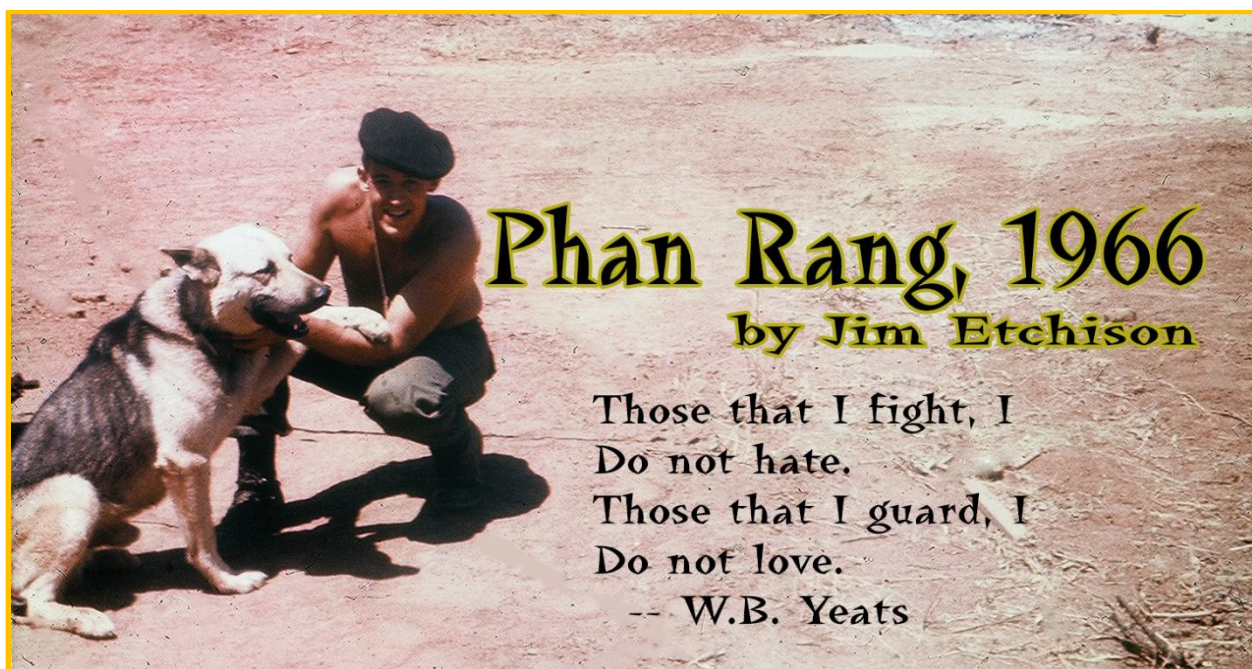


In this issue:

Phan Rang, 1966 by Jim Etchison

Doug’s Comments



Phan Rang, 1966
Vietnam, Chapter 5 of
The Sky Is Not The Limit

By Jim Etchison

While writing this book, I corresponded with retired Lieutenant Colonel Martin F. Heuer, who was gracious enough to provide his thoughts, which are excerpted below.

The story of Airman First Class James W. “Jim” Etchison, U.S. Air Force, and his flying as a crewmember/gunner on both 174th and 161st AHC “Slicks” is really quite rare, yet it is something that actually happened during the Vietnam War. Jim was a sentry dog (K9) handler assigned to the 366th Air Police Squadron at Phan Rang AFB in February 1966 and served there until he finished his tour in February 1967. It was March 1966 when he started flying missions with Army Aviation.

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When Jim first approached me with his story in early 2011, I found it hard to believe. At the time, I was the president of the 174th Assault Helicopter Company Association and had already had some rather unsettling experiences with people who we categorize as “Wannabes.” Jim said he’d flown many times as a gunner on U.S. Army helicopters of the 174th and 161st during the conduct of regular missions flown by both companies while they operated out of the Air Force Base at Phan Rang, RVN. He said he’d kept a written record of each flight mission, including the crewmembers names of those he flew with and a statement of the mission. I could hardly comprehend such a story because it was so repetitively against all the regulations I was familiar with. He was a member of the U.S. Air Force, had no orders authorizing him to fly as a crewmember on U.S. Army aircraft, nor did he have permission from his own Air Force unit. Yes, there were many personnel of all services who had flown as a gunner on Army helicopters from time to time, but it was usually an emergency requirement, or it was often done when the missions were of the “Ash and Trash” variety with little danger involved. Up to this point, I’d never heard of an individual from another service flying regularly with Army aircrews. One of the most basic considerations for the crew was that the person riding as gunner was qualified to fire the M-60 machinegun; that he knew the rules for engagement and could be counted on in the event of an emergency. Jim, it turns out, was qualified and had obviously convinced the flight crews he would perform his duties, if needed.

Jim and I corresponded for the better part of a year during which he sent me the meticulously prepared reports of the missions he flew with pilots and crewmembers of the 174th and 161st. I still had reservations, so Jim sent me photos, orders, biographies, and other written material to prove what he was saying. I then began to believe he was exactly who he said he was and what he had done in Vietnam were real life experiences. The final confirmation came from a former 174th pilot, then First Lieutenant Curtis P. “Curt” Laird, who I knew very well and had transferred to the 161st shortly after the arrival of the 174th at Lane AHP. Curt remembered the missions he flew with Jim in the gunner’s position on his aircraft. With that, I was convinced and encouraged Jim to provide all of the information he had to complete the story.

Some of you who read Jim’s record may remember him as “The U.S. Air Force guy who flew gunner on our aircraft in Vietnam.”

Martin F. Heuer, LTC, USA (Retired)

174th AHC 1965-1966

14th CAB 1966-1967

**Those that I fight,
I Do not hate.
Those that I guard,
I Do not love.
—W.B. Yeats**

My exact words were, “Does it snow in Vietnam?”

First, I must be honest and tell you why I went to Vietnam. Was it for democracy and patriotic duty? Absolutely not: It was to get out of the cold, although a letter home dated November 27, 1965, seemed to imply that it was my contribution to our country’s freedom that led me there. The reward to leave Loring came when Colonel Dohnke called me into his office one morning, and asked if I would be willing to volunteer for Vietnam. If you didn’t have twelve months left on your tour, you did not have to go, and I had eleven months remaining. This conversation took place in November with another winter already upon us. My exact words were, “Does it snow in Vietnam?” With his answer, “No,” my reply was “On behalf of “Spanky” and I, we are ready to serve our country and go to war.” After a thirty-day leave, I returned to Loring AFB, packed my belongings, prepared Spanky for the trip, and we flew to Vietnam.

