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Scramble

Ken Mick

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The early light oozed through the mist, creating a natural sauna as dawn replaced night in Lai Khe, Republic of Vietnam.

I pictured the cool mornings of Ohio with their waking birdsong as I rushed to class. Carrying a few books and tablets across the leafy College Green at OU in Athens and admiring the mini-skirted coeds contrasted harshly with the reality of a muggy day in Southeast Asia.

The soupy fog heralded another hot, humidity-saturated day. Soon, military convoys passing on Highway 13, the main road from Saigon to Loc Ninh, would add their diesel stench and powdery dust to the uncomfortable surroundings giving my flight suit an embellishment of rusty talc.

At 0630, my two-piece Nomex flight suit had already sweated through. Its fire-retardant cloth did not allow for much ventilation and rapidly became a wet blanket. The sweat band in my black Stetson Cav hat chafed. On my way to the flight line, I carried my SPH-4 flight helmet in its olive-green bag and wore the Kevlar “Chicken Plate” armor draped about my shoulders.

I carried a Car-15 rifle, a .556 caliber collapsible-stock version of the trusty M-16 infantry weapon, and a bandolier of spare magazines of ammunition. I also wore a black shoulder holster with a Smith and Wesson .38 caliber revolver.

My excrement-colored flight suit sported an amazing variety of pockets and nooks to store grease pencils, maps, sunglasses, knives, and the odd candy bar.

Atop all this gear rode a survival vest with even more pockets. Varied pouches held a compass, knife, Signal Operating Instruction (SOI), a book about the size of a paperback Webster dictionary, strobe light, and emergency survival radio.

Trudging to my assigned AH-1G Cobra gunship, I looked similar to most others headed in the same direction. Our swarm resembled a small herd of pack mules ambling along behind an old west Conestoga wagon.

I remembered my father, an Air Force pilot heading off to fly, mounted in an air-conditioned, blue Air Force van, followed by a file of bearers carrying his gear!

Why did I choose the Army over a plush Air Force life? Perhaps, the glib Army aviation recruiter who told me that I would become a pilot faster in the Army and that helicopters were cool, which bombers clearly were not. However, the real reason involved doing something similar to my father, but not exactly the same. Thus, I chose the Army, living in tents and carrying my stuff like a “Real Man,” not like those valet-loving Air Force pukes.

My reverie ended with a loud whump nearby, producing a cloud of dust and debris. A siren began to wail. The herd became a stampede, rushing to our mounts to repel this attack.

Reaching my aircraft, the crew chief and I hurriedly untied the blades, removed the safeties and stored my gear. I climbed into the back-seat Aircraft Commander position and began a truncated preflight check. Meanwhile, my front seat co-pilot/gunner appeared and climbed into his cramped compartment.

I hit the battery switch, engaged the fuel switches, and squeezed the trigger, beginning the start sequence. The process completed and radios on, I called Operations.

“Centaur Ops, Centaur 49. What’s going on?”

“49, Ops, depart north when cleared and join the other guns. Contact 56 on unit push.”

Switching radios, I called Lai Khe tower for clearance and joined the other Cobras gathering beside the runway. As we were cleared, I pulled pitch and headed north to exit the base. After crossing the wire, I told Jimbo, my co-pilot, to get clearance from province artillery and to go weapons hot.

I called our platoon leader. "56, this is 49."

"Roger 49, 56. Orbit base clockwise and await orders. No enemy info yet."

Adrenaline pumping through our bodies as our flight flew circles around the airfield and longed for some action. After a slow 10-15 minutes, the call came to stand down. False Alarm!

"Centaur flight, return to base. Meet at ops for debrief."

Only a sigh signaled our disappointment. Keyed up and aroused, but still carrying a full weapons load, we landed.

We gathered in Ops and Captain Graph, the Operations Officer, gave us the word. No enemy, just a pilot checking a Cobra and accidentally firing a 40MM grenade into the L-shaped revetment wall. Thankfully, the explosion we heard was the propellant shooting the shell out of the M129 turret. The round had not accelerated far enough to arm the explosive warhead.

Nobody hurt except for one cowed aviator!

