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Into the Unknown

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After a two-day flight from Long Binh in III Corps, we arrived at Phu Bai, a US base south of Hue in the northern I Corps area of South Vietnam. Our troop landed on a bleak, derelict airfield bordered by rows of huts like those we saw in the Southern US, housing intended for migrant farm workers. The buildings, transferred to the ARVN and now returned to US control, had been denuded of doors, windows, and other portable items by the departing Vietnamese troops.

A small steel platform airstrip and a parking area with parallel revetments adjoined our new home. Barbed wire surrounded the field and cantonment area but left us isolated from any other US troops. Security for our new home consisted of a company of abandoned former 101st Division infantry troops, left behind by their redeployed units and drained of morale and motivation. The defensive perimeter reeked of drug-generated fog.

I threw my duffle bag into the platoon trailer being pulled through the aircraft parking area, collecting personal equipment for the aircrews. I carried my flight gear and personal camera equipment to the ops shack where quarters were being assigned.

I was not among the first to arrive, so expected to be given the leftovers.

A pleasant sight awaited me as CPT Mike Woods, known as “Big Guy” for his imposing physique and towering height, pulled me aside. “We’re over here, Ken. I got us a hooch near Ops.” Mike, true to his words, had snared one of the less-devastated rooms. As a captain, Mike loomed large in the unit hierarchy and the personnel officer liked him.

Mike led me through a covered breezeway and up a flight of steps to an empty room. It had no windows or door but was otherwise intact. Scrounging would satisfy our shortages! We assembled cots and went foraging for bits and pieces of missing furnishings. Bartering quickly improved our nest.

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Our new home sat far to the north of our former home in III Corps. Saigon and the Cambodian rubber plantations we formerly haunted now welcomed other units. Hue and I Corps contained forbidding areas of low mountain ranges and valleys to the west and the South China Sea to the east. This AO was unknown territory with perceived dangers around every turn.

I Corps had been the home of the 101st Airborne Division, now transported back to the States by the magic of Vietnamization. We had absorbed a few pilots from the 101st and expected they would show us the ropes.

Our operations area shared flying responsibilities with the “Blue Ghosts” of F Troop/8th Cav. We two units constituted the only air cavalry units in the north. Where there had been many aviation units just a few months ago, now, in the spring of 1972, a handful remained.

We quickly jumped into the flight rotation in the unfamiliar locale. Our inherited pilots from the 101st did their best to orient us. However, the need for gunship support by the ARVN overcame our time to acclimate.

My first flight into the mountains had me assigned as wing to CPT Woods, Centaur 45; my roommate. Mike, a second-tour gun pilot, oozed confidence and radiated ability. In that location, at that point of geographic unfamiliarity, I just oozed.

We departed Phu Bai headed to an area along the first mountain ridgelines, southwest of the provincial capital of Quang Tri. The mission was not really visual recon (VR), our habitual job, but was to fly cover for several CH-47 Chinook heavy-lift helicopters as they retrieved ARVN artillery pieces from Firebase Anne, now in danger of being overrun by NVA forces.

“Centaur 49, Centaur 45. Follow my lead. NVA troops are outside the wire. Prep the area on the west side of the base.”

“45, 49. I can clearly see NVA troops in the open.”

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As if viewing a movie on a huge screen, I watched the two Chinooks approach a small airstrip within the base perimeter. ARVN soldiers awaited their arrival with the 155-mm cannons rigged for pickup.

Liftmaster 1, the Chinook lead, called on guard, the emergency frequency. “Mortar rounds impacting in our flight path on FSB Anne! Flight going around,” he announced, beginning an orbit to try another approach.

The two heavy-lift copters rapidly climbed away from the guns as fountains of debris and dust rose from the stricken airstrip. “Centaur 49, 45. Follow my lead. Firing at NVA on the west side.” We began a strafing run.

The Liftmaster ships cleared the base area and orbited well to the east as our Cobra flight attacked and began to fire rockets and miniguns into the enemy troops, causing havoc in their exposed position. As Centaur 45 completed his first run, I dove into his wake to add several pairs of seventeen-pounder rockets to the effort. I had never seen so many NVA in the open. My explosives threw bodies and equipment into the air, as they kept advancing onto the airstrip. As they charged, green NVA tracers rose in swarms toward our speeding gunships.