The trip took us from Maine to New York by commercial airline. At Kennedy Airport (JFK), my dad met me for the brief layover, and Spanky and I continued to Texas for tropical warfare training. After a week of throwing grenades, firing several types of weapons, we headed for Saigon in a C-141 airplane. There were 52 dogs and handlers and with what seemed a million pounds of dog food. Our route went through Wake Island, Guam, Manila, and finally into Saigon. After a night’s rest, the K-9 teams heading to northern bases from Saigon continued on a C-123. The C-123 shook, rattled, and rolled, with most of its windows missing, toward Phan Rang, located along the coast of the South China Sea. Spanky and I arrived there completely exhausted, approximately three days after leaving Texas.

I left Jan Son Nhut on the 10th and got up here in the morning on the same day . . . We came up on a C-123, and on the way, one of the

dog handlers cracked-up, and five of us had to hold him down until the plane landed . . . I had the honor of being the first dog man on the base; Spanky and I were the first ones to leave the plane.

-- Letter, February 11, 1966

When the two of us left Loring, it was the middle of the winter, and Spanky had his thick coat of hair. When we landed in Vietnam, the temperature was approximately 100 degrees F. With the tropical humidity, along with the temperature change, Spanky really fought the elements for approximately the first three months. Due to his heat exhaustion, I almost had to carry him around the perimeter while we were on duty. He finally shed his winter coat and was back in action.

Nights can get very boring, and there is just so much you can discuss with your four-legged partner.

For the next year, we endured the tropical heat and monsoon downpours. We walked, ate, played and put our lives in each other's hands. As a result of daytime activities, and not being able to sleep when we got off post in the morning due to the heat, I would doze off on post many nights. Spanky picked up my habit and snored louder than I did. I'm sure every Viet Cong (VC) in the area knew exactly where we were. Actually, I was more concerned with the guards in the security towers on the inner perimeter. The dog team was caught in the middle between the tower guards and the VC, resulting in a possible cross-fire position during an attempted penetration.

Nights can get very boring, and there is just so much you can discuss with your four-legged partner. After elaborating on plans for when you get out, daily newspaper articles, bar girls you had tea with, and so on there were still hours of walking or finding a nice quiet place to relax. The handler's philosophy was, if a penetration was going to happen, it would be well known within a few minutes. The base didn't need K-9 teams to tell them that we had visitors. AK 47s, the Viet Cong's favorite weapon, in addition to their other calling cards being fired, was enough in essence to say, "Hi, we're here."

To illustrate how the dog team's night can go from one extreme to the other, there are two

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situations. The first was a firefight that erupted on the post adjacent to mine. We were being shot at from the other side of the perimeter and in turn, naturally, returned fire. It was only for a few minutes, and the handler next to me, collecting his composure after the excitement ceased, went looking for his helmet. When it was found, there was a bullet hole right through the middle. We never strapped our helmet on since if it were hit and went flying, most likely your head would follow.

The helmet ended up in our captain’s office, who claimed it was his. Everyone knew the real story, but we allowed him to preserve his ego. It was also well known that the captain wouldn’t leave his quarters after dark, so I would have loved to read the letter he probably sent home, along with a picture of the helmet, describing his heroic stand defending the base that night in the name of “freedom.”

Another extreme illustrates how dangerous “boredom” can be. When we arrived at the base, it was small, with construction activity 24 hours a day in preparation for fighters, F-100s and F-4s, plus other support aircraft to arrive and call Phan Rang their home. The air for the entire year was filled with red clay dust that attached to everything you owned. As a result of the expansion in its early stage, for the first few months, the outer perimeter was not a great distance from the middle of the compound; showers, mess hall, etc.

“A witness said the fellow went one way and his towel the other”.

We had a handler who was very much a loner, never mingling with the other K-9 members. Around 2:00 a.m., the handler had nothing to do, so he took aim with his rifle at someone wrapped in a towel who was going to the showers. He was clearly visible, due to a light on the shower walkway. The handler put a little too much pressure on his trigger finger and fired. The M-16 bullet missed the guy by inches. A witness said the fellow went one way and his towel the other. The handler was court-martialed. It is not known whether the guy with the towel ever took another shower until he left the country.

One of our posts contained the base waste dump where all items thrown in the trash wound up. It was nothing but gigantic piles of garbage. Two dog teams worked “The Dump” every night, and if there was one Vietnamese going through the garbage, there were between 50 and 100 each night. Although you see pictures of people picking through refuse, you don’t realize

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the reality of life for many in the world until witnessed first-hand. Many of the young girls would come up within 8 feet of you; the dog leash was 6 feet, and asked if you wanted to make love, naturally for a certain amount of compensation. Their other request, holding a baby in their arms, was for you to take it to America. It was simply one of the scars of war.

There was a sergeant from Alabama who was short, fat, and a complete idiot, and it showed in all his actions. The first episode was when he came in a jeep to my post about 11:00 p.m. As we were talking, he swore he heard noise on the next post. Without the least bit hesitation, he started firing his M-16 in that direction. All of a sudden, we heard, “Don’t shoot, don’t shoot!” The noise he heard was the dog team assigned to that area. The handler’s name was Andy, and to say the least, Andy was pissed. Somehow, the ordeal did not get reported, although it should have as a “friendly fire” incident.

The second incident involving “Sergeant Alabama” occurred when we were driving on a dirt road around the perimeter in a jeep. He was driving, and I was in the front seat with another handler in the back. He stopped so quickly, I almost went through the windshield. A Russell’s viper snake, very poisonous, crossed the road and caused the panic. Instead of simply running over it, he jumped out, fixed his bayonet to the rifle, and threw it at the snake. The rifle stuck in the ground in a vertical angle and the snake coiled around it.

I started laughing like hell and asked, “Well, Sergeant York, what are you going to do now?” We had to wait until the snake took its time to uncoil and continue across the road. It disappeared into the brush unharmed, probably laughing like hell, and the sergeant’s ego was crushed.

Since the main area of the base was under construction, the snakes migrated toward the perimeter seeking safety from the construction equipment.

Vietnam had more than its share of poisonous snakes, including the “spitting cobra,” and they were an ongoing threat to us. Many of our posts were in elephant grass, where the snake would be unnoticed until you or the dog stepped on it. None of the handlers were bitten; however, the dogs were continually taking snake bites, Spanky being one. A bite that would kill an individual would not kill a dog. The dog would become very sick and remain off duty for a few days while recovering. One moonlit night, while I was walking post in grass up to my hip, I noticed a cobra watching me that was coiled with its head taller than the grass, approximately

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20 yards away. Obviously, I avoided that part of the post for the rest of the night, with the feeling that if any VC came through that area, it would be the snake’s responsibility to capture him. The largest one we killed measured 9 1/2 feet long!

