

War Story: Alternate Duty

II - crash landing

by Steve Glines

I don't know how the U.S. Army figures hours. The rules said you could only work ten hours a month in the tower. Apparently a foxhole isn't a tower. When we went on combat mobile missions we might be out for two weeks and be very focused and exhausted that whole time. Once we started landing aircraft it might be almost continuously for up to a week or so at a time. At Kay Sahn we took in a dozen Hueys an hour and seven or eight C-130's a day. During the siege I didn't get any sleep for two weeks. And that was after not getting any sleep during the battle for Hue. I guess the Army's idea of being in a tower is radar. If you've got one then you have a tower otherwise all bets are off.

If I was only allowed ten hours in the tower a month I still had another fifty or sixty hours a month in administrative work, I was the "site commander" after all. Anyway the Army in its infinite wisdom gave me lots of alternate duty which in the I-Corp area mostly meant loaning me to the Marines. That worked out because the alternate duty the Army came up with tended to get people killed. I lost two of my guys to the Army's idea of alternate duty. Don't get me wrong the Marines could get you killed too only they tended to be more sophisticated about it. At least in my case.

It worked out this way: The marines knew I was the "Commander" of the airfield inside the Citadel of Hue. To everyone but the top brass that meant I was the equivalent of a marine Major. The Marine General knew better but he liked me so he went along with it and got me alternate duty that was, at least, interesting if not just as dangerous as anything the Army could come up with.

For one thing I already had my wings, having qualified to fly a DeHavland Beaver so I could deliver pay packets. Next I qualified in a Huey courtesy of the Marines at Hue Phu Bai, the marine airbase

down the road from Hue and I learned to back seat drive a Phantom at Da Nang, again courtesy of the Marines. Let me tell you, driving a Phantom is a lot more fun than driving an AH-1 attack helicopter. After I qualified in the Huey, the Army made me also qualify in the AH-1. That nearly got me killed. Come to think of it flying a Marine Phantom nearly got me killed too.

One of the alternate duties the Marines thought up was flying back seat in a Recon Phantom out of Da Nang. That meant that I didn't have to know how to run the radar or weapons systems, although I learned, I just had to know how to run the Recon camera which was easy. So every couple of weeks the Marines would request me and I'd hop in the back of a Marine Phantom and we'd go off streaking low and fast over various parts of North Vietnam. Anyway the nice thing about a Recon flight is that you can generally outrun anything the North had. That was the point, the Recon flights didn't carry any heavy armaments so you could turn on a dime and punch in the afterburner and leave a MIG 21 in the dust. You could even outrun a SAM, sort of. Trying to outrun a SAM is what lead me to crash land on a Navy carrier.

In a typical recon flight you'll take off with full external tanks, fly up to 25 or 30 thousand feet where the engines are most fuel efficient and fly north until you cross the DMZ or arc into North Vietnam from Laos or the South China Sea. Recon flights always fly unescorted, at least mine did, so you had to be careful not to be jumped by a flight of MIGs. Generally you can outrun them which we did on one occasion but you had to be careful not to be chased right into a SAM site which we were several times.

Most recon flights go in either before or after action, that is before or after we bombed the hell out of someplace. We went in low and fast because, either we were on recon because someone thought there might be a lot of bad guys there, or we just stirred up a hornets nest and wanted to see the results. Either way we knew there would be a lot of ground fire and the best way to avoid it, other than not going there in the first place, was go fly as low and as fast as we could. My job was to make sure we were lined up on the

target then run the camera for ten or fifteen seconds. After that it was the pilots job to get us out of there. But getting us out of there was harder than getting in. Almost any site worth bombing had plenty of AAA (anti-aircraft artillery) surrounding it so we always had to bob and weave to get through it or go vertical to get away from it. Going vertical presented a problem, SAMS.

Once, when we went vertical an AWACS warned us of a SAM on our tail. I looked to see a white missile the size of a telephone poll chasing us. The front seat (the pilot) jiggled the plane left and right to be sure the missile was following us then took a quick look around and dived for what looked like a factory or a small military base. The missile followed us in. The funny thing about those SAMS, they would follow you so long as they were headed up. Once they went less than horizontal, that is once they got above you, they just plowed into the ground at what ever point you were aiming at. So our little recon mission turned into a bombing run only we bombed the North Vietnamese with their own missile. I thought that was pretty dumb of them.

The last time I flew Marine Recon (I politely declined after that) we were flying in to photograph a SAM site that had been bombed 2 hours earlier. In the front seat was Major Willie Neil. We thought it would be piece of cake. Almost 60 Marine and Navy Phantoms had dropped 300 tons of high explosives on the site. If you've ever seen what a 500 lb. bomb can do imagine what 1200 of them will do. We weren't expecting any problems. We expected some flack, AAA, but in the past whenever a SAM site was flattened the North Vietnamese would pick up and move then set up someplace else so after action recon like this tended to be easy. Not this time, we flew into a hornets nest.