Graph proceeded to flog us with a lecture on armament safety. He mentioned a mandatory class which sounded very un-warzone.

After returning to the aircraft and refueling, I left my front seat to finish the postflight inspection and trotted down the flight line to a knot of aviators at a nearby revetment.

“What’s going on? Anyone hurt? Snake damaged?”

“No to all. It was a fuck up and not incoming. Nobody hurt.”

I slowed down and worked my way into the group around the accident scene. I saw the pilot, Lt. Silver sitting on an open ammo bay door, holding his head down and retching – not hurt!

I began walking uphill from the flightline toward the hooch area, already planning a visit to the O Club for a cold Black Label and a shot.

“L T, where are you going?” called Captain Double D, my platoon leader. Double D was short for Delbert Dumpy, a mark of our respect for his leadership and flying abilities.

“My mission is scratched. I’m headed to the club.”

“Afraid not. You’re up in an hour, going to Cu Chi with a team to support the ARVNS. Your new front seat is at the 20-ship pre-flighting now. Get your brief from Ops in 10 mikes.”

I groaned. Not only would I have to go up again, but I had one of the 20mm Cobras and a new copilot.

On my last 20mm mission, the vibration from firing the huge 6-barreled Gatling gun had caused one of the power feeds to the instrument panel to pop out, rendering most of the dials and gauges worthless. The 20 ships were notorious for freaky behavior.

The M35 gun and ammunition added up to 1200 pounds to the aircraft weight when loaded with its 950 round ammo load. The blast from the gun, while firing, beat on the left side of the aircraft and required an additional slab of armor to help absorb the shock and keep it from seriously damaging the ship and crew.

The gun did, however, have a couple of advantages. First, it gave the aircrew the ability to stand off from the target and fire with pinpoint accuracy, unlike firing rockets which needed to allow for a drop at the end of their flight. Additionally, firing the cannon produced an awe-inspiring sound, like operating the Texas Chain Saw on steroids.

“Who’s my front seater?”

“W.O. Baggins.” He smirked. “New guy. They call him Groceries.”

After a sketchy brief by Ops, I headed to the aircraft to meet my new crew member and gunship. Both proved to be somewhat impressive. The six-barreled gun mounted under the left wing looked seriously wicked. Sadly, Groceries’ appearance did not resonate like that of the gun!

W.O. Baggins, whose physique explained his nickname, seemed bright enough. He expressed his familiarity with flying in a 20 ship. Where his experience had been gained, I neither questioned nor learned as time was short and I was more concerned about his ability to fit into the front compartment.

The mission was seemingly simple: Fly to Cu Chi some 25 clicks from Lai Khe; Meet with a US Advisor and his ARVN counterpart; Locate and eliminate a VC blocking unit and destroy their bunkers.

All requirements sounded like they fit well with our armament and capabilities. Our OH-6 Loach pilot, W.O. Boomer, and I agreed on an action plan whereby he would confirm the bad guy location and drop smoke on them. I would then soak their position with a firehose stream of 20mm rounds.

Boomer took off first and I followed, climbing to around 1500-foot altitude. The OH-6 called his break into the Visual Recon (VR) area agreed upon.

“49, 13 entering box.”

“Roger 13, you’re cleared in hot.”

I circled over the friendlies with Boomer clearly in sight.

“49, 13. Bunkers in view and manned. Smoke away.”

I called the advisor on his Fox Mike (FM) radio frequency. “Keeper 8, Centaur 49. Loach has spotted enemy and marked their location. Am I cleared to engage?”

“Roger 49, this is Keeper 8. Your smoke is right on. You are cleared to engage.”

As I began to fire into the tree line, the bad guys fired at both aircraft, but my cannon fire continued to walk through their position, setting small fires and causing some secondaries.

“49, this is Keeper 8, Cease Fire! You’re hitting the friendlies!”

“Keeper 8, Centaur 49, roger cease fire, but it’s not so. My rounds are clearly in sight as are the friendly positions.”

“49, Keeper 8. I say again, Cease fire and meet me at the Cu Chi airstrip.”

