



NATIONAL MUSEUM
OF THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE
Wings & Things Guest Lecture Series

The Story of the Raven FAC's

Craig W. Duehring, who served as a forward air controller (FAC) during the Southeast Asia War, tells the story of the forward air controllers who fought the war in Laos.

I tell folks, don't pay for your meal before you've had a chance to taste it. It may be good; it may be not so good.

Thank you very much for the nice introduction. Thank you, General Metcalf for inviting me to be here with you tonight. It's been a great visit going around the museum. I have to tell you a little bit before we get started. First off, I used this just because it's convenient, and it's of course, the cover of the book, *The Ravens*, and I know they're selling them out here in the bookstore. There's actually only about four more boxes of those things left in existence, but not here. They're actually not here; once these run out, they're out, but the Web site is theravens.org. If you don't get one tonight, you can get one there for as long as they last. We're not going to reprint them. It's been a few years that they've been out.

What I want to do tonight is tell you, in the short period of time that we have, about the Raven program from my perspective. The problem is, of course, I can't tell you like a historical perspective because I haven't done a study – I'm pretty familiar with it, but I can only give you my portion of it. Perhaps by doing so, you can gain an appreciation for what was happening around us. Think of it as a layer cake, and you're going to cut a slice out of the layer cake, and the layers appear there so you're going to get a taste of everything. The program started in 1966, lasted about six years and it involved about 190 people total. About 172, we think, actually flew with the Raven call sign in combat. So a very small program, covered a very large period – short period of time over a very large country. I'm going to just tell you my story, and we'll go from there. I'm going to cover about two-thirds of the presentation, stop, and we'll take some questions. I'll watch the time, and I'll get you out of here on time tonight. What? I thought I'd get applause for that. [laughter] We'll see what happens.

You gotta love a picture like that! [laughter] With a picture like that, you've got nowhere to go but up, right? I think later on what we'll do is have a caption contest, and you'll be ready to submit your suggestions. I thought maybe, "No, mom, I did not steal that chicken." Actually, I was born and raised in Mankato, Minnesota, which is a town of about 35,000 people in the midst of the famous valley of the Jolly Green Giant. My ancestors were among the first settlers in southwest Minnesota and fought in the Sioux Uprising of 1862, the Civil War and all wars since. When I was about 12 years old, I took my first flight in an airplane, "penny a pound" out of the local airport. I climbed into an airplane with a bunch of strangers, and that one flight around the pattern there for I think a dollar and 20 cents convinced me that I wanted to fly airplanes, and I never varied from that again.

I went to high school right there in town – Loyola High School – and joined the Civil Air Patrol, the cadet program, and worked my way through the ranks and eventually became the senior ranking cadet in the Minnesota wing before actually converting to become a senior member. I attended Mankato State College in my home town since I couldn't afford any other options. We had no ROTC – that was back in the '60s – so Air Force OTS became my goal. College was difficult and the draft was a constant threat to my plans. Because I had to work my way through school, it took 4-1/2 years to complete my studies, which required a 6 month extension from the local draft board, something kids don't worry about these days. I am glad that I grew up before the days of "big government" where I was still able to put on a suit and tie and present my own argument in person to members of my own community. I think we've lost something over the years.

I graduated from college just before Christmas 1967 and immediately drove to San Antonio to spend New Year's Eve in a motel room waiting for my OTS class to start. Following commission, I drove to Craig Air Force Base in Alabama in April of 1968 to begin pilot training in Class 69-06. I heard all the jokes you can imagine about being named after the base or having the base named after me. But the worst part was seeing the trash cans all over the base that were stenciled "Help Keep Craig Clean." [laughter] When I went back to Craig a couple of years later as an instructor pilot, during my in-processing at the base dental clinic, a young technician kinda topped them all when he simply picked up my records, looked at my name and said, "Um-um-um-um, it's a damn good thing your folks didn't name you Goose Bay." [laughter]

I flew T-41s, tubed an instrument check ride in T-37s. Those were the days before we had DME and magic things like that doing an instrument approach. But that reduced me down to the middle of the pack so I knew fighters were out of the question when it came time to graduate. But that was fine because I had an instructor in class that had shown us a picture of himself as a FAC – forward air controller, and I said that looks like a pretty cool deal. So when our class, when our list came down, we had one OV-10, two O-2s and three O-1s. Now, I wanted to improve my odds, so I got together with some of my buddies that wanted to be FAC's, and we started a whispering campaign that said that FAC's were suffering extremely high loss rates over there. What we did was we scared, not the guys, but the wives of the married guys, who said, "You don't take one of those things. You take a nice, safe ATC job as an instructor pilot." "Yes, ma'am." So "The Road Not Taken," as the Robert Frost poem says, but I got an O-1 and a fast track to Vietnam.

I arrived in Vietnam in August 1969 and after completing my in-country check-out at the aptly named Forward Air Control University at Phan Rang – simply known as FAC-U, I moved on to the little farming village of Duc Hoa, Vietnam, the home of the 25th ARVN Division, located about halfway between Saigon and the Cambodian border.

The Tet offensive of 1968 had left a lot of scars around the countryside, but activity had slowed down considerably while the NVA and the VCA took time to regroup. Not that they had pulled out, but the level of activity wasn't as great as it had been. Still I saw some action and even earned a DFC by breaking up an ambush that had been set for a Special Forces unit operating near the Parrot's Beak and the Angel's Wing.

We also volunteered to fly blacked-out helicopter gunship missions at night – or at least until our boss found out about it. Still the missions were not as fulfilling as I had expected.

Another problem was my boss who was probably the worst leader I'd ever met in my 28 years of Air Force experience. The longer I remained there, the more convinced I was that my career would never get out of the starting gate.