We came in from the South China Sea at 22,000 feet. As soon as our feet were dry (over land) we dropped down to 4,000 and 400 knots. That was just high enough where we wouldn't catch much AAA and low enough to avoid SAMS. When we were about 20 miles out an AWACS (airborne radar) told us that there were 2 MIGS directly in front of us at 90 miles out and closing at 500 knots. When

we were 15 miles out we were told that there were six more MIGS at 3 O'clock at 20 miles, 12,000 feet above us and closing at 300 knots. We were driving into a trap. The front seat (the pilot) announced that we were going in on afterburners at 300 ft., which meant I had about 3 seconds of camera time instead of 15, after which we would turn to 9 O'clock, go vertical and power our way out of there.

We crossed the target at 550 knots, just short of the speed of sound. I saw a cylinder of AAA tracer rounds instantly erupt around us when I looked up from the camera. The pilot pulled a sharp 5G turn and went vertical, climbing at better than a 45 degree angle. We were passing 20,000 feet at Mach 1.2 (about 750 knots) when I felt a mild thump. It's the kind of thump you feel in a commercial jetliner when they put their gear down. Not a big deal, normally. If you feel a little "thump" at 750 knots that means you either hit some really nasty turbulence or you've just been whacked by a SAM. Take a guess which?

Fortunately the SAM had detonated prematurely or we would have been shredded. It became immediately apparent that we had lost both external fuel tanks so we dumped what was left of them and killed the afterburner. We could have emptied our remaining fuel tanks in a minute if we continued on afterburner. At that point we didn't have enough fuel to get back to the South so it was either find a gas station, ditch in the South China Sea or find a carrier. We were out of luck in the tanker department so we headed towards the South China Sea. A Navy phantom intercepted us and inspected every part of the aircraft. We had to cycle through lowering the landing gear and flaps while still at altitude so the navy could be *almost* certain that we would not kamikaze into one of their big beautiful ships. We passed muster and headed into the glide path while escorted by the Navy jet.

Up until that part of the war all Marine pilots had to qualify in carrier landing, once, but rarely made carrier landings so in practice, preferring to fly off fixed runways. Later on the Marines started rotating their squadrons out to sea so that their pilots would get more carrier experience. But that was later. We were on final.

We popped through the cloud layer at 250 knots and descended towards a spot on the ocean discernable to me only because it was at the tip of a thirty mile wake. The spot on the South China Sea grew at a horrifying rate. When we passed 2000 feet our escort peeled away and wished us good luck. We dropped the flaps first then the landing gear which brought us down to 220 knots and, what seemed to me, to be a very steep angle of attack. By the time I saw the meatball (a visual device that helps the pilot to stay on the glide path) we were only 10 seconds from nosing into the flight deck at 200 knots.

The pilot pulled the nose up and cut power to a minimum. Then, just before we hit the deck he slammed the throttle full forward to afterburners which ignited just as we hit the deck. We hit the deck hard, a three point landing, nose a little low but we caught the second of five arresting cables which brought us from 190 knots to a dead stop in less than three seconds. The crew unhooked us from the cable and towed us out of the way.

It felt like we sat in the plane for an hour, which was good because I needed to let my heart stop racing; I couldn't move. Finally a navy crewman wheeled a ladder up to the cockpit and we crawled out still very shook up. Between the gentle roll of the ship and the pumping adrenaline neither of us could walk straight.

A corpsman gave me a cup of "coffee" and I settled down pretty quickly. My pilot did the same and we were lead to a locker room with a hot shower already running and steam billowing out the shower stall door. When I took off my flight suit I realized it was totally filled with shit. It's funny but the only thing I could think of then was how I could get it cleaned quickly if I had to wear it again in a couple of hours. The chief helping me take off the flight suit smiled and said not to worry, he'd get me a new clean one. While we were undressing Major Willie winked at me and called me Captain Jack. He had shit his flight suite too.

Anyway I got to eat at the officers mess with Major Willie and we both expected to be shot off the deck in an hour or so but the navy wasn't buying it. They checked the Phantom over and found a couple

of nicks from the SAM explosion and a severed hydraulic line so we spent the night while our bird was patched up. We got a call at 5:45 AM the next morning and told that we would be fired off at 10:00. You'd be surprised how much prep work goes into launching an airplane from an aircraft carrier. We sat through what seemed to be a never ending cycle of weather briefings, Military condition briefings, a statement from the ships captain, more from a couple of Admirals and one from the President himself. Finally there was a general news briefing before the weather report started up again. Major Willie had to make up a flight plan which was basically get us from here back to Da Nang and let them know we're coming. Then they made us go through the entire avionics checklist (a hell of a lot more complete than we had done back in Da Nang) before they hauled us up to the flight deck on one of their massive elevators.

We were the last of a stick of eight planes scheduled to be shot off starting at 10 AM. Overnight we had acquired two new external fuel tanks so we were ready for a one way trip back home. Major Willie fired up the engines while I just sat in the back seat with nothing to do. If I shit myself landing I almost did it again getting launched. We got hooked into the catapult then grabbed the OhShit handles, got a wave and got slammed at what felt like 10 g's into the back of the seat. In a second and a half we sent from standing still, to a screaming 250 knots with full afterburner driving us even faster. Wow! Wow! Wow!

The next day I was scheduled to work the Da Nang tower. Man, that's when I realized what a tit job I had.