I quickly flew to the airstrip, landed, and shut down. I could see Keeper 8 and a very agitated ARVN officer waiting for Boomer and me. My pucker factor was sky high. Had I screwed up?

It seemed that I had miscalculated one item in my hasty 20mm mission planning. The 20mm rounds look like very large rifle bullets and after firing, eject the spent cartridges from a chute on

the underside of the Cobra. Large, empty hot shell casings weighing several ounces each were being dumped over the friendlies, causing excitement and some discomfort.

My apology was grudgingly accepted. We finished the mission from an alternate standoff position over an unmanned piece of terrain.

Another note to add to my Lessons Learned log about operation of a 20mm ship!

After our release from the Cu Chi mission, we headed north toward our Lai Khe base.

“49, 13,” called Boomer from his loach. “How about taking a look at the old rubber plant along the Saigon River. It’s just off our flight path and I’ve seen activity there in the past.”

“13, 49. Wait one while I clear us with Ops.”

Ops rapidly approved our detour and confirmed that no friendlies were in our AO but that we could only fire if fired upon.

I relayed the orders to 13 and we proceeded over the abandoned processing site.

“13, 49 you’re cleared down when ready.”

13 spiraled down into an area which appeared deserted. The old plant appeared to be constructed of something like concrete block and had once shone with white paint. Its red tile roof was partially collapsed; you could see onto what remained of a concrete floor through the gaps. As he executed his recon, 13 reported the usual old fighting positions and bunkers, but nothing new.

“13, 49, let’s head home. This area looks barren.”

“49, 13. One more pass and I’m out. I saw recent motorbike tracks on the trail we passed.”

“Roger, 13. Be careful.”

A double click on the radio from the loach signaled his concurrence.

“Taking Fire,” came Boomer’s excited call. “Smokes out. Enemy is two guys with AKs on a motorcycle. They fired on us! I’m clear.”

A dusty cloud signaled the motorcycle’s direction. Had they remained in the trees we might not have seen them.

“Groceries, you’re clear to fire the minigun at the fleeing vehicle.” He engaged, but his long burst went wide of the target and abruptly stopped. I assumed he had a break in the minigun drive cable which fed the belted ammo. Cable breaks happened periodically and supply had a hard time getting new ones as replacements, so maintenance made do with fixing the old ones.

“Hold on, Groceries. I’m going with the 20mm,” I said over the intercom.

I rolled the Cobra into a steep dive and placed the sights on the fleeing motorbike. As my airspeed climbed, I squeezed the trigger to produce a stream of heavy shells chasing the enemy.

While the cannon blasted, the front canopy abruptly vibrated open, thrusting out like a sail into the wind. The aircraft rolled right, pitching us over 90 degrees onto our side. Maps and other loose items in the front compartment began swirling madly around the cockpit.

Thankfully, my training kicked in, overriding the chemicals flooding my system. First, I nervously eased our dive, rolled back to the left, and leveled the wings. Next, I began a cyclic climb to avoid the trees and terrain ahead. Then I bellowed on intercom!

“Close your canopy! Groceries, close your canopy.”

“49, 13. We’re clear, but what happened?”

“13, 49. Our canopy popped open. Almost lost it. Mini also inop. Let’s head home.”

“Roger, 49. Motorcycle guys headed back into the trees. I am back up with you and don’t see any obvious damage to your snake.”

We were soon cleared to land at our base. I parked the 20mm ship near the maintenance hangar. I wrote up the damage in the logbook and wearily climbed down from my cockpit.

“Groceries, I thought you had 20mm cannon experience. Your dumbass reaction almost got us killed. Mother fucker!”

He mumbled a reply about seeing a training film and fled uphill toward Ops. Obviously, he missed the part about placing his arm on the canopy latch lever when firing a 20mm in a steep dive!

I headed to Ops to debrief, then to my hooch to dump my gear. Later, in the club, my platoon leader, Double D, soberly told me that the canopy opening incident had convinced Groceries that he was not cut out to be a Cobra pilot. He left the unit soon thereafter.

I didn’t fly the 20mm ship on a mission for the remainder of my tour. Nor, thankfully, did I ever encounter Groceries again.