One day at Bien Hoa, I saw a young man in blue jeans and remarkably long hair with the greatest lamb-chop side burns I'd ever seen. I asked my buddy "Who is that?" "That's Captain So-and-so." My eyes made my next question superfluous. "He's a Raven," my buddy continued. I said, "What's that?" "Hell, I don't know but I heard they fly some sort of secret mission somewhere. They all have prices on their heads placed there by the VC. It's pretty dangerous." Well, that was that. I was beginning to recognize epiphanies when I saw them, and I knew I had to become a Raven. In a short, and I do mean short, discussion with the stranger, he revealed one useful bit of information. If I wanted a piece of the action, I had to go to the 504th Tac Air Support Group commander and interview with him for what they called Project 404. The appointment was made and on that morning, I began the walk around the airfield to the distant headquarters for the 504th Tac Air Support Group. We didn't have cars, of course. Fortunately, a blue station wagon pulled up and the driver offered me a ride. As luck would have it – and I had many lucky experiences in Southeast Asia, it was the 504th Tac Air Support Group commander himself. "Where're you headed?" I said, "I was coming to see you. I have an appointment to talk about Project 404." We pulled into his reserved parking spot and conducted the interview right there in that big old station wagon. Finally he said, "I'm going to let you go to the program because you come from the Midwest and I appreciate good Midwestern common sense. We need some of that up there. You see, when pilots get away from the flag pole they tend to change and become loose and unmanageable." His words were like cheap liquor to an alcoholic. [laughter] The more he talked about how "undisciplined" those FAC's were, the tougher it was to keep from salivating all over my shirt.

Once inside the headquarters, I was taken to the intel vault where I was allowed to read a two-page summary of Project 404. I learned that it was in Laos and that the members wore civilian clothes and a few other useful tidbits but not many details. My instructions were to return to my unit and wait for a message to move. I was on cloud nine. I danced my way back to Duc Hoa and proudly announced to all that I was leaving in the very near future but I couldn't say much more than that.

One of my close friends – this is actually a picture of him taken in Laos much later on – Park Bunker – he's the guy with a gun in his hand in the brown shirt. One close friend and fellow FAC was quite interested. His name was Capt. Park Bunker, an academy graduate, married and at least 30 years old – all of which made him seem at least 20 years older than he was. Park was exceptionally interested and eventually followed me into the program.

I went about my duties with my duffle bag standing by my bed but the call never came. Day after day passed and March became April before I was able to take a Bird Dog to Bien Hoa for the 100-hour maintenance check. No sooner did I park the plane than I hiked my way over to the 504th Tac Air Support Group. I went in and sputtered, "I'm Lt. Duehring and I have been

waiting for word to go to Project 404. What's taking so long?" The calm reply was, "Didn't you get the word? We sent three HF radio messages to your site with no reply. Therefore, we let the No. 2 guy on the list go." I was in shock. "But don't worry, you can be the next one to go." "When is the next opening?" "Well, it's a small program, and we don't think there will be a slot until August." April. August. I said, "August?" I gasped, "That's my DERS date." "I know," the personnel specialist replied. "If you're willing to sign up for a consecutive overseas tour, you'll be eligible to PCS up-country." I struggled, but only for a moment. "What the hell," I said. "I might as well extend. I'm not doing much around here." I now know how a fish feels when it jumps on a bright, shiny hook. For, no sooner did I return to Duc Hoa, than the call came to pack my bags and go to Tan Son Nhut Air Base to catch a commercial flight to Bangkok. I was on the road to high adventure.

So I said goodbye to my Army and Air Force buddies and headed off to my new life. On Friday, April 10, 1970, after one night in real civilization in Bangkok, I boarded the "Klong" C-130 flight to Udorn in northern Thailand. Once there, we circled the base for at least an hour awaiting clearance to land. Out the side window I could see fires burning at various spots on the base. Later, I learned that an RF-4C that had been shot up over the Chinese Road, lost control on final. The pilot shoved the engines into afterburner and both aircrew members bailed out. The flaming aircraft struck the AFRTN station at change of shift and killed 19 people. It then traveled through two "colonels-trailers," took out a newly remodeled but unoccupied wing of a barracks and ended up in the swimming pool. One of the aircrew members landed in the BX parking lot w his ejection seat smashed through the roof of the base theater, and it landed in the front row.

I dragged my way to the passenger terminal where I was met by an officer attached to Det 1 of the 56th Special Operations Wing – that was our home when we came to Udorn. It was also our unclassified PCS destination. That's what we told our families back home. He asked if I had any civilian clothes in my bag to which I replied, "Yes." "Then go into the men's room and change and give me your wallet." I handed over my wallet and dragged my duffle bag through the swinging door. When I came out he said, "You will never wear a uniform again until you are back in the states on your final PCS move. And, these cards that refer to the military such as your club card, your check book with your rank on it, etc. all have to be removed." As we drove to Det 1 headquarters, he continued, "I will lock your uniforms in a CONEX and these cards and checks will be kept in a safe in intel where you can get at them, if you need them." He gave me back my ID card, my Geneva Convention card and my flight cap. In the event that we were shot down and unable to escape, he explained, we were to attempt to claim our rights as prisoners of war with our cards and to quickly put our flight cap on in an attempt to be captured "in uniform" and not shot as a spy. By the way, it never worked. No Raven, who was not able to escape, was ever taken alive. This fact was brought out to me very graphically some months later when my very good friend, Park Bunker, who followed me into the Raven program, described his own death on the radio as it took place. Another Raven who was shot down after I left, who probably died in the crash, had his body stacked on top of the airplane where it was burned in full view of his friends.

I spent a great night as a guest of my newly found friends at Det 1. Their jobs were to instruct Thai, Lao and Hmong student pilots how to fly the AT-28. This airplane was the Navy version of the T-28 Trojan with the large engine and a three-bladed prop. It was outfitted with six wing

bomb stations and two wing-mounted .50-caliber machine guns. When they weren't instructing, they flew bombing missions into northern Laos. We got to know all of these Air Commandos and usually saved our best targets for them. Imagine the challenge in teaching a young man to fly in combat when he didn't even know how to drive a car – and in a language that was foreign to his tonal language.

Two days later, I was driven out to Det 1 where I met my first “real” Raven, who dumped me into the back seat of a Bird Dog and off we went, across the Mekong, landing at Wattay Airport at Vientiane. That is the administrative capital and still the capital of Laos. There was a small air terminal on the west side of the field but much of the north and east sides were filled with Air America airplanes – neat airplanes like C-130s, Pilatus Porters, C-47s, C-123Ks, Volpars and bunches of helicopters – UH-1s and UH-64s. It was magic. We taxied off the southeast end of the runway and onto the ramp where the Lao T-28s were parked in neat rows and O-1s were parked individually among sandbag and PSP revetments. We drove down to the American Embassy compound where I met the chief Raven, Lt. Col. Bob Foster – probably the finest Air Force officer I have ever met. What a change from where I had come. I left the worst Air Force officer I've known and sat down with the best. I was nearly in shock.

