Batcat - Korat Stories

by J. J. Smith
January 1, 2008

What follows is a series of stories written by J. J. Smith. While at Korat J. J. Smith was a pilot and aircraft commander. The stories were written by J.J. to give his daughters and grand children an idea of his experiences while in Southeast Asia.

These stories reflect a wide spread of the situations which occurred. For many of us experiencing a different culture was new.

I want to thank J.J. Smith for sending these stories to me. Hope you all enjoy these stories.

Larry Westin - Batcat homepage webmaster

Runaway Prop

In October, 1967, we left Otis AFB, Massachusetts to start the deployment of the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing to Korat RTAFB, Thailand. We flew an EC-121R, the airplane we'd be using in SEA. Major Bob Coloney was my aircraft commander. Only the flight crew plus a wing pilot and some maintenance personnel went with us. The back end crew would go by MAC. There were four airplanes in the first group.

The airplane was loaded with much more baggage than we would have been able to take if we had gone by MAC. There were motorcycles, bicycles and even a couple of used refrigerators. And, we had our washboards.

We flew from Otis AFB to McClellan AFB, Sacramento, California for our first RON. McClellan was not chosen for our RON on a whim. They had Connies stationed there and maintenance would be no problem if we had any mechanical trouble.

We were to fly from McClellan to Hickam AFB, Honolulu, Hawaii, RON; fly to Wake Island, refuel, fly to Andersen AFB, Guam, RON and then fly to Korat.

The next evening, about dark, we were to take off for Hickam. Bob Coloney was a wonderful AC to fly with. He knew I had been bumped from the left seat to the right seat merely because I didn't have enough rank. Consequently, he allowed me to fly every other mission from the left seat. The flight from McClellan to Hickam was to be my leg.

We loaded up our people, shut the door and started engines. We taxied out to the runway and did our runup. A wing pilot was flying as copilot and Bob Coloney was sitting in the crew rest seats near the galley. The copilot got our clearance and we ran the BEFORE TAKEOFF checklist. We taxied onto the runway and started our takeoff roll.

As the copilot called "VR" and I rotated the aircraft for takeoff, I heard a propeller go to full low pitch and overspeed. This was the first time this had ever happened to me. I had heard the sound of a runaway prop described and I recognized it immediately.

There is a piston inside a prop hub that is moved by oil pressure. There is oil pressure on each side of the piston and this pressure keeps the prop in the pitch selected. At takeoff, the props are set at low pitch which in turns allows the propeller to turn at a higher RPM. In this case, the pressure failed, for some unknown reason, and the propeller went to an almost flat pitch. When this happens, the airflow over the propeller is driving it and the RPM increases. Thus the propeller is driving the engine rather than vice versa. The takeoff RPM for the Connie was 2800 RPM. This prop increased to about 3200 RPM. Since the prop is not producing any thrust, it acts like a brake. In effect, you have an area about the size of a barn door acting as a speed brake. At liftoff, this is not an ideal situation.

The first indication of the runaway was the noise of its increasing RPM. This was accompanied, almost simultaneously by the aircraft yawing to the right into the overspeeding number three engine.

The flight engineer shouted, "Overspeed on number three! I can't control it!"

"Roger," I called to him, "reduce the throttle on three and feather it!" I had to use a lot of left rudder to maintain the takeoff heading during the climb and maintaining 145 KIAS to gain traffic pattern attitude of 1,000 feet AGL.

The copilot advised the tower of our problem. The tower wanted to know our intentions.

I heard all of this and said to the copilot, "We'll level at 1,000 feet. Have them direct us to area to dump fuel and we want a GCA for landing."

He told the tower as I had directed. In the meantime, number three engine was still windmilling. The flight engineer had run his ENGINE FAILURE AND/OR FIRE DURING FLIGHT CHECKLIST. This included feathering and shutting off the hydraulic fluid, fuel, blast air and engine oil on number three engine.

"It didn't feather!" the engineer called to me.

'Hell, this ain't the way things are supposed to happen,' I thought.

"Alright," I shouted, "monitor it and let me know the RPM on it."

Meanwhile, we had been handed over to approach control and had been given a heading to a fuel dump area. To the copilot I said, "Tell approach we're dumping fuel." We had to get this airplane on the ground. Although we could land at the weight we had taken off at, it would be easier if we could dump some fuel. An engine windmilling without fuel and oil will not last long. The possibility that the engine would seize and twist off its mounts crossed my mind.

"Dump fuel," I called to the engineer.

"Roger," was the response.

If you dump fuel from an altitude of 500 feet or more, it will evaporate before it reaches the ground. I had no worries of houses, lawns or kids and dogs being covered with a fine mist of aviation gasoline.

About this time, number three engine began to vibrate and shudder in 30 seconds cycles.

"Tell the tower we want a straight in approach. Forget about the GCA," I directed the copilot.

He told the tower what I had said and we were given clearance for an immediate approach. During the last several minutes, I had sensed Bob Coloney was standing in the doorway to the cockpit, but he never ordered me out of the seat so he could take over. He left it up to me.