After the Korean War, handlers were not allowed to take their dog home. The government was getting sued for the dogs back in civilian life biting the mailman and others that got too close. The line of thinking was that since the government trained them to be aggressive and attack people, they were responsible for the dog’s actions. Therefore, I knew the day would come when I would have to leave, and Spanky would remain to be put to sleep or retrained. I am not aware of what eventually happened and do not want to know. All I know is that when the departure day from Vietnam came, it was like giving away my child, knowing we would not be reunited in the future. To this day, there have been very few people I met and would put my trust and faith over his. A dog handler fully understands the saying “A dog is a man’s best friend.”

Years later, in Brazil for a family wedding of one of Rita’s cousins, I met two Brazilian military dog handlers during the reception. We got along great after they were told that I was a handler in Vietnam. The next day they took me to the kennels to see their dogs, of which they were rightly proud. During the reception, as the drinks were refilled several times, one of them asked, “Who would you trust more, your wife or your dog?” We just looked at each other without having to give an answer.

Since our duty was at night, several days a week, I took an illegal side job as a door gunner on helicopters, “Huey Slicks” with the army’s 48th, 161st, and 174th Assault Helicopter Companies based at Phan Rang. To a point, the “powers that be” turned their backs, since the army was short of door gunners. One of our primary duties was to take the 101st Airborne in and out of firefights they always seemed to find. We also conducted resupply missions for the Korean troops (ROKs) in the area, plus medevac flights, transporting the wounded from areas of conflict, in addition to those that suffered from everyday accidents. I still don’t feel comfortable around gas-operated objects, such as generators, due to medevac’ing a Korean troop out of the field that had a generator blow up in his face.

Everybody has a story returning from war. Although I had the “blood and guts” moments, which most listeners prefer, there was a psychological incident that will remain with me forever,

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which began years before during my time at the University of Arkansas.

My first college semester was at the University of Arkansas, and I lived, as most students did, in the dormitory, three to a room. Across the hall lived my close friend, Roy. Where you saw one, the other would be. After the first semester, realizing that for the moment, college was not my “cup of tea,” I enlisted in the military; three and a half years later, I was in Vietnam.

During one of my helicopter missions, we brought back a 101st infantry squad to their base camp, shut down, and returned to the ship approximately an hour later. As I was walking back to the chopper, but not yet in, I turned, and approximately 10 yards from me Roy was sitting by a hut with a few other troops dressed in field gear, indicating they had just come from or were going out on a mission. I noticed he had black officer’s bars sewn into his fatigues.

We stared “eye to eye” for what seemed like an eternity (“thousand-yard stare”) yet we never spoke or advanced in recognition. I wanted to hug and embrace him, with memories of our past in college, but could not move forward; my legs just would not take me to him. Only a vet can truly understand, and it’s beyond my ability to explain why I couldn’t. As I returned to the gunner’s position on the chopper and we lifted off, I noticed his eyes, void of life, following our ship’s path. I never went back to find him, and now over 40 years later, I see his blank stare cutting through me as though it was yesterday.

The K-9 section arrived at Phan Rang approximately three months prior to the fighter aircraft; first, F-100s followed by a variety of other attack and support airplanes. The closest town was Thap Cham, approximately 5 kilometers from base where we would spend most of our off-duty time. Because the dog section was the first line of perimeter defense, we would not wear identifying dog patches on our fatigues, as apparently, there was a price on our heads offered by the VC.

In any event, it didn’t take us long to feel at home and know where all the bars were. We found small rooms to rent by the month furnished with a chair, bed, dresser, and an all-purpose maid; the total price for this package was \$40 per month. What else could you ask for being so far from home? “Chad” was the landlord and a hell of a nice guy. The only problem was the local military carried him away one morning, accused of being a Viet Cong. As soon as the planes arrived from the States, the price tripled for our comforts, and being on an enlisted pay grade,

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most of us surrendered the luxury of these hideaways.

Our living quarters on base were nothing to write home about. There were eight handlers to a tent, plus we had a monkey as a pet. It was absolutely impossible to keep clean, since Phan Rang was in a construction mode 24 hours a day, and the dust from expanding made it an absolute dust bowl. The bathroom was a “two-hole” outhouse that was in continual use. During the first few days after arriving, everybody had dysentery due to the change in diet and climate. If you want to laugh, imagine 52 handlers lined up waiting their turn. By the time you finished, you had to get back at the end of the line, knowing that one trip was not going to be enough. You didn’t even buckle your pants, and you always carried a roll of toilet paper as a treasured commodity, knowing that the next time around, there may be none at your disposal.

It reached 115 degrees today, and I am getting splinters from using the good old outhouse. When I get back to the States, I am going to go to the bathroom the very first thing just so I can use one of those automatic flushers!

—Letter, February 26, 1966

Taking a shower was also a difficult task, since the facility was on the other side of base. Anyone wanting to shower had to meet at a particular time and take the section’s truck. It was a pain with all the coordinating, and we probably smelled worse than our dogs. God bless the monsoon season. It simplified matters greatly. We knew the approximate time of the afternoon rains and positioned ourselves with soap in hand, many stark naked outside the tent, waiting for the downpour. Once in a while, you would get your timing off and be completely lathered with soap from head to toe, and suddenly, the rain would stop. During these cleansing periods, the area resembled a nudist colony more than a war zone.

Tell a handler absolutely not to do something and, guaranteed, he absolutely will do it! Stan, another handler and I became good friends. After nights of hearing activity from a hamlet not far from the northeast corner of the base, we decided to make a daytime public relations visit. It was posted as an “off limits” area due to suspected VC activity. Therefore, one morning after putting up our dogs, off we went. We knew how to get there, and it was just a matter of not telling anyone.

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With extreme caution, we walked into the hamlet with big smiles on our face, no weapons, and pockets full of candy for the children who swarmed around us within the first few minutes of our visit. I am sure they had not been that close to an American, and probably heard tales of their fathers and uncles shooting at us. During the day, the VC usually hid their weapons, carrying on with their regular lives. In any event, as the elders rendered cold stares, we began to think there was a good reason why the area was off limits.

While strolling, I noticed out of the corner of my eye, down by a river that ran through the hamlet, a guy in uniform about 20 or 30 meters from us raising his weapon over his head signaling someone, somewhere and telling them something. Although the local militia walked around in uniform with a weapon, you were not certain which side they were fighting for. I did not inform Stan until later as he would have to turn to see, and I didn't want the guy to know he was being watched. The VC attempted to remain anonymous, so I wasn't really worried, due to the number of children surrounding us.

"Oh, shit, we're dead."