The Kingdom of Laos was divided into five military regions, simply named MR I through MR V. In each was a major city that hosted the flying operations of the Royal Lao Air Force, Air America and the Ravens. The cities were Vientiane, the royal capital of Luang Prabang, Pakse, Savanneket and General Vang Pao's guerilla headquarters at Long Tieng. Let's see if I can point some of these out to you – you can see the lines here. MR I – Luang Prabang – was the capital city there. We were in MR II, Military Region II – Long Tieng was where we worked out of. Vientiane was MR V. Down here at MR III, they flew out of Savanneket, and Pakse was – what's left – MR IV.

Twenty-one Ravens were authorized in-country but I never saw quite that many during my 11-month tour. And there was also a rapid turn-over. The concept was that a FAC or fighter pilot would serve in Vietnam for six months of a normal 12-month tour, then he spent six months as a Raven. The Raven tour was itself split into two 3-month tours – one at Long Tieng or Lima 20 Alternate, as it's also called or just plain “Alternate” so I'm going to use those sometimes interchangeably. Lima 20 Alternate is merely the number of the site – Lima meaning Laos, 20 was the cover story so that they could be obscure, they called it 20 Alternate, or just plain “Alternate.” By the way, it was the busiest airport in the world; nobody knew it. We actually beat Chicago O'Hare Field; we had more takeoffs and landings than they did. So one at Long Tieng or Lima 20 Alternate, and then three months at one of the other sites. The reason for this was simple. About half of the Ravens were flying out of Lima 20 Alternate at any given time because that was where most of the fighting was taking place. The threat was consistent up there while at other locations, the threat was a little more sporadic.

I'd been told that, because the NVA had been rocketing Lima 20 Alternate every night, the Ravens stationed there had moved back to Vientiane to sleep but flew north every morning, cycling out of Lima 20 Alternate all day before returning back south, about a 45-minute flight, to Vientiane. This was normal during the dry season when the NVA could move heavy equipment over the dirt roads and through shallow rivers. During my welcome interview, I prayed that I

would be sent to Lima 20 Alternate. Finally, Mr. Foster – by the way, the officers were all referred to as Mister and the enlisted guys as Tom, Joe, what have you – he said, “Well, Craig, I’m going to send you to Long Tieng to work with Vang Pao.” I felt ready to jump up and cheer. “What I want you to do is the best job you possibly can, and if in the process you piss somebody off, you send them to me because 50 percent of my job is keeping people off your back so you can fight.” Thus began the steady growth of deep respect that I developed for this man in the months that I was privileged to work for him. From that point on, I would have done anything for him, and I would have died before I would have let him down.

Almost as an afterthought I asked, “I was scheduled to come to Laos a couple of weeks ago and didn’t get the word to move so another guy was sent and I was told that there wouldn’t be an opening until August. Then I was told to hurry up and go. Can you tell me what happened?” Mr. Foster took a deep breath and sat back in his chair. “Hank Allen,” he began, “was scheduled to return home a week or so ago. The person who came to replace him then was Dick Elzinga. Dick arrived 10 days ago. As is the custom, the departing FAC normally checks out the new guy, so Hank and Dick took off from Vientiane the next morning in a Bird Dog, and we never heard from them again. They’ve never been found.” It took only a second for what he said to sink in. If I had received the radio message and departed on time, that would have been me in the back seat of that missing airplane. So I replaced the guy who replaced me. That story set the stage for many close calls that were to occur in the months ahead.

I met my new family that night including A.D. Holt, Stan Erstad, Jeff Thompson, Brian Wages, Jim Cross, Mark Diebolt and Jim Struhsaker, who was also known as “T-shirt” because of his habit of flying in a white T-shirt, blue jeans and cowboy boots. He also had the greatest handlebar mustache I’ve ever seen – with the possible exception of the one now worn by Sam Elliot. We probably ate a quick dinner before heading down town for a night of bar-hopping. Our little house was crowded and so the new guy got the couch in the front room.

On Wednesday, April 15, 1970, the guys raced through a pre-dawn breakfast and took one of the jeeps to the airport to take off for a full day popping bad guys. Tom Palmer, a major in the Air Commandos, sat down with me for a minute and explained what my check out would consist of. At the airport, I grabbed my shoulder bag of new 1:50 scale maps with a 1:250 over-all navigation map, a set of dark glasses, my helmet mounted with a boom mike and hiked out to the back seat of a waiting T-28. We took off and headed up towards the mountains and the famous Plain of Jars. The others were already out there and putting in airstrikes in the morning sun. Tom showed me the territory, which consisted of mountain after mountain after mountain. Try as I might, I was so lost I couldn’t believe it. After all, I’d never flown in mountains before and certainly not when people were shooting at me. Tom put in an airstrike or two and, after two hours, we landed at the secret base of Long Tieng. The 4,200-foot runway lay hidden among the sharp, karst mountain peaks with houses and huts and ramps all around. The only way to land was to the west while the only way to take off was to the east. Can you guess what way is east and west on this? [laughter] They’ve got a unique barrier up there. Once a pilot cleared the runway on take-off, he side-stepped to the right to allow the other aircraft to land. You landed every single time as the sharp peaks at the west end made a go-around very unlikely. I quickly noticed the rusting wing of a C-123 that tried a go-around quite unsuccessfully, right at the base of that karst peak.

We took a short break, met the intel crowd and some of the maintainers, including both Air Force crew chiefs and Air America contract Filipino crew chiefs. Then we climbed into an O-1 with me in the front seat and Tom in the back. Now it was my turn to put in some airstrikes, which I did, apparently to Tom's satisfaction. We landed after lunch and hiked up to the Air America hostel for some fried rice before Tom turned me loose on my own. Let me just give you some orientation – this is the Air American ramp. Our ramps were down here. There was like a commercial ramp, an overflow, that was down here; it wasn't used very much. Where we lived was in this little compound right here – this area here, these were our houses right here. The CIA guys were on this side of the street. This was the Air America hostel; they had a little café in there. We did most of our eating and stuff up there. Gen. Vang Pao's house was a pretty good sized house; I think it's right there. Later on, we'll talk about the king's house that's up here on this ridge.