I turned back towards the runway. We were about five miles out on final. I lined up with the runway and picked up the VASI. The VASI consists of four sets of lights, two, one behind the other, on either side of the approach end of the runway. When you're above the glide path, both sets of lights are white. If you're on the glide path, the front set of lights is white and the rear set is red. If you're below the glide path, both sets of lights are red.

Being at 1,000 feet and this far out from the runway, both sets of lights were red. I would maintain 1,000 feet and continue the approach until the front set of lights turned white. The copilot reminded me of the BEFORE LANDING checklist. I called for it and the copilot and flight engineer accomplished it.

About three miles out, number three engine began to shudder with more intensity. I didn't dare increase the airspeed to shorten the time we were on final for fear that would make number three's propeller windmill faster. About this time I told the flight engineer to stop dumping fuel and to give me the landing weight and approach speeds. We would still be heavy for landing, but not as heavy as we had been at takeoff.

At a mile and a half, the front VASI lights were white and the back ones were red. We had the checklist completed and I started the descent. Number three continued to shudder more frequently and with greater severity.

We landed without incident and taxied from the runway to our parking spot. During the landing roll, number three RPM had finally gone to zero, meaning the engine had stopped. When we had the engines shut down, we got out and walked around to look at number three engine. Not that we could do it any good nor diagnose what had caused it to overspeed; we just wanted to look at the source of our concern for the last ten minutes. Maybe that would give us some comfort.

Number three engine's cowling was covered with black oil. The whole right side of the fuselage from the wing to the tail section was coated with black oil. I walked over, grasped the number three propeller and tried to turn it. I could not turn the prop. The engine was frozen solid. Several of us, together, tried to turn the prop. No luck. An engine change was required.

We wrote the incident up in the Form 781 and turned the airplane over to maintenance. It would be at least 12 hours before we could take off. By regulation, we would have to have at least 12 hours of crew rest before the next takeoff. Maintenance could probably do the engine change in 6 hours and the McClellan Connie Wing would take care of the flight check. Our next takeoff was set for 1400 the next afternoon.

We went back to the BOQ, had a few beers (of which I bought most) and went to bed.

The next day Bob Coloney and I walked down to maintenance to see how the engine change was coming. They had changed the engine and it was to be flight tested a couple of hours later.

I asked the Chief Master Sergeant, NCOIC of Maintenance, if they had found why the prop had oversped and why we couldn't feather it. He gave me a long explanation of which I understood about 10%.

"The crux of it, Captain, is a part was installed backwards at Ontario when they were rehabilitating the airplanes after coming out of the bone yard. This old airplane is so good that even installed backwards, the part worked okay for several months. It just happened to fail on your takeoff. When the part failed, there was no way you could have feathered that prop."

Bob and I didn't say anything. What was there to say? We thanked the Sergeant, left and went back to the Officers' Club for lunch. We talked about the incident over lunch and tried to figure out why we had been so fortunate. We were lucky in that the weather had been good and we were able to make a VFR approach when number three had started to vibrate badly. If the weather had been IFR and we had had to make a GCA, it would have added about ten minutes to the approach. Would the engine have lasted another ten minutes? Who knows? Or suppose it had happened out over the Pacific Ocean, hours away from a landing field. We had made it and that's all that mattered.

At 1300, we were back on the airplane. Again, the wing pilot was my copilot and I was in the left seat. Bob hadn't counted the previous evening's 20 minute flight as a full leg. Some route changes had been made. We would now fly to Hickam, refuel, fly to Wake Island and RON. The next day we would fly to Andersen AFB, Guam, refuel and fly to Korat. No Mai Tais in Hawaii nor no RON at Andersen AFB. Wake wasn't a bad RON

if it were only for one night. There was the Drifter's Reef, a small open air bar, with Daiquiris, on the rocks, made with fresh lime juice and served on the rocks.

The rest of the deployment continued to Korat without incident.

The Korat Mission

Back in the mid-sixties Lyndon Johnson was President and Robert McNamara, former whiz kid at the Ford Motor Company, was Secretary of Defense. The Vietnam War was just starting to heat up. The North Vietnamese were infiltrating supplies and troops into South Vietnam down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Trail started in North Vietnam and crossed into Laos before reaching the DMZ between North and South Vietnam. It continued on down through Laos and branched off at many points to South Vietnam.

It was hard to detect travel on the Trail because of the thick jungle canopy. McNamara turned the task of detecting traffic on the Trail to one of his Pentagon think tanks. The think tank seized on this idea and ran with it. The result of it was an operation called Igloo White.

Igloo White, in its simplest form, was this. Plant acoustic sensors along the Trail, have aircraft monitor the sensors and relay the information to a Combat Information Center (CIC). The CIC would in turn call in air strikes to interdict the Trail and its traffic. Nice theory, but expensive as hell at the time. I don't recall the cost but it was in the billions.

First a sensor had to be developed. Then a sensor delivery system had to be developed. Then a monitor system had to be developed. Then a CIC system had to be developed. Money was no object. Igloo White had one of the highest funding priorities in the Pentagon budget.

I don't know if any of this is still classified so I won't go into detail on what the sensor looked like or how it worked. Suffice it to say