Stan was, and I am sure still is, one of those fellows that can make friends at the drop of a hat, and the kids completely enjoyed him. Villagers other than children started coming over to us, and a man approached with instructions, by pointing, to follow him. I could only look at Stan, and think "Oh, shit, we're dead." They didn't speak English, and we certainly didn't want to practice our local barroom vocabulary. We were led to the "mayor's hutch," and through moaning and groaning, supplemented by hand signals, we found him extremely friendly. He offered fruit that contained bugs, resulting in dysentery for the next few days, and ended the visit by sharing his fully loaded opium pipe. Any fear we had literally went "up in smoke." In due course, excusing ourselves, we were escorted back to the main road. From there, we bid goodbye, never mentioning our K-9 occupation or telling our co-workers about the adventure. We never returned. I used to send film home for my mom to develop, and when done, she would send the pictures to me.

Received the pictures; even though they are in black and white, they are good. Your son took quite a chance going there for the village was off limits for it is located at the north perimeter of the base, and

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as several of our planes have been on final approach they have drawn a lot of ground fire from there . . .

—Letter, September 16, 1966

Stan and I had a previous episode that almost got us thrown in jail, if it hadn't been for a “not too bright” air policeman at the main gate. As mentioned previously, the K-9 section and the army's 101st Airborne arrived at Phan Rang prior to the fighter pilots. The air force would not issue grenades to dog handlers and the army did not issue good mattresses to their troops. You know where this is going, and you are correct, “barter system” once more. Stan and I were in one of the local “boom-boom” houses, the polite term is “tea house,” at the end of the base, when we began a conversation with a couple of airborne troops, and within minutes, negotiations began.

The air force pilots' living quarters were ready for their arrival with the thickest mattresses that would compare to those in a five-star hotel; we were guarding this area, so we were familiar with the furnishings. It would be quite easy to acquire a “six-by” truck (six wheels), load it up, and deliver the cargo to our clientele. In turn, they would give us a case of grenades, and everyone would be happy, as any business transaction should end.

The midnight “commando raid” was going great. Stan and I had the truck loaded with five or six mattresses, and just as we were getting into the truck, an officer stuck his head into the hutch and noticed the mattresses missing from the beds, and with a quick glance, saw them on our truck. There wasn't much of an excuse to come up with, so Stan saluted as he got into the truck, never wavering on his protocol. I told him to forget the formalities, because if we didn't get out of there, his saluting would not prevent jail time; I drove like hell directly to the main gate.

Because the officer immediately called the air police explaining the theft (a better term is “relocation of government property”), the radios became alive, relaying messages to the regular air police patrols to be on the lookout for a truck filled with mattresses. Since we were air police and had our radio on, we heard all transmissions. Stan broadcasted over the air that he saw the truck going to the southern part of the base, only because we were in the northern sector. Slowing down to a roll at the gate, not giving the guard a chance to look in the back, we flashed our badges, and off in the night we rode. I knew then what “mules” (drug smugglers)

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must feel like when they approached customs while carrying contraband.

We unloaded at the 101st, being treated as “heroes,” received our grenades, drove back to the K-9 section, and the next morning, in the chow hall, heard all about the missing items. I am sure the air force pilots’ mattresses were replaced, the original ones now being enjoyed by the 101st, and Stan and I with better protection on the perimeter. Everybody was happy, except for the officer who blew the whistle.

Toward the end of my tour, I received a telegram that my dad was operating a Pan Am flight through Saigon as a flight engineer. A leave was granted, and I flew to Saigon on a military transport. I met his plane on the tarmac, and it was a great feeling. Somehow, he had arranged for another engineer to continue his trip from Saigon that gave us some time together. I had only been in the city once when transferring to Phan Rang, so both of us were tourists. At Phan Rang, GI’s were not allowed to have civilian clothes, but in Saigon, they were encouraged to be worn, as circumstances would allow. I took him to the K-9 section at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, and met a handler who I was previously stationed with in Maine. He was more or less my size, so I borrowed his shoes, shirt, and pants for our adventure.

Big Etch and Little Etch hit Saigon, and hard. There wasn’t a bar on Tudu Street that we missed, and all the tea ladies thought it was great for a father and son to be together. They made our visit as pleasant as possible until funds began to get close to the poverty line. It was a great evening, and I saw him off the next day on his flight to Hong Kong to rendezvous with my mom, who was waiting for him there on vacation.

A few years later, my parents had some neighbors to dinner at our home in Westbury, on Long Island. The subject came up about people not paying attention to exchanging money when traveling through foreign countries. To emphasize her point, my mom told the story of when my dad came from Saigon to Hong Kong. She explained how Etch paid the taxi driver a Hong Kong fare in U.S. dollars, which cost him about 50 times what it should have. Naturally, this left them short on funds for their vacation. It took me about a second to connect the dots, and when I looked up at him, he was already staring at me indicating to keep quiet. I did, and the subject was never mentioned again.

The sad part of the story is that the handler I borrowed the clothes from was killed in a VC

penetration at Tan Son Nhut before I could give them back. I had taken the clothes to Phan Rang and was going to mail them to him, but after hearing the report of the attack on his air base and that he was one of the fatalities, I threw the clothes away.

Phan Rang is located south of Cam Ranh Bay and because we worked at night, approximately once a week, our unit members would provide security for convoys between the two bases. A unit member manned an M-60 machine gun in the lead jeep and another GI in the rear jeep with an M-60 protecting the convoy from the back.

There was a rubber plantation approximately halfway along the route, and it was a perfect place for engagement.

I got back from the convoy all right, but not without a little trouble as I had anticipated and exactly where I had anticipated, the plantation. Your son was credited with discovering eight cases of stolen ammo, 7,750 rounds, which the VC obtained by way of black market. With the gunner giving me fire coverage with the machine gun, this other guy and I threw the cases of ammo in the jeep and got the hell out of there for it was as much VC territory as you could get. Two VCs were cut in half by the machine gun, and all I can say is God was with us . . .

—Letter, March 6, 1966

I volunteered as door gunner on the Huey's with the 48th (Jokers), 161st (Flying Pelicans) and 174th (Dolphins) Assault Helicopter Companies when time permitted. My total hours were approximately 175 while in-country, with God knows how many missions throughout our area of operation; some were boring, while others, quite memorable. The most challenging part of this undertaking was trying to convince my mom and dad that I still had all my faculties, so I wrote to them and explained:

Mom and Dad, I know you feel that I am crazy for doing things like this and they make you worry, but it's not that I am crazy. Some

people feel that God has led them into their occupation, such as the ministry. Well, see, I feel that he has led me into my occupation, and I feel that he is always right beside me and guiding me. I am not pushing my luck for I feel that life is something, which God gives you, leads you through, and then takes away from you at his choosing for a reason.