Okay, we landed after lunch and hiked up to the Air America hostel for some fried rice before Tom turned me loose on my own. He introduced me to the chief back-seater, Capt. Yang Bee who the guys called General Ky since he looked a lot like the South Vietnamese Air Force Chief of Staff, General **Nguyen Kao Ky**. The back-seaters were soldiers in VP's army who learned English to one degree or another and who often rode with the Ravens to translate the requests of the Hmong officers in the field. Sometimes we flew with them, sometimes we did not. I tended to fly with them very often. Yang Bee was the best, and his English was excellent. He was also a very dynamic individual who was very close to Gen. Vang Pao. Tom's specific instructions were to go out and get familiar with the area but do not direct any airstrikes – especially on the first day in-country. Give them to the other Ravens. I clearly understood and told him so.

We took off and Yang Bee started talking excitedly on his radio in the back seat. After a bit, he called to me on the intercom. "27," he said. They couldn't remember our names but knew our individual call signs; mine was Raven 27, which told the world that I was from Military Region II, so we were all 2-something up there. "We must go Lima Site 26 (Xieng Det) now. Many enemy, maaany enemy attack right now." A troops-in-contact situation or TIC – the highest priority mission was underway. "Yang Bee, we can let one of the other Ravens handle it. We are not supposed to direct airstrikes today." "No," he replied, "No other Ravens are airborne. We must go quickly. The fighters will be coming soon." I was up there alone. I checked with our radio operator and found out it was true, that all the other Ravens were on the ground getting refueled, rearmed, what have you. Nothing else to do but to call Cricket, the orbiting Airborne Command and Control Center and see what fighters could be sent to me.

We arrived overhead of the besieged outpost while Yang Bee keep up a steady stream of unintelligible chatter with his contact below. Soon a flight of A-1s showed up, and I directed them to the battalion-sized enemy force which was holed up in a deserted village and at other locations surrounding the Lima Site. The A-1s were a great asset because they could stay in the area for hours and carried every kind of ordnance imaginable. The fire was extremely accurate and the enemy moved around quite a bit. When the A-1s were Winchester (out of ordnance) a second flight of four A-1s came on scene. By this time, the enemy was on the move so we simply chased them. There was a lot of ground fire reported but that comes with the territory. They were followed by a flight of two F-105s. Finally, a third flight of four A-1s arrived and we

chased them into the jungle and forced them to break off the attack. The Hmong soldiers were extremely happy and said that 100-200 enemy soldiers had been killed by our airstrikes. I'm not sure if the numbers are accurate, but I earned my second Distinguished Flying Cross on that day – my first day as a Raven. Good grief, I thought, this is going to be one hell of a tour. [laughter]

On the evening of the second day, Jerry Rhein, the AOC Commander (the guy in the blue there), took me to Vang Pao's house for dinner. Jerry is a remarkable pilot, an air commando from the ground up who was assigned to run the air support mission for Gen. Vang Pao. Jerry was a combat veteran in the A-1 Skyraider and later in the year, he led the A-1s on the famous Son Tay raid into North Vietnam. Gen. Vang Pao was a legend throughout Southeast Asia. He was a Hmong, or as we called them in those days, a Meo (but Meo is actually a derogatory term given to them by other people who fear them; it means "savage"). While we were there Gen. Vang Pao actually had a celebration and gave the Hmong people back their original, traditional name, so now they're called Hmong. He was the first Hmong to be commissioned in the French Army. According to Bernard Fall in his book "Hell in a Very Small Place," Lt. Vang Pao was one of only a handful of Laotian officers who performed exceptionally well. In fact, he led a company of 300 soldiers during the battle of Dien Bien Phu in the spring of 1954. He rose to become the only Hmong general in the Laotian Army. He was also the leader of his people and led the fight against the communists for years. He had six wives, one from each of the major families of the Hmong. He held the power of life or death, and his decisions, for his people, were final. There are many legends surrounding this man, most of which are impossible to prove. But it can be said that, at that time, he was at the zenith of his power and he was smart, dynamic, charismatic, considerate and still human.

I changed into clean clothes and we drove the very short distance to VP's house in Jerry's jeep. While the general hosted dinner at his house every night he was at Long Tieng, you never really knew who might turn up. So we walked up to the door where VP was talking and waited for him to notice us. "Jerry, my friend, welcome to my house," the general began. "Gen. Vang Pao, I would like to introduce our newest Raven, Raven 27." As I had practiced, I joined my hands together at the fingertips to raise them above my eyes with a slight bow, in the traditional Buddhist sign of showing respect to a high ranking individual. Simultaneously, VP stuck out his hand to shake mine. Then we both changed what we were doing – he joining his hands together and I sticking my right hand out. We tried once more to coordinate our greetings, and, finally with a laugh, he grabbed my flailing hand and shook it firmly. "Welcome. And come inside."

I'm going to step through these slides because it really talks about the customs there, the basis and the eating habits, but actually we might be just a little short of time if we do that. But this gives you an idea about what the inside of his house was like, very little furniture. You sat on the floor. Usually the dinner was a boiled chicken, chopped up – just ch-ch-ch-ch-ch – vegetables, fruit and the inevitable scotch. Used to be Lao-Lao, but somebody turned him onto scotch. If you had a big party there, there would be the traditional instruments that would be playing. This is actually one of my friends upstairs dancing on the roof because that's where the big parties went. We'll skip forward. I'll talk to you about it later if you want.

The life of a Raven was incredibly unstructured. At Lima 20 Alternate, we had a Raven house or "hootch" as we called it, which was built of all dark wood. There was a large room where we

could watch 16 mm movies that came in by C-130 along with the food and normal supplies. The room had a bar that got plenty of use although we actually preferred the CIA bar, which was over this bear cage. You just climbed up the top. By the way, his name was Floyd, and if you picked up the board in the floor, Floyd would stick his snout up there and ask for a drink. He was an alcoholic. [laughter] If you poured a beer down, or whatever else it was, he could get pretty ripped. Now Mama Bear lived down there too, as did Baby Bear. When she saw Floyd, you know, getting a little flaky, she'd take Baby Bear and push him back into the cage. She'd plant herself in front of the cage, so when Floyd wanted to go back in to lay down, she'd swat him across the nose. Nothing changes; it's evolution. [laughter]

We had a kitchen but usually ate our meals with the CIA guys in the dining hall they had, which was run by some excellent Thai cooks. There were bathrooms with pictures of stick figures posted up there showing how to use a toilet seat. This was necessary because the Hmong who worked for us used our facilities too. Since they were used to squatting on the ground, they often hopped up on the toilet seats before using them. Their weight was too great and the seats inevitably broke. We had a radio room in the building, which was run by Combat Controllers from Hurlburt Field. One day, one of our radio operators, who will remain nameless, found an old pistol in the desk drawer. It fascinated him and he cleared it of ammunition, so he thought, so he could have a better look. I walked into the radio room just as the gun fired and a hole appeared in the floor between my feet. We stared at each other in shocked silence for a minute while I did a quick check of my body for unplanned leaks, and he started babbling "I thought it was empty. I looked at it first. I've always been around guns all my life. I'm very, very sorry." Then he broke down into tears. I didn't even have time to get angry. All's well that ends well, and this was only one of many close calls.