With NVA infantry pouring through the base defenses on the west, the ARVN troops around the guns abandoned their weapons and fled down the east slope of the hill.

“Liftmaster flight, Centaur 45. ARVN running east. Suggest you abort. All the gunners are now gone.”

“Centaur 45, Liftmaster 1. Roger, concur mission abort.”

As the Chinooks departed, we made another gun run along the western area, attracting small arms fire, but no noticeable hits. “Centaur flight, Covey 17. Clear FSB Anne. Have fast movers inbound.”

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“Covey 17, Centaur 45 flight departing.” We handed off the area to the circling Covey forward air controller (FAC), flying overhead in his OV-10 to coordinate the TAC air. We proceeded to Phu Bai to rearm and refuel as a pair of Phantoms began their attack.

Over the next week, base after base suffered assault and many were abandoned or overrun. The enemy appeared unstoppable and the ARVN often surrendered to their foe without a fight. We felt like the 300 Spartans at Thermopylae, holding the gates against a modern army. However, as we gained familiarity with our new AO and tactics, we began to hit back.

Route 547 ran west from Hue, passing FSB Birmingham, FSB Bastogne and on into the A Shau Valley, longtime enemy-held territory.

I flew wing again, this time with CPT Dan Tyner as lead. Dan, another second-tour gun pilot, was fearless. During his first tour, while alongside the runway waiting out a thunderstorm inside his Charlie-Model Huey gunship, the aircraft behind him attracted a direct lightning strike, overloading its electrical system and firing rockets into Dan’s ship. Several crew members died and Dan received serious wounds, spending weeks in a hospital, emerging healed, but having lost his healthy fear.

Flying with Dan seriously stressed my nerves. He seemed to expect his fearlessness to extend to everyone else. Thus, I felt required to emulate his actions while overcoming extreme anxiety.

We flew west along the gravel road to cover a resupply op by several Hueys from the “Blue Stars,” a sister unit. Our destination, FSB Bastogne, halfway between Hue and the valley.

Clouds sat atop the mountains seriously restricting our flight operations. Beyond FSB Birmingham, we were cleared to fire anywhere outside the base perimeters. Transiting a pass which had become a tunnel through the misty weather, we entered the Bastogne environs. The

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scene looked disturbingly like “Skull Island” in the King Kong movie. The base was surrounded by NVA troops and ringed by brooding mountains intermixed with fang-like rocky pinnacles supporting outposts and guns.

We began to take and return fire, covering a UH-1 Huey as it hovered up the side of a hundred-foot rock pinnacle. At the top, the crew chief kicked off the supplies and the helicopter dove down the other side of the rock and safely away.

We flew a racetrack around the firebase, taking fire from the overlooking hillsides as we passed. It seemed like flying inside a sack. I struggled to maintain control of both the aircraft and my fear.

Exiting the pass to escape Bastogne, we took fire from a US M-41 Tank on the road. Dan turned to investigate, prompting orange US-type tracer rounds from the stopped vehicle. He dove his Cobra toward the .50 caliber machine gun. As his aircraft broke off from its firing pass, I covered Tyner’s break, putting rockets directly behind him.

“40, 49. What in hell is this shit? Does this guy know whose side he’s on?”

Dan called Centaur Ops for guidance. “Ops, Centaur 40. Am taking fire from US M-41 tank near Bastogne. Any intel?”

“40, Centaur Ops. Tanks captured by NVA while fleeing from FSB Veghel. Any tanks your location are now enemy. Contact Covey 17, his freq. Execute handoff and RTB. He has tac air on the way.”

“Covey 17, Centaur 40 flight of two Cobras. Do you have us? Orbiting east of Bastogne near the asshole in an M-41 Tank shooting at us.”

“Centaur flight, Covey 17. Hold your position, pair of A-7s inbound.” We kept the tank in sight as a pair of jets streaked toward the captured tank. White trails from the pair arched

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toward the armored vehicle and exploded on target with an impressive blast which threw the turret into the sky.

“Covey, Centaur 40. Nice shooting. Tank destroyed.”

“Ops, Centaur 40 flight now returning to base, rearm and refuel.”

My muscles relaxed in groups from hands to feet. Getting shot at by orange rather than green tracers had induced painful grip reflexes. Eventually, my brain began to relax and a random thought escaped. “I covered Dan’s break. Who covered mine?” Clearly, being flight lead was a better position to be in!