—Letter, March 11, 1966

I always looked forward to flying with Aircraft Commander, Captain Carl Kernwein, and co-pilot, Captain Donald Higgins, with Lionel Grover in the crew chief position. They could always incorporate humor into our flights. Most of the time, we flew with the side doors open, leaving the gunner on the one side and the crew chief on the other completely exposed. Glover told a story of when he was flying as gunner and that while hovering approximately 20 feet off the ground, the crew chief accidentally leaned over the edge of the chopper too far and fell out. The captain's first words were, "I wonder how much paperwork this is going to take?" The comment was made before seeing if the crew chief was injured. Apparently, the crew chief was lucky, only breaking an arm.

When Kernwein and Higgins flew together, they would compete to see who could fly closest to the ground, "contour flying," and come up over the trees; many times, branches scraped my gun mount. On one mission, Kernwein was following a road as if in a road vehicle. He came up behind a wagon being driven by an old man and ox carrying a high load of hay piled higher than the chopper, since we were flying so low. As the ox was slowly plodding along, Kernwein got "bumper to bumper" with him and came up over the wagon's rear, missing it by inches. The ox, driver, and wagon went in different directions, and there was one more Vietnamese that wanted the "ugly Americans" to go home. Another time, the good captain noticed a Red Cross worker and a Vietnamese girl riding in a "Lambretta," similar to a taxi, and flew down alongside as two cars so the occupants could talk to one another. The girls loved it, so one day you make a foe, and the next, you make a friend.

Kernwein was a pro as a pilot, always on the lookout for a trap. One such flight took us over a "free fire zone" meaning if anything moved, you could engage without any questions asked; this area was the bad part of town. The captain had the ship approximately 4000 feet, which

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kept us out of small arms ground fire range yet close enough to see activity. Someone was walking in the middle of an open field with his back to us. This was considered suicidal on his part. Kernwein’s instinct targeted the individual as a decoy, to lure us down to a lower altitude, where we would be in a crossfire situation from the woods adjacent on both sides of the field. Kernwein didn’t take the suspected trap, and we lived for another day.

Another mission illustrates how a number of South Vietnamese soldiers were not keen on being exposed to “harm’s way.” They felt that the Americans were present to fight their war for them. We flew a search-and-destroy team composed of five or six Vietnamese to a drop-off point where they were to spend two days in the “bush” seeking out their brothers fighting for the opposite side. The patrol was to return to the landing zone, LZ, for pickup two days later. The procedure for off-loading was to come in fast, hover above the ground for literally seconds, while the troops jumped out, and then get the hell out of there as fast and high as you could. When off-loading you are a sitting duck. As we started our climb out, approximately 10 feet above ground, I noticed one of the Vietnamese with his arms wrapped around the skid dangling from the chopper on my side. I guess he wasn’t too patriotic and felt he had better things to do than go into the bush. I stomped his arms with my feet and whether wanting to go or not, he dropped to his comrades. We came back in two days for the pick-up, and nature can be very informative. The LZ was composed of high elephant grass, which had obviously not been walked through for the two-day period. Their search-and-destroy mission turned out to be a fireside cookout right where we let them off.

One of the first missions was to pick up three or four VC suspects being flown to an area for interrogation. They were sitting in the middle of the ship off to my left with their hands and feet tied, guarded by a Vietnamese officer. Since we seldom flew with the side doors closed, there was nothing stopping a VC suspect from falling out, which reportedly occurred on several occasions. Before realizing what was happening, the officer took a prisoner and was threatening to throw him out into the wild blue yonder a few thousand feet above the ground. After I stopped the officer, assuring him that it wouldn’t happen in this chopper, he reluctantly sat back down, staring at me, not in a loving manner, throughout the remainder of the flight. In hindsight, it probably would have been better to let the suspect fall, than go through the interrogation techniques that were being used.

While flying, I used to write a brief summary at the end of each mission. By the time I left

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Vietnam, my diary was composed of two books. Through the years, only one has survived, and I hope that someday the other will be found. It contained a write-up on a mission that has remained in my thoughts, and without the book for reference, I can only describe what is remembered concerning one of the flights.

The mission was to fly a colonel on a resupply/inspection mission where as he could fly over his troops that were dug in somewhere in the jungle. We flew from Phan Rang with the ammunition and picked up the colonel at Nha Trang. After taking off and reaching God knows where over the jungle, the aircraft commander signaled for me to start lowering the ammo boxes. The colonel took my position, and he was momentarily probably Vietnam’s highest-ranking helicopter gunner. Hovering at treetop level, lying flat on my stomach and halfway outside the chopper, I let down the ammo through the triple canopy trees. Once the box went through the treetops, it disappeared, and due to the multiple layers of palm leaves obscuring the ground, I had absolutely no idea who was receiving it on the other end of the rope. Even if it were the enemy, they wouldn’t have shot us down since, if they crippled the helicopter, the chopper would most likely explode, which would have ruined the ammunition and food.

There’s a saying “Don’t bite the hand that feeds you.” Whoever was on the ground would pull hard on the rope, signaling me to pull it up and start again with another load. While all this was going on, the colonel was shouting, “Those are my boys, those are my boys,” smoking a big cigar while waving his hands. Actually, he wasn’t smoking the cigar, he was chewing it. The colonel was right out of one John Gotti’s social clubs. He was as Italian as they come and quite a character.

We did receive ground fire from the crew chief’s side for a few seconds that was opposite to the helicopter’s side I was resupplying from. The crew chief wasn’t in a position to return fire, since he was in the middle of the ship, holding my feet so I wouldn’t fall out. We weren’t hit, and the aircraft commander quickly climbed to gain altitude. Heading back to the base, the colonel settled down, and I wanted to ask him if he knew any of the mob back home, but felt it wasn’t an appropriate time.

That was a good mission, since it broke the monotony of many routine resupply flights termed “ash and trash.” Most of them were around Phan Rang, going back and forth to the Korean outposts that surrounded the air base. It was a matter of carrying ammunition, food, and

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water; the water was transported in five-gallon jerry cans. On the outbound, the cans were lined up in two neat rows in the middle of the chopper for easy extraction. Filled with water, they were heavy and stable. The trouble was bringing back the empties that were light. I would line them up, and when we reached altitude, because of my nightly K-9 duties, I would fall asleep. Due to the chopper having its side doors opened during most of these flights, two or three cans would fall overboard by the time we got back to the flight pad. God knows who or what was hit down below. Can you imagine being killed or wounded by a jerry can falling from a helicopter? Inventory was never taken the cans, so nothing was ever said.