The intel folks had a room that we stopped at for the latest information. As the months rolled by, I became more cynical of the ability of the intel community to provide much of anything that was timely and useful. Mostly, they were in the receive mode and sent what we learned back to 7/13th Air Force at Udorn. But they did provide the day's list of fighters on the daily FRAG along with their TOT's (time of travel). If we hadn't discussed our plans the night before, we pulled them together at that time and each man just announced what he was going to do and what fighters he thought he could use. Once we were in the air, we kept in close touch with each other on the FM radios and modified our plans as necessary. We had a ramp full of O-1s – six or seven of them – and two AT-28D-5s for our own use. meant they had the big engines, of course and the "dash 5" nomenclature meant they had Yankee ejection seats. Everybody wanted to fly the T-28 but you had to wait your turn. When my turn came, I flew to Det 1 at Udorn for a 3-1/2 day, seven ride local checkout to become instrument and range qualified, which meant I could fire rockets and the .50-caliber machine guns – 3-1/2 days. Although we loved having our picture taken in front of the Chapakao aircraft (the Chapakao were the Hmong pilots – this was one of theirs; we like the bombs because they were cool) none of us was qualified to drop bombs. At another site, while I was in-country, an American pilot decided to try it anyway and blew himself out of the sky in the process. The two AT-28s were sequentially numbered, oddly enough 599 and 600. We had had more but they were shot down. I was able to get only 250 hours or so in the T-28 before both of ours were shot down and never replaced. Instead, we began to see more U-17s (that's a Cessna 185) move in to take their place. The Bird Dogs flew a three-hour mission while the T-28s were limited to barely two hours. But the "Tango's" as we called them, were

faster so they often took off at dawn to catch the NVA while they were still camouflaging their trucks, or they stayed up late, almost till sunset, and then raced back to the airfield, which was totally unusable at night.

The CIA guys, or simply “the customer” as we called them, had a hardened block house, an administrative building and billeting. We worked with them all the time. Most of them didn’t like to have their pictures taken. This is one exception. Jeff Thompson in the cowboy hat was a Raven, and the other guy worked for some federal agency.

Father Bouchard, interesting man. We had a church so I used on Sundays to go to Mass when Father Bouchard was in the valley. Father B, as he was known, lived out in the jungle with the tribal people of all kinds and would disappear for a couple of weeks and suddenly show up on the flight line or come in over the mountain ridge. He first moved to Laos in 1956 and spoke most of the local dialects. This made him a very valuable source of information to help us learn what was going on in and around the PDJ. Whenever we heard he was in the valley, we knew he would stop by to have a decent meal and to watch a 16mm movie. Now, some of the shows we got from the Air Force were not exactly the kind you would show to a Catholic priest. So we knew that he liked the musical “Oliver,” and we kept a copy on hand. If the selection was not up to par, we would simply say, “Gosh, Father, they haven’t delivered anything recently. Would you like to see ‘Oliver’ again?” He’d always agree and I’ve seen that silly movie dozens of times. Father Bouchard and I remain good friends and we have visited each other every year or two since those days. He is now retired in Miami and will celebrate the 50th anniversary of ordination with the Oblate of Mary Immaculate this summer.

Sometimes we flew planned missions, for example, if VP had an operation going on somewhere. We always kept close to the CIA types who moved on the ground with the guerilla forces. One day, I spotted an ambush just before one of these patrols stumbled onto it. The only fighter I could find to help was a Laredo FAC, a single F-4E with an internally mounted 20mm gun. Unlike this picture, which was the only one I could find, he didn’t carry bombs since he was a forward air controller; he just carried rockets and his gun. Since the bad guys were in spider holes down in the ground, he rolled in with a very high angle of attack, got rather close and cut loose. Then he swapped ends pulling a bunch of G’s with both burners roaring and the aircraft pan-caked over the ridge line and into the valley. He pulled out just above the trees and climbed back to the clouds. Finally, he regained his voice and said, “Ah, Raven, I think I’m still a bit heavy from the tanker. I’ll climb up a bit higher this time.” That kind of a pass gives a whole new meaning to the term “poopy suit!” [laughter]

On April 23, barely a week after my baptism by fire, another new Raven arrived by the name of Dave Reese. He was scheduled to replace Jim Cross, who was within a few days of going home. Jim was a very sharp officer who had worked as a Senate page. He planned a career in politics and already had an impressive network set up. Dave Reese had come, like all the others, from a tour in Vietnam. He was a very likeable guy who seemed to fit right in. I don’t recall what we did the day he arrived but it probably involved touring the local bars and clubs in Vientiane. On the morning of April 24, 1970, we all met at the table at our house in Vientiane, and each person said what he intended to do that day. I remember sitting across from Dave Reese, now the new guy, but I don’t remember the conversation. We headed out to the airport and I flew to some area

that I've long since forgotten. Around lunch time, Jim and Dave landed in the U-17 after directing some airstrikes, grabbed a bit to eat and took off again, all while I was airborne. I was about to land when I heard a call from Mark Diebolt, who was flying the AT-28 and who was talking to Jim Cross, but I could only hear one side of the conversation. Jim and Dave had unwittingly flown over Roadrunner Lake, which recently had been surrounded with heavy duty 37mm anti-aircraft guns as well as ZPU machine guns, and on towards Ban Ban. (This is the 37mm.) Somewhere around there, the U-17 took three hits of anti-aircraft fire. Jim pointed the aircraft south and sought to put some healthy distance between themselves and the big guns. Mark Diebolt intercepted him at the southern edge of the PDJ and saw the aircraft below him in a steady descent. Jim said he had jettisoned the ordnance and was hoping to clear the ridgeline in front of him. Mark looked down and actually saw the trees of the jungle through the hole in the wing. A cloud moved between them and when Mark cleared the cloud, he saw smoke and fire rising from just short of the ridge line. Only the AT-28 carried a parachute so bailing out was not an option. We were unable to recover the bodies.

