, and headed for the flight line. Jeff had already inspected the aircraft. As a first-time AC, I had been assigned an experienced pilot to fly in my front seat. CW2 Jeff was not only an expert pilot, but one of our Instructor Pilots. As an IP, he had forgotten more than I had ever known about flying the Cobra. He was also an amazing combat pilot. He would not allow me to screw up too badly.

As we cranked the gunship and cleared the Lai Khe airfield, my hangover began to dissolve into a dull, but bearable throb. I continued to fly toward Tay Ninh, allowing the ship to follow its nose, much as our Cavalry namesakes must have followed their mounts' lead.

Arriving at the Tay Ninh West forward area refuel point, I landed on one of the waiting refuel pads, retarded the throttle to flight idle and passed the controls to my front seater. I climbed out

of the cockpit, retrieved the fueling nozzle and began to top off our tanks for the visual recon mission in Cambodia. Remembering another time when mortar rounds exploded in the fuel site, I did not become too comfortable. Nothing exploded and I thankfully remounted, called "I have the controls," then called the controller to announce, "Centaur 49 departing fuel pad Echo 17 for North departure." Next, "Centaur control, 49 off Tango November Whiskey headed North, will call fence." I had let my unit know where I was and where I was scheduled to go.

Crossing the border into Cambodia, my Loach and Huey team and I prepared for entry into our VR box. Again, as frequently on our missions, it was in the Chup Rubber Plantation area. My senses were heightened as I realized that this time, it was up to me to initiate the action and protect my compatriots. Don't screw up.

For the first time as an AC, I cleared the Loach to enter the reconnaissance area. Centaur 37 spiraled down and began to work over the canopy toward a small road in a clear area of the rubber forest. Ahead, we saw an ox cart loaded with hay and two figures. The Loach cautiously approached and the action below captured all our attention.

"Centaur 37, taking fire, taking fire," our Loach pilot screamed. I immediately banked into a wing-over maneuver, rolling into a steep dive and lowering the nose onto a heading for the Loach and Ox Cart below. I noted airspeed; less than the 190 knots maximum and the target filled my gun sight as Jeff looked for smoke marking the enemy. I locked my gunsight onto the Ox Cart, assuming that it was the source of the hostile fire. My finger, hovered close to the trigger which would release pairs of rockets. I itched to fire!

"49, 37, It's not the cart, repeat, not the cart. They were as surprised as we were." As big fluorescent green tracers passed overhead, I broke off the firing pass and climbed away. Several

ball-peen hammer sounds told me that we had taken a couple of hits, but the controls were normal. Nothing seemed to be missing.

The loach crew marked the correct target, a 51 Cal machine gun site, with a purple smoke. Jeff poured a torrent of minigun fire on the area and I followed with several pairs of rockets. When firing stopped, the loach confirmed that we had destroyed the enemy gun and crew. Despite the scare, none of our team was injured.

Departing the VR area, we climbed to assigned elevation and crossed back into Vietnam. Our engagement had taken only a few minutes, yet I had almost blown some poor old farmer with his son and family ox to pieces. Thankfully, training took over and I reacted correctly. I had not screwed up!