The Korean troops were hardcore fighters, respected by both sides of the conflict. The following excerpt was found on a captured Viet Cong:

Orders now stipulate that contact with the Koreans is avoided at all costs unless a Viet Cong victory is 100% certain. Never defy Korean soldiers without discrimination, even when they are not armed, for they all are well trained in Taekwondo.

A mission flown on August 23, 1966, got me in a situation where I had to come up with a quick story to explain why I hadn't shown up on time to go on post with the K-9 section. K-9 patrols started at 6:30 p.m. around the Phan Rang perimeter, and at that time, I was in Nha Trang on a helicopter mission that got extended past its scheduled time. The day started by departing the pad on routine supply missions for the Korean outposts surrounding Phan Rang. About midday, we were called out for a medevac run due to a soldier having his hand blown off by a grenade. By the time we got back to Phan Rang, we quickly refueled and took Captain Kernwein north to Nha Trang, where he was being reassigned. The trip was approximately a 30-minute flight one way, and although I knew it would be tight, I could make the trip and return just in time to go on my post.

I was wrong; we didn't depart Nha Trang until 7:00 p.m. and realized that I would have to do some creative talking to explain my late arrival when I got back to the K-9 section; especially since the air force had not approved my flying with the army, and my seniors at the K-9 section were not aware of my extracurricular activities with the Hueys. That time of year, night fell

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around 6:00 p.m., and the flight back was my first time I had flown during darkness.

Vietnam looked completely different. The only thing you could see were flashes from artillery fire from ground units or air strikes. The air force was conducting several strikes along the route we were flying, and our pilots had to stay alert to avoid a midair collision with these fighter aircraft as they dropped their ordnance and strafed the area.

Actually, it was quite entertaining. After time spent “in-country,” you became immune to the fact that these displays ended in people being killed. Captain Higgins had been upgraded to aircraft commander and asked if I wanted to be let off at the kennel. I immediately responded that it would be a disaster. All I could picture was a chopper landing in the middle of the kennel with me jumping out. We arrived at the Huey pad at Phan Rang located on the other side of base from the K-9 section at 7:35 p.m., and I began the half hour walk to the kennel; this gave me time to compose a story.

My explanation to the supervisor was I had gone down to the tea house area by the base in the afternoon and after a few beers, fell asleep in one of the back rooms of a local bar. Looking like hell from flying since 8:00 a.m., he mistook the reason for my rough appearance and told me to go sleep it off. I never heard any more about the incident and ensured all future flights got me back to the kennel on time to go to work.

Another flight with Captain Kernwein and Captain Higgins is recorded in my diary. Both pilots had to be on their good behavior for this one:

Departed pad 11:30 for VIP run with three-star General Heinges and three of his aides. We departed here with a one gunship escort. Both our ships were supposed to make a quick stop at Dalat, but as we made our final approach, the airfield was completely abandoned, and a C-47 had been pulled off into the woods, whereas there was no possible way it could take off from the field. We bypassed Dalat due to the above information and continued on to Bro Loc. I felt I would freeze to death because we had to fly at a high altitude to avoid ground fire. After landing at Bro Loc and getting mission

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coordinated with the pilot of the gunship, we took off and landed at a field close by to refuel and pick up the general and his aides. After accomplishing this task, we took off and landed at Tra Tan Ra, a Special Forces outpost. As we landed, the ARVNs had a color guard for the general. It was funny as hell, because they didn't know what they were doing. I was very much interested with an outpost of this type, for I had read about them in the book *The Green Beret*. This was the first time I had actually been to a Special Forces camp. It was fortified to a maximum and very impressive. As we were waiting for the general to finish his business at the outpost, we were sitting in the ship at the end of the small airstrip when, without warning, a caribou type aircraft landed and could not have missed hitting our rotary blade by three inches. It was so close that the crew chief jumped from the ship and ran like hell. After leaving Tra Tan Ra, we headed for a town called Diling and landed after ground troops marked the “LZ” with a yellow signal smoke grenade as the troops had done at Tra Tan Ra. “Green”—come on in, “Yellow”—if you want, but be careful, “Red”—stay away unless you're a fool! The general left on business, and we waited around the ship for his return. The “LZ” was right in the middle of town, so we passed the time away watching the local girls walk by. Upon leaving Diling, we took the general back to Bro Lac, dropped him off, and headed for Phan Thiet at approximately 18:00. Following another meeting, we departed Phan Thiet with our passengers and arrived at Tral Loung San, another Special Forces outpost. After this stop, we departed back for Phan Thiet. On the way back, the general wanted to circle a forward position camp. It was shaped in a triangle with each side approximately 100 yards in length. A couple rows of barbwire were strung the length of these sides on the outside with a deeply dug trench along the inside. All I could say is that these troops must be brave bastards, for the ground surrounding their fortification

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showed hundreds upon hundreds of mortar craters from the fence line to approximately 600 yards out. Upon completion of this circle, we flew over one of the major operations that was taking place at this time. Tanks were seen maneuvering off to the left of our ship, but I did not observe any firing. We arrived back at Phan Thiet, and the passengers departed for their own ship. The gunship that acted as our escort departed for its home base. On the way back to Phan Thiet, I studied the general and observed how he had two personalities. On the ground, he is always smiling and shaking hands, but in the air, he sits in his seat and stares out into dead space showing deep concentration. Upon leaving Phan Thiet, we headed for Phan Rang and landed at pad at 19:45. On the way, we spotted tracer fire in an area where we had flown a previous mission. The ground fire was not directed at us.

—End of Mission, August 19, 1966/19:45

This flight was conducted around the southeast area of the country, Phan Thiet, throughout the central highlands, Dalat and Bo Loc. I had the latter town’s name spelled incorrectly in my diary.

How’s that for a part-time job? This was a good example of why the Huey was so important during the war. I was watching the Military Channel the other day, over 40 years later, and the Huey still ranks number one in performance. Any crewmember that had the privilege to be assigned to this helicopter will never forget the pop, pop, pop sound the blades created while making its way through the sky.

Approximately 10 years after returning from Vietnam, I was refueling one of Academics of Flight’s training airplanes at Islip Airport on Long Island. While completing paperwork, three or four Hueys landed that belonged to the Air National Guard. Naturally, when the crew came in the office, we started talking. The aircraft commander invited me to the ramp to view one of the ships. Accepting his offer, I walked to within approximately 20 feet of one of the choppers, but then stopped. I couldn’t make myself go closer. Time, which as they say cures all ills, has erased my disassociation with items I was familiar with during Vietnam. I also had “survivor’s guilt” for many years, which rushed to the surface at that moment. Finally, one

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morning I woke up to reality. I had given my opponents the opportunity to cut my life short, exposing myself on the base perimeter at night and as door gunner during the day. If he couldn't shoot straight and hit my ass, that was his problem, not mine.