Eighteen months ago, while I was still the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force, a member of my staff brought a message to me from the POW/MIA folks in San Antonio. They wanted me to know that they had recovered some bone fragments which had been positively identified as coming from Jim Cross and Dave Reese. I was in a state of shock, and at the same time, extreme joy. Actually, there were three groups of remains – one from Jim, one from Dave and one that definitely came from the wreckage but could not be positively identified. In October, I flew to Ohio, Youngstown, where I had the honor of presenting the flag to Jim's father, along with fellow Raven Ron Rhinehart. Then last spring, I participated in the burial of Dave Reese as well as the burial of the common fragments at Arlington National Cemetery. Members of both families attended, united now as they were on the day that the news was given to them 39 years earlier. Several Ravens attended as well. It was an emotional time for all of us.

Much of what we did was a cat and mouse game with the NVA. They were extremely good at camouflage but it was hard for them to cover every track. Sometimes they simply pulled a truck or tank up under a large tree and got away from it in case we saw it. My specialty was finding people. I could spot soldiers through a triple canopy jungle and the technique was simple. I flew high and used my binoculars to sweep the trails. One day, I saw something out of place – a light spot moving across the PDJ. When I studied it more closely, but still careful to keep my distance so as not to alert them, I saw a column of about a dozen soldiers, each of whom had cut a large palm leaf and placed it over his head as he walked. That way he increased his camouflage and kept the hot sun off his head at the same time. There was one problem. One of the soldiers gave them all away because he reversed the leaf and held it bottom side up. The top of the leaf is dark green while the bottom is a very light green. It was like waving a flag at me. I called up the fighters and we did what we needed to do.

This gives you an idea what it looks like when you would come out in the morning and you'd see the tracks of the vehicles. Sometimes they'd just find the nearest tree and park it under there and put some grass over it. So you just followed the trail to the end, and when you had a chance, you blew it up, and lo and behold, something might be down there.

By mid-February 1971, the NVA had pushed to within a few miles of the guerilla base of Long Tieng. For several nights, they had rocketed us. They'd come so often that once we heard the sound of the rockets flying overhead, we would automatically roll under our cots before the warhead would explode and before we'd even wake up. On the morning before St. Valentine's Day – this was 1971 – we took several rockets in the valley but none dropped near our compound. I recall driving down to the hospital with our Flight Surgeon, Dr. Venidict Osetinsky – this was one of the few pictures I could find with the doctor in it – he later commanded Wilfred Hall Hospital in San Antonio and the Wiesbaden Hospital. We visited a rather portly Thai captain who was lying on his back on a table displaying a nasty hole in his left cheek. It went completely through the flesh into his mouth. I recall being surprised by the fact that there was virtually no blood around the wound. As a direct result of that attack, several of the U.S. maintenance types assessed our defensive posture and came to the conclusion that we did not have any real protection from an attack. So they set out to build a bunker using anything they could get their hands on. They used a lot of sand bags for the foundation and covered them with corrugated aluminum and finally with more sand. The intention was to have only one entrance with a zigzag entrance into the main part of the bunker, but you can only do so much in one day and we ended up with an opening at each end. The bunker was located between the wooden house, which served as our headquarters, and the two story concrete block building that housed our bedrooms and latrines.

We went to bed that night with our weapons close at hand. As usual, the 105mm field piece, which had been set up near the king's house, south of the runway kept up a steady fire of harassment and interdiction fire all night long. (For you purists, no this is not a 105mm field piece, this is a Howitzer. It's the only picture I could find. Gives you an idea though.) We estimated the gun would fire a round towards the area where we thought the NVA troops were working at a rate of about once a minute. Try sleeping through that. At about 3 a.m., I woke up completely after hearing a change in sound. I realized that the big gun was silent, but there were other explosions going off every few seconds accompanied by small arms and automatic weapons fire. I stuck my head out the window and craned it to the right. I saw the flashes from the muzzles of numerous weapons and the flash of explosions. My immediate thoughts were that our forces were engaged in some type of minor skirmish with a patrol of bad guys who might have tried to sneak into the valley. I didn't really feel threatened. I reached for my movie camera with the hopes of getting some of the fight on film, even though it was dark. I tried to take a shot but discovered I was out of film. Okay, the fire's coming off this hillside, and later on it comes into this compound. So right now the battle's going on up here on this hill.

I fumbled with the camera, and I heard a voice yell "incoming." I went for the floor under my bed just as a rather large artillery round hit the side of the building we were sleeping in. I jumped up, grabbed my M-16 and pistol belt and dashed out of the room and into a herd of people – Americans and locals – all of whom were running down the stairs towards the new bunker. We piled into the bunker as the rounds impacted the ground and buildings around us. While we huddled there, I had the opportunity to count the rounds coming in and noticed that we felt or heard an explosion every six seconds. That was to keep up at a rather steady rate for the next 2-3 hours (until it got light). I found out later that an NVA unit had worked its way around to the south of Long Tieng and attacked the men who were firing the 105mm field piece. The friendlies were totally surprised but put up a short fight. The NVA carried six guns – a mixture of 61mm

mortars and this, a DK-82 recoilless rifle. We were able to count the guns by observing the muzzle flashes. (This is a 61mm mortar.) Once the friendlies were driven away from the 105mm gun, the NVA just turned their guns on us and began firing directly into our compound. What I had seen on the hillside just outside my window was this fire fight. Our biggest fear was that the NVA would capture the 105mm gun intact and use it against us. If that had happened, I would not be here today – it's just that simple. Fortunately, one of the local soldiers tossed a termite grenade down the barrel of the gun just before he made a run for it. I'll never know his name, but I honor his memory all the same.

The firing continued but we knew we were blind if all of us stayed in that bunker, so a few of the guys made a run for the two story "barracks" and took up observation positions in some of the bedrooms. One of the Ravens took the first shift in the Doc's room, which was a somewhat larger corner bedroom, while our intel officer Mike, I won't give his last name because you might know him – we called him "Fat Albert," he was a little overweight – "Fat Albert" stood guard by the latrine window. Our only weapons at this point were M-16s, AK-47s, side arms and hand grenades. Beyond our building was a bunch of concertina wire and then there was the village. The whole area sloped away from us until you came to the bottom of a valley, which was less than a mile away, and then the real valley wall covered with trees, shrubs and grass, began its climb up to about 1,000 feet. The enemy force was hidden on the hillside about a mile (or a little more) away. The really bad news was that they occupied what we considered to be the only reasonable escape route out of the valley.

We had radio contact with the blockhouse – a house of solid rock which was located at the end of the compound off to our left. I believe they had a 30mm machine gun set up over there but it wasn't much good at that range. We also had a .50-cal. machine gun set up in the corner of the compound to our right, and he was able to return fire towards the muzzle flashes. We were terrified, all of us, and we came to the realization that we were probably not going to make it out of there. I recall very vividly the feeling of absolute panic and the almost uncontrollable urge to throw down my M-16 and simply run. It was a great personal struggle. It was just becoming light outside but still pitch black in the bunker. Alone with my thoughts, I had time to evaluate what was happening and I became convinced that I would not make it out. The incredible, indescribable fear started in the pit of my stomach and rose to spread throughout my body – much like the first pangs of nausea you feel when you know you've caught the flu and you know you are about to throw up. Your flesh is clammy, the sweat pours profusely off your forehead. The temptation to run was overwhelming, even though I had no plan and no place to go. The reason I did not run is because I could not leave my buddies. The bonding that had taken place over the previous torturous months was the glue that kept me in my place. A few minutes later, the urge passed and I was again in control. It is the most awful feeling I've ever felt, and it changed me forever.

Apparently the guys in the blockhouse were able to get off an SOS message to Alleycat, the night time airborne command post, but the only help they could send us was a Laotian AC-47 who – I have a word here but I won't use it – sort of frittered away its load of 7.62 bullets in the hills a couple of miles from the target, in spite of continuous attempts to get him to move to the right area. He was worthless! All most of those guys cared about was shooting up all their ammo so they could sell the brass.

A few minutes later, we heard an AT-28 start up on the ramp. Then to our amazement, he took off into the pitch black night – this is a VFR airplane – into a sky filled with invisible mountains and actually bombed the enemy position – VFR at night! Then he headed south toward Vientiane as he had no hope of landing back at Lima 20 Alternate. Later on the only Laotian O-1, which for some reason had spent the night there at 20 Alternate, took off and departed south. We discovered later that it carried Gen. Vang Pao.

It may not surprise you to learn that a couple of humorous events took place while we were waiting for the end. The first occurred just after we had taken refuge in the bunker and were doing a lot of collective shaking. Apparently, one of the other Americans in camp had been caught outside during the attack and had been cut in the leg, but not too seriously, by shrapnel. He managed to make his way to the block house and it wasn't long before a guy named Burr, one of the CIA guys, called us in a rather excited state on the radio demanding to know where the doc was. Our guy manning the radio asked, in total darkness, "Is the doc here?" "Yeah" was the reply out of the dark. The response was "Tell him Shep's hurt; he's got a cut on the leg." Remember now, that the rounds were impacting every six seconds all around us. The guy on the radio swung his flashlight around until it fell on the doc, the one you saw earlier. "So what the hell am I supposed to do about it?" There was short, squat, grey-haired, kindly Doctor Osetinsky, specialist in intestinal surgery, six-year time-in grade full colonel, armed to the teeth with his M-16 across his knees, a bandoleer of ammo across his zipped up flack vest and a helmet on his head; not a band aid in sight. [laughter] The terror of the moment passed and we doubled up with laughter.

At another time, Mike, alias "Fat Albert," was crouching below the latrine window when a round slammed into the side of the building. Mike was a large man. The impact threw him off balance and hurled him into the toilet. Later on, he proudly displayed his only official war wound – a very bruised shin which had unceremoniously come in contact with the toilet bowl.

As the first hint of dawn crept through the hills, a flight of F-4s, "Killer Flight," rendezvoused overhead. I'll have to admit that the air was very smoky and visibility was poor, but there's still no excuse for what was about to take place. I was the senior-ranking Raven so Chad Swedberg and I made a dash from door to door until we reached the doc's room. There we tried making contact with the flight by using our FM radio via a patch through Alleycat on their UHF radios. It didn't work. We solved the problem by making contact on back-up 282.8, which is the back-up rescue frequency, and everything else was fine. I told Chad to talk on the radio while I backed him up. The lead aircraft was loaded with CBU-24 and 42 – 42 is time-delayed fusing, up to 30 minutes, they go off, so the book says – while No. 2 had wall-to-wall 82's, which are 500-pound bombs. We carefully described the target, which was on the hillside, in the trees, and the friendly position in the valley, in the village. Pretty easy, right? When they were ready, we marked the target using the tracers from the .50-cal. machine gun. They said they were in; actually lead made the first pass but didn't release any ordnance. At this point, I had a bad feeling about this whole situation and I said to Chad, "Move them out a mile away from the whole area and have one of them drop one or two bombs on the hill top, then work them in. I just don't trust the F-4s" – these were the iron-sided D's. So that's exactly what Chad did. Sure enough, No. 2 dropped a couple of bombs nearly a mile from where we had told him. We called for the .50-cal. machine gun and lead rolled in. He kept asking for clearance and we repeated that we couldn't see him on

his pass, so if he had everything in sight and understood everything, then he was cleared in hot. Disaster! He decided to drop all six canisters of CBU on one pass. Unfortunately, he dropped it directly on us. I recall very clearly looking out the open window and seeing the trees and the houses in the village exploding into bits and a solid wall of destruction racing toward us like a tidal wave. Chad was screaming on the radio, “You’re dropping on the friendlies; you’re dropping on the friendlies!” and I made a reference to his ancestry, then jumped under the only bed that was in the room and was immediately crushed by four other bodies.

The wall of destruction raced through the compound and tore most of the roof off the building. The bunker took two or three direct hits, and the operations center on the far side of the bunker caught fire. We raced back to the bunker and hung on for dear life. The building next door continued to burn as did the dining hall and the little bar over the bear cage. We knew that the building had several tanks of bottle gas near our position, but luckily, the safety valves worked as advertised, releasing their gas one at a time in a load hiss and the tanks did not blow up. Then the smoke began filling our little bunker, but once again, our prayers were answered and the fire in the operations building burned itself out. Many other nearby buildings – the dining hall, the CIA dorm, the bar above the bear cage, like I mentioned – burned to the ground. The reason we couldn’t leave our shelter was because hundreds of the CBU bomblets with time-delayed fusing were lying all around and were going off for up to an hour and a half (not 30 minutes) after the incident. Shep, the guy with the cut leg, happened to be outside with a group of six Hmong when he heard the F-4s make the fatal pass. He looked up just in time to see the clam shells, the dispensers, open above him, and he hit the ground. When he stood up to run for it, he was the only one left.

