Alpha Male

Jim Dyk
In October 1965 our squadron left Alameda Air Base; we sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge, destination Vietnam. Charlie Clydesdale, Mike Ahrnes, and I stood at the bow. We looked down from the bridge onto a gray flight deck with CVA-19 painted between the two catapult tracks. Mike said, “I’m afraid I will die in Vietnam.”

Until that moment I had never admitted that the orders to combat in Vietnam scared me. Fear was not an emotion a pilot admitted having.

On my first mission I began to understand that flying in combat was an exercise in managing fear. Some days a pilot is good at it. No matter the target, you’re up to the challenge. The catapult shot was fun. You climbed to 7500 feet above the target, rolled over on your back, pulled the nose to a 30° or 45° dive, dropped your bombs at exactly 3500 feet and pulled out of your dive above 1500. Everything happened in slow motion and you’re fully in control. You don’t notice the puffs of flak, you don’t feel the bounce of your fuselage as the bombs you dropped explode. You don’t mind making six dives on the same target. You turned at the bow of the ship at 500 feet, turned in at the stern and saw the guiding light of the meatball; you landed aboard the carrier, just as you were trained to do.

On bad days, you left the flight briefing with a dry mouth. Taxiing the jet to the catapult was a challenge. After the catapult shot you looked to find the flight leader and made a mess of joining the formation. Rolling in on the target, every
bump must have meant your aircraft had been hit. You couldn’t find the altimeter so you dropped your bombs high - they hit short - or low, and each run is a terror. The landing was made but it was sloppy and you were soaked with sweat.

Most days were somewhere in the middle. The good days were rare. The bad days were rare. All of this was very personal. The pilot’s ready room was full of pilots who did not share their feelings.

On the day of our first ALPHA Strike, I was on the good side of the fear continuum. An ALPHA strike was more than a regular bombing mission. A regular mission was two or four aircraft dropping ordnance on a target. The target for an ALPHA was a high priority target. The Intelligence Officer told us about our first ALPHA strike; we were to bomb Vinh. He said, “Sources have identified a concentration of troops and vehicles and ground-to-air weapons. We think the defenses will be strong, with all calibers of anti-aircraft fire.” We received our tactics briefing; the F-8’s were to roll in first to provide flak suppression so we in our Navy A-4s could more safely climb to 7,500 feet, roll in and drop our bombs. Our twenty aircraft come from A-4 Skyhawk squadrons aboard the U.S.S. Hancock.

I was the twentieth and last jet to roll in on each of the six bombing runs. My regular flight leader, LCDR Bill Isenhour, called Ike, was number nineteen. The Tonkin Gulf was smooth that morning; the sky, puffy only with little clouds, was
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ready to greet me. The launch was normal: run the power to 100%, check the gauges, salute the Launch Officer, put my right hand at my crotch, left hand locks the throttle at full, lean back against the seat and take the catapult shot catching the control stick as it comes back toward my crotch. Gear up and look for Ike. Just as briefed. Number 1 was made a sweeping right turn so all the rest of us could catch up and slide gracefully into our places in the formation. We completed the turn and headed for the coast. I looked across the beach; great day for the sand and water. Ike’s aircraft began to gyrate wildly. He radioed: “I’m hit, I’m hit!”, then turned away from the coast.

The flight leader ordered, “Twenty, take Ike back to the ship.” I caught Ike as he turned above our carrier. Using hand signals I informed Ike I was going to inspect his aircraft. I slid left, then under; his wings look good. I pulled back on the power and eased aft; the fuselage had no damage. I gave Ike a thumbs up, no damage to his plane. Taking the lead, I led Ike down to the meatball. He landed fine.

Once onboard the carrier, the ground crew inspected Ike’s plane. A close look at his cockpit revealed a .45 caliber slug in the parachute pack; Ike had discharged his sidearm in the cockpit. No announcement was made about what happened; we all just chalked it up to bad luck and let it slide. I didn’t ask, but I suspect Ike was having a bad day on the continuum of fear.
I flew many missions, both night and day. I flew in rotten weather, through flak and SAMs. I was the duty officer monitoring another ALPHA strike when one of our pilots, Lt. Paul Galanti, was shot down and captured. Paul stayed a guest of the North Vietnamese for six years at Hanoi Hilton.

On the day of my second ALPHA strike, I found myself on the bad side of the fear continuum. We were only days from leaving Vietnam and coming home. The ALPHA strike was to bomb the airfield north of Hanoi. I was to be the 24th aircraft over the target. The intelligence briefing told us to expect lots of flak as we headed north past Hainan Island; lots more flak as we winged west on our way into the target; then plenty of SAMs on the way in and out. The weather briefing was even worse. Forecast for less than 1000 foot ceiling on take-off. Unknown ceiling on crossing north of Haiphong and more unknown ceiling over the target sixty miles inland. Since the exit route was just backtracking, the weather and defenses were to be the same on the way in and out.

The ceiling ended up being lower than predicted. The flight turned left toward Hanoi. There, we found the cloud ceiling even lower; the leader turned away from the coast. I had to descend to allow the other twenty-three aircraft to pass in front of me. My aircraft shook: stall warning. I released the pressure and leveled the wings and in that crazy moment I lost sight of the flight. My circumstances were: first, near the Chinese coast; second, east of the very heavily-
fortified North Vietnamese coast; and last, I was flying alone. I climbed to 500 feet, turned a bit west of south and found the coast, followed it southward and confessed over the radio to the flight leader that I had lost sight of the flight. I reported my altitude and heading. I finally felt safe when the *Hancock*’s radar identified me and guided me up through the clouds until I could rejoin the flight; 24 was back where I belonged. I landed safely and took my ass chewing from the flight leader. I hadn’t handled my fear very well that mission. From that day to this, I cannot adequately express how embarrassed a pilot is when he is lost, scared and alone.

Days later, our last before heading home, our Commanding Officer wrote the names of our flight leaders on the blackboard. “Each flight leader needs a wingman.” This mission, our last ALPHA Strike, was to bomb the airfield between Hanoi and the Chinese border. I told myself that fear was not an emotion I, a Navy jet bomber pilot, could afford. But I was scared, frozen in my ready room chair. Slowly the wingman spots were filled. Each time a volunteer sat, I wanted to get up. Finally, LCDR Don Gregg filled the last spot, the one I should have stood for, with Ike.

All went well until Ike and Don were between Hainan and Vietnam. Ike radioed that his plane was hit; he jettisoned his bombs and bomb racks. He banked
back toward the carrier. Ike ejected southwest of Hainan. Cover was provided until the helicopter rescue plucked him out of the jungle.

That night I flew our squadron’s next-to-last mission. We were feet dry south of Than Hoa. The SAMs flew all around us. We dodged the missiles and dropped our bombs. Later that dark evening, Lt. Mike Ahrnes flew our squadron’s last mission. His aircraft caught fire as he took the catapult shot. He ejected just off the bow; the Hancock swerved to miss his downed A-4. Mike was back aboard the carrier less than fifteen minutes later. He survived Vietnam; Lt. Charlie Clydesdale, after nearly seven years as a POW, survived Vietnam; I survived Vietnam.

I have seen Charlie and Mike often in the more than half-century years since Vietnam. I asked Mike if he remembered what he said as we sailed under the bridge.

“No. What did I say?”

I told him.

“I don’t remember that.”

I wonder, still, is my memory flawed, or do pilots never admit being scared?