Rummaging through some personal effects I once came across a few moth-eaten ribbons that had been awarded during my military years. I wanted to display them on a plaque in my den. I hoped to include the Army Air Medal, since I met all requirements, due to the helicopter operations. However, there was a catch, since I was in the air force, and the flights were with the army, it was never listed in my military separation papers.

I am still working on trying to receive the award and feel, with more effort, I can achieve this goal. By keeping a record of all my missions, I began this project. The high point has been establishing contact with the aircraft commander of my last mission on November 7, 1966, Captain Curtis Laird, who is now retired and living in Texas. It was one of my most unforgettable telephone conversations. We had much to talk about, and my eyes filled with tears after I hung up. It's true when they say that you never leave it behind. I sent Captain Laird some photos taken while we were flying and joked that while he thought I was protecting him at the gunner's position from possible ground fire, I was really just taking pictures.

Two missions of several flown with Captain Laird when he was a first lieutenant were recorded as follows:

Departed pad 07:45 to resupply ROK outposts around Phan Rang perimeter. Felt good flying again after so long of an absence. The ROK Tiger Division has been replaced by the White Horse Division. AC and pilot are real good flyers. High gusty winds made flying rough.

—End of Mission, November 7, 1966/11:00

Departed pad at 08:00 to resupply ROK outposts around Phan Rang perimeter; good flying weather. Arrived back at pad to refuel at 14:00. Went back to resupplying. Crew chief thought he heard a shot and thought we were shot at. Crew chief jerked ROK Troop off chopper and fight broke out between them for a few seconds. A 2/Lt. from the ROK's started to chew the crew chief's ass, but crew chief told him to go to hell

in a nice way. Very interesting afternoon.

—End of Mission, November 7, 1966/17:00

The other pilot on both missions was Chief Warrant Officer Dale Beggs. I never knew his unique story until speaking with Captain Laird not too long ago. Beggs had been in the Army Reserve and Army National Guard for six years, with his last rank, a sergeant. He wanted to go regular army; however, he was refused, since to do this required previous active duty and not more than one dependent. Beggs had no such previous active duty, and at the time, he had two dependents, a wife and son.

Dale had a solution. He divorced his wife, got around the requirement of previous active duty, and joined the regular army. From there, he went to Warrant Officer School, helicopter school, then assigned to the 174th Assault Helicopter Company, Vietnam. He remarried the same girl three months after he was accepted into the regular army. As they say, “Where there is a will, there is a way!”

Laird said that in the beginning he had no idea, as the others, of Beggs’ story. Dale was a quiet individual, and I assumed wanted to keep his background to himself. However, it was leaked by someone in Dale’s hometown. Laird was returning off a mission with Beggs as his copilot, and as they approached the helicopter pad to land, Laird saw a multitude of press, with cameras waiting for the helicopter to land. Laird’s first thought was, “Oh God, what did I do wrong this time!” As it turned out, the press was there to interview Beggs concerning his journey to get to Vietnam.

Another conversation was with Carl Kernwein, who now resides in Washington State. Apparently, he was transferred to the 1st Cavalry Division after Phan Rang. The 1st Cav was continuously engaged, and I am sure Carl was in the middle of it all. He told me he wanted to forget that part of his life, and I certainly respected his feelings.

The last contact in 2011 was Lieutenant Colonel Martin “Marty” Heuer, the president of the 174th Assault Helicopter’s Association. He was an officer with the 174th in 1966, and because he was stationed at another base than Phan Rang, he was unaware of my flying with his unit. Captain Laird and Marty have remained good friends and after speaking to Laird for

confirmation, Marty called me, and again, we had a few laughs. Marty claimed that if he had been aware of my flying, he would have never authorized such activity, but he was grateful and sent the following e-mail:

It was great talking to you today. You sure had an unusual experience during your tour in VN, and the 174th was the beneficiary of your volunteer service.

Marty asked if I had been officially checked out and certified with the M-60 machine gun prior to my flights, since it was the main armament on the “Slicks.” I explained that it was the primary weapon we used on our convoys, and I was completely familiar with its operation. I can’t remember if I was ever formally checked out or not; I just started using it.

He subsequently published a book, Sharks, Dolphins, Arabs and the High Priced Help, concerning the 174th . He told me if he ever gets to a second edition, he would update the book with my activity. He sent me a copy, and reading the book has been very refreshing, since the majority of crewmembers I had flown with were mentioned throughout.

On one page, Marty expressed his thoughts about the individuals assigned to guard duty:

Guard duty was never a pleasant task, especially during the monsoon seasons when the bunkers were cold and wet. It certainly wasn't as dangerous as those who pulled perimeter duty in the field; the thought of snakes, rats and the threat of enemy attacks were enough to unnerve the strongest.

A friend sent me an e-mail last year concerning a Medal of Honor recipient, Ed Freeman, who was assigned to the 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division (Air Mobile) involved at the Ia Drang Valley battle in November 1965. The following took place at LZ X-ray:

Your infantry unit is outnumbered 8-1 and the enemy fire is so intense, from 100 or 200 yards away, that your own infantry commander has ordered the medevac helicopters to stop

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coming in. You're lying there, listening to the enemy machine guns and you know you're not getting out. Your family is halfway around the world, 12,000 miles away, and you'll never see them again. As the world starts to fade in and out, you know this is the day. Then—over the machine gun noise—you faintly hear that sound of a helicopter. You look up to see an unarmed Huey. But. . . it doesn't seem real because no medevac markings are on it. Ed Freeman is coming for you. He's not medevac, so it's not his job, but he's flying his Huey down into the machine gun fire anyway. Even after the medics were ordered not to come. He's coming anyway. And he drops it in and sits there in the machine gun fire, as they load 2 or 3 of you on board. Then he flies you up and out through the gunfire to the doctors and nurses. And, he kept coming back! 13 more times! He took about 30 of you and your buddies out who would have never have gotten out.

The author was not mentioned; however, you can be assured that for the rest of his life, he will look skyward and regress to that time in his life whenever a chopper passes overhead. Ed Freeman was wounded four times and passed away on August 20, 2008, at the age of eighty. This is an amazing piece of writing, illustrating what an individual will go through under intense fire, to extract his fellow combatant out of harm's way.