After an hour, the U.S. Army Liaison Officer, who happened to be visiting at that time, decided to make a run for one of the other buildings. He had just stepped out of the entrance when one of the bomblets went off in his face. I thought, “Good God, he’s gone.” But he came back inside, shaking, and said that as soon as he had stepped outside, he saw the CBU and instantaneously, he saw it blow up. Fortunately, it split down the seam into two pieces and he emerged untouched. We found out later that the CBU tends to do this.

As daylight filled the sky, the NVA pulled back and disappeared into the jungle. We later discovered several NVA bodies near the perimeter fence. They were members of a sapper team who were within minutes of entering the compound and finishing us off when the CBU from the misguided F-4 wiped them out too. Another stroke of heavenly intervention.

As soon as we could, we ran to the flight line to inspect our airplanes. By this time, Chuck Engle had arrived on scene in his O-1 after flying up from Vientiane and began directing air strikes. Each of us examined his aircraft, if it was safe to fly, threw one of the support guys in the back seat and took off. I ended up with “Fat Albert” in my rear seat and we strained our way into the sky. Because I was the last Raven airborne, I was stuck with directing a continuous string of air strikes, which by this time were coming in waves, before I could head south. Mike simply got airsick and threw up all over the airplane. What a day!

U-Valee was a Hmong backseater. He had a chubby face that radiated enthusiasm for his work. He was courageous, intelligent and spoke English quite well. One day he rode in the backseat

with another Raven, whose name I will not mention, and they flew over an area just south and east of the PDJ. The Raven saw NVA soldiers on the ground quite clearly, especially one group that appeared to be assembling a weapon. The Raven thought it was a DK-82, a recoilless rifle, and rather than use his binoculars, he decided to make a low pass over them just to make sure. He was wrong. The soldiers were in the final process of setting up a .51-caliber anti-aircraft machine gun. Now this particular O-1 had been hit the week before by AK-47 fire while the chief Raven, Bob Foster, was flying it. The result had been five bullet holes in and five bullet holes coming out. The bullets tumble when they strike something solid, the exit holes reflected the length of the bullet rather than the diameter. The 10 bullet holes had been covered with speed tape, sort of like duct tape, and it was still good enough to fly. In any case, the gunners cut loose with the heavy machine gun and struck the Bird Dog with five rounds. Four of the rounds passed harmlessly through the nearly porous aircraft, while the fifth round came up through first the floor, then the radios, then through the rear seat striking U-Valee in the buttocks and exiting out his chest. There was blood and gore everywhere in the cockpit and U-Valee was killed instantly. The Raven tried to contact the folks at Lima 20 Alternate but the radio was knocked out. It took him over 30 minutes to fly home. During that time, Cricket noticed that he was overdue for his 15 minute check-in call, so we raced to the area expecting to find wreckage. But he appeared over the horizon at the last minute and landed.

U-Valee's body was removed from the aircraft and the crew chiefs attempted to wash it out with a bucket of soap and water. U-Valee had been born and raised near Nong Het in the eastern PDJ. While still a boy, the Communists had attacked his village and his father was killed. This left U-Valee as the only surviving male member of his family and left him with the responsibility to provide for his mother and his sisters. He grew up quickly and entered Vang Pao's army. Eventually, his ambition was recognized, and he was sent to English training and became a Robin backseater. Now he was making good money but he aspired to become a Chapakao – a Hmong T-28 pilot. That night, several of us commandeered a jeep and drove to his mother's grass hut out in the village. We could hear the wailing from quite a distance away. I remember stepping into the light of the interior and this is what I saw. U-Valee was dressed in a plain black suit – all Hmong men seemed to own a plain black suit for special occasions – and he was stretched out with his hands to his side, on a plank of wood with his head elevated slightly. Everyone was absolutely stoic, including his sisters. No hint of expression showed on their faces. But his mother, however, indulged in incessant wailing and the sound could be heard for a long distance. At his side, the shaman or witch doctor mumbled continuously and shook bones in his hand and threw them on the ground. Then he would scoop them up, throw them on the ground again and again for as long as we were there. We stood quietly, reverently, until it was time to go. Then we summoned a trusted agent and emptied our wallets of all the Kip – that's the local currency – that we had and asked that the money be given to U-Valee's mother. We stepped back out into the darkness and drove back to our hooch.

The funeral was scheduled for the next day and we all planned to attend. Imagine my surprise when I was told that I could not attend the funeral but was scheduled to take the crippled aircraft back to Udorn for major repair work. One radio had been hot-wired so that I could talk to the tower and that was that. I was extremely angry but my objections were ignored. I preflighted the airplane and saw that fresh speed tape had been applied to the 20 holes in the skin of the O-1. When I opened the door, I saw that the blood stains of my friend had not been removed nor had

the huge hole in the seat been covered. At this point I was extremely emotional and climbed into the front cockpit in abject silence. I added power to the engine and released the brakes. Then I lifted off from the runway and flew over the funeral procession as it wound its way to the funeral pyre off the end of the runway. It was just like a movie. I climbed and flew the next hour or more to Udorn, then entered the pattern for landing. I called Det 1 and told them I was bringing a combat damaged O-1 in for repair and they directed me to the parking area. I taxied in but saw no crew chief waiting as I had expected there would be. So I taxied up in front of the hangar, shut down the engine, pulled on the parking brake, stepped out and walked away from the despised aircraft. As I did, a crew chief came running out of the hangar, repeatedly apologized for not meeting me as he had not been told I was coming in. I took no notice and ignored his sincere apology, still angry at what I had been forced to do. I distinctly heard the sound of his racing feet on the tarmac which came to a screeching halt a short distance behind me. Then, he saw the aircraft, with speed tape all blown off revealing 20 small and large holes plus a horribly blood stained interior with a gaping hole in the rear seat. All he said was a slow and measured "O – My – God". I never broke stride but continued to the Officer's Club.