

A Raven and Robin: Reunited 44 years after the Secret War by Steve Wilson, Lieutenant Colonel, USAF(Ret)

I spoke loudly into the emergency radio: “Mayday, mayday, mayday. This is Raven 27 and I’m hit and going down.” I was ten miles behind enemy lines with no parachute and the engine had quit. And there were 25,000 North Vietnamese Regulars below...not the Viet Cong part-time soldiers but battle hardened, well trained, highly motivated, and very capable NVA regulars. But let’s back up to the beginning to set the stage.

I arrived in Pleiku, Vietnam in June 1971. My job was called a Forward Air Controller or FAC. I flew the O-2A, a twin engine lightly armed spotter plane. My job was to locate targets, mark them with a smoke rocket, and direct fighter-bombers onto the target. But there was very little going on at Pleiku and I became bored.

There was a mysterious one-page letter in the operations room asking for volunteers for Project Steve Canyon. The letter didn’t even say where the assignment was or even what you would do. But previous pilots that served in this assignment had gotten the word back that this assignment was about becoming a Raven across the “fence” (border) in Laos.

I didn’t have any of the qualifications, but volunteered anyway. I was accepted after a few weeks. I found out later there had been lots of pilots killed and they needed to fill cockpits. I guess I didn’t get the memo about not volunteering in the military.

I arrived in northern Thailand in early January 1972 after two weeks leave in the states with my new wife of less than a year. I in-processed and was given temporary duty orders. I departed at 4PM that same day on a CIA transport for Vientiane, Laos. All of my military uniforms were placed in a locked metal container. I had been “sheep-dipped” into clandestine duty. I was now part of “The Secret War in Laos.”

I learned how to fly a new airplane in just a few days and studied the rules of engagement. In under a week I was flying combat missions in a very hostile environment. There were ten pilots most of whom were Lieutenants like myself and a Major in charge of us. I was assigned the callsign Raven 27. We lived in a hotel. Normally we would live at a CIA base in central Laos. But once the NVA got too close to that base just prior to my arrival, flying operations were moved to a safer venue.

I flew the first day with an instructor, then it was baptism under fire... literally. There was more action that first day than my previous six months in Vietnam. Maybe a slight exaggeration, but not too far off. I had definitely achieved my goal of avoiding boredom. This was an intense battle going on.

My second day I flew with Yang Bee. He was a Captain in the Laotian Army and about ten years older than me. He wanted to see if I had what it takes. Yang Bee is the bravest person I have ever worked with. Bullets could be flying all over the sky, but he was steady as she goes.

He talked on the radio with the troops on the ground and helped us form a plan to attack the enemy.

The troops on the ground were usually a mixed group. The bulk of the friendly fighters were Laotian Army of the Hmong ethnic group. There were also mercenaries from Thailand paid by the CIA. And finally there was a CIA case officer working as an advisor.

The NVA started a major offensive just prior to my arrival. They had 25,000 troops supported by artillery, anti-aircraft guns, surface to air missiles and even air support on one occasion. We only had 2,000 troops to oppose them. But we had some advantages the NVA did not: we held the high ground; Air America transports and helicopters; tactical airpower; CIA support; and the Ravens.

There was an NVA anti-aircraft gunner that was deadly for us. This gun shot down two of our aircraft. I was part of a two plane reconnaissance mission to locate this gun. I would fly low to draw fire while the other Raven flew high to watch for the gun firing.

The plan worked well...too well. The gun fired and I got hit. The incendiary round exploded upon contact with the propeller sending smoke and flames on both sides of the aircraft. I turned toward "friendlie" in case the engine quit. But it didn't quit amazingly enough. Yang Bee was in the back seat. When I looked back at him, he gave a thumbs up. We landed safely and the plane was quickly repaired.

One week later, we decided to try again to locate this gun. By a quirk of fate I was in the same plane with Yang Bee and flying the low position close to the action. And yet again I was hit by the gunner. This time the round that got us was an amour-piercing round and it hit the engine on the left side. The engine did not stop, but there was very little power. We did not carry parachutes, so we were going to make a crash landing.

I had a choice of where to head. One field had a couple of CIA guys in a hill overlooking the airstrip. And the airstrip was under almost continuous siege. The other option was the big CIA base I would normally have been living at with the rest of the Ravens. The only problem with this second option was a 5,000 foot mountain range between me and the base. I thought this was a better option since we could crash into the mountains and scramble to safety with the friendlies on the top of the ridge.

We cleared the mountain ridge with maybe a hundred feet to spare. It was easy to land at the CIA base. The runway was long and concrete...both rare in Laos. We practiced landing without power. It is an emergency procedure we know well, and even something we expect in a single engine plane in combat. I looked back at Yang Bee and he had this confident look on his face. It was kinda like "Been there, done it!" and it usually turns out OK.

After we touched down, the tower controller was screaming at us to push the plane off the runway. Air America had troops and supplies to deliver and our crippled plane had stopped operations. After we got the plane off the runway, a CIA officer greeted us with a warm beer. Best beer I ever had.

In jest I looked over at Yang Bee and asked him if he was ready to go back and fly today. He said, "Yes. Our Buddha is strong today. We will not die today." I told him our day was over and we were taking Air America home.

Combat in the Air Force is much more impersonal since we are so far away from the enemy. On my flight to home base on an Air America transport after being shot down, there was a seriously injured Hmong soldier as well as two body bags. Fighting is very personal for the Army guys at the "point of the sword."

The next day I had several revelations. First, I had come very close to death on my first wedding anniversary. Not the exact same day, but very close. Second, the intelligence officer showed me a typed message, it was a translation of the NVA anti-aircraft regiment radio call to their headquarters reporting the incident of the previous day. It had been intercepted. The intelligence officer forgot to stamp it classified and I forgot to return it. It has been authenticated as genuine. Lastly, the bullet that gets you is the so-called "golden BB"...the one you never see. Your head is constantly moving and looking for the ground fire. But the "golden BB" is the one you miss.

Several months later I completed my Raven tour of duty and returned home to my wife. I said my goodbyes to the other Ravens, and Yang Bee. We had defeated the NVA on this most recent dry season offensive. We were outnumbered ten to one but had decisively defeated a formidable enemy. Many deaths on both sides.

I had come out of this tour in pretty good shape. I had only been hit twice. One of our ten pilots was killed while I was still there. A few months after I departed Laos, the pilot that took my call sign was killed as well as another Raven. Over a five-year period 165 pilots were Ravens. Thirty-two were killed in action. This was dangerous work for sure. I was lucky.

Fast forward to the present. I stayed in touch with some of the Ravens I flew with through the Facebook page "Call Sign Raven." A year or so ago I posted a photo of me and Yang Bee. To my surprise, Yang Bee and his family escaped Laos to Thailand after the communist took over Laos. Then he moved to the US as a refugee.

Gau Nu, Yang Bee's daughter, and many other relatives asked to be my Facebook friend. Gau Nu contacted me via Facebook to say she was bringing Yang Bee to North Carolina to visit his other daughter in Concord. They travelled to Raleigh to spend the afternoon and re-live our experiences from over 40 years ago. What a joyous occasion for an old guy (me) to get to reunite with his even older brother in arms (Yang Bee) after so long.

I brought out a few maps and other items left over from the war. Yang Bee was having an absolute great time reflecting on the past. His English is poor, but we could tell that his daughters were really enjoying him re-living the past. It is funny how a small detail from the past can trigger a forgotten memory. There was more than one forgotten memory. I told the group about Yang Bee's lunch during breaks from combat missions: a small wicker basket (smaller than a large can of beans) filled with cooked rice and topped with a very small quantity of fish (maybe two tablespoons).

I re-lived a memorable mission with the group. Yang Bee and I had flown deep into enemy controlled territory very close to the border with North Vietnam. By the time we turned towards friendly territory, the weather had turned much worse. We looked for a way home. There were none.

The only way home was to climb into the clouds...an emergency procedure in this plane. So we located a saddle. This is a place where a gap in the ridge is located. The mountain ridge rises on two sides of the gap and the terrain drops off on the other two sides of the saddle. So we climbed into the clouds for maybe thirty seconds or so. Then I pushed the stick forward hoping to break out of the clouds before we hit the tree tops. It worked.

Yang Bee told his daughters he was not sure we would safely recover from that mission. Then my wife asked Yang Bee how many close calls he experienced during many years of combat missions. He said there were too many to recall. This was true irony to me. I spent six months flying this dangerous mission and had only a few really dangerous missions where I doubted whether I would live to tell about them. But Yang Bee had flown this mission for years! Clearly Yang Bee and his fellow Hmong warriors had much more "skin in the game" than any of the Americans.

Our most fun was viewing my slides from my tour in Laos. And Yang Bee thoroughly enjoyed the show. On one slide, he pointed out to his daughters the burial site for his grandmother. He was so animated it was a joy to share in his excitement. Even though he has suffered two strokes, he remembered most all of the locations shown on the slides.

All afternoon we enjoyed our experiences from over 40 years ago. We had hoped everyone would spend the night in Raleigh with us. But the day was just too much for the old guy. I wanted this to continue, but understood it would be better for them to return to Concord. I hope the day comes soon for us to visit Yang Bee in Michigan and re-live some more experiences from these days in Laos.

Reunion postscript: I have had many new "friend" requests on Facebook from Yang Bee's relatives. Yang Bee had nine children and many grandchildren. It is an honor to share Yang Bee's story with his extended family and the American Hmong family. I feel the Hmong contribution to the American melting pot is an important contribution few Americans are even aware of. I am proud of my small contribution to the story. It was truly an honor to serve with this brave man and his fellow Hmong.