Every now and then, a person hears a song that is remembered for life. I had a cassette tape from 30 years ago that was stolen from my car. One of the songs recorded was “More Than a Name on a Wall” by the Statler Brothers rendering tribute to the mothers, the real heroes, who lost a loved one serving in Vietnam. This is for all the moms that had their lives changed forever:

***I saw her from a distance
As she walked up to the wall
In her hand she held some flowers
As her tears began to fall
And she took out pen and paper***

***As to trace her memories
And she looked up to heaven
And the words she said were these . . .
She said lord my boy was special
And he meant so much to me
And Oh I'd love to see him
Just one more time you see
All I have are his memories
And the moments to recall***

***So Lord could you tell him,
He's more than a name on a wall***

Excerpts from Letters Concerning K-9 Perimeter Duty, Phan Rang, 1966

February 26, 1966

Had a little action last night. The dog man on the post next to mine heard something outside the perimeter fence. He light his flare to light the area, and it reveled three individuals coming toward the fence about 75 yards out. He opened fire on them, and they disappeared back into the mountains. We figured it was VC trying to plant booby traps around the perimeter where we walk or snipers trying to get into position to harass us.

April 3, 1966

Three dogs have been bitten by snakes—two by Russell's vipers, one by spitting cobra. The dogs got sick, but did not die.”

Two nights ago the dogman on K-1 was shot at with an automatic weapon five times. They captured the two individuals, and I don't know what happened from there.

Last night, a dog team was just being posted when a water buffalo

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started charging them. He raised his weapon to fire but didn't have a round in his chamber. The posting truck had not yet left, and one of the dog teams that was sitting in the back of the posting truck quickly fired on the bull with automatic fire and dropped the bull about ten feet in front of the dog team it had been charging. Apparently, the security troops were trying to run it off the runway, and the bull got mad.

April 10, 1966

Last night, I wandered a little too far from the perimeter and landed about a mile off base. Spanky alerted and pulled me to about 50 yards from a house where I observed a group of Vietnamese men. I kept hearing sniper fire, but I am so used to it by now that it didn't bother me. I found cover behind a bush and radioed in to control if they knew anything about a house being on my post with Vietnamese around it along with sniper fire. After checking my position out, they told me I better get the hell back on base for my own good. These people are so security-lazed (U.S. military) that they (Vietnamese) took down the barbwire around the outer perimeter. As it turned out, I didn't get shot, for I got back on the perimeter with much speed. Here is a diagram of where I had wandered.

We had another dog bit by a snake; this makes five so far.

April 13, 1966

Two nights ago, we had a very active night. Remember I said they would try and attack the base; they did on our south perimeter, but were pushed back. They also blew up a fuel line of ours, and K-9 was harassed by sniper fire. I had a tracer round go by my helmet not more than five feet and was the closest one yet, but I don't think he really knew where I was. The snipers know where we have our posts, but they don't know where the handlers and dogs are a good part of the time. By shooting rounds on our posts, they hope we will fire back. By doing this, the explosion from our weapon will create a muzzle flash, and we would give away our position. Also, we had another dog bite by snake, which makes six.

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June 6, 1966

Two nights ago, a water buffalo hit one of our dog teams, two posts down from mine, and in the confusion, the dog got away, and we haven't found him as yet. The buffalo was killed, and the handler is OK.

July 11, 1966

We finally got back into the war. Five VCs tried to penetrate our north perimeter two posts down from mine. The firefight lasted for about one and a half hours because they kept sending up reinforcements. Spanky and I hit a bank for cover and watched for them to come through our post that was being illuminated by flare ships, but none tried to come through. One VC was found dead, and we had no casualties. One of our boys had a bullet hole right through his helmet, but was not hurt.

The other night, Spanky took a snake bite out on post, and needless to say, it would have been me if not him. He got sicker than hell, but we rushed him to the hospital, and he recovered.

August 18, 1966

Well Spanky is out of work for a while, so I have some extra time. He has some kind of skin disease which means he cannot work and must be isolated for a while.

October 23, 1966

The other night, a troop turned his dog loose on alert, and the dog came back a few minutes later after making contact with a wild boar. The dog's whole side was ripped open. He is alive, but it will be a long time before he works again. I would be happy if the VC were the only thing we had to worry about. We are all about underwater and the snake situation is worse than ever. About two weeks ago, they killed a cobra, which measured nine and a half feet. Now, what in the hell can you do about something like that? You know why I say that the VC is the least of my worries.

I found the following newspaper article from Stars and Stripes, written in 1966, referring to our K-9 unit at Phan Rang concerning unsuccessful enemy penetrations.

Four-Footed “Detectives” Defend Phan Rang AB

The main lines of defense at Phan Rang AB, Vietnam, against perimeter penetrations are the four-footed “detectives” which patrol the base perimeter. The sentry dogs can “sniff out” an intruder at 600 yards under ideal wind conditions.

TSgt. Rodney G. Arnold, 35th Security police Squadron canine section supervisor, says that the presence of the sentry dog on the perimeter has been “a deciding factor” that the base has never had an enemy penetration.

The dogs react in many different ways to let its handler know that it has “sniffed out” an intruder while on patrol. Some dogs bark, some moan, cry, or jump into the air. Without their “four-footed radar,” the handlers could pass within a matter of feet of the enemy during the dark of the night, without detecting him.

A2C Donald V. Houck summed up the reliability of sentry dogs: I rely more on my dog “Dutch,” than I do my weapon.

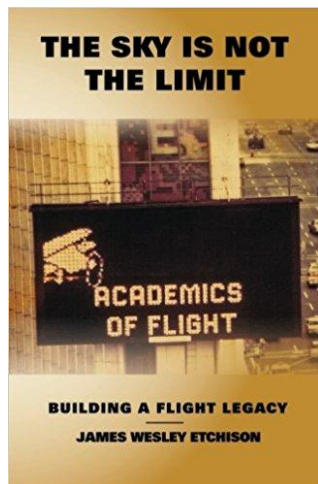
Part One of The Sky is Not the Limit takes the reader through events prior to and during Jim’s Vietnam deployment, which lasted three years, returning to a society against U.S. involvement in the war. His restlessness is apparent during several helicopter missions and events during the Tet Offensive when the city came under a rocket attack on his first night back to Vietnam for Pan American.

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Part Two begins with the creation of Academics of Flight and carries the reader along as Jim travels to countries throughout Africa, Europe, Central and South America, and the Caribbean, teaching for various airlines. Jim describes incidents as varied as when he hid in a closet during a coup in Nigeria to avoid arrest to when he was harassed by a fundamentalist on a flight from Dubai to Karachi.



“The Sky is Not the Limit” is available in both [paperback and Kindle editions.](#)

Doug’s Comments

This newsletter was compiled and published by [Douglas Severt](#). Previous issues of the Phan Rang Newsletter are available [here](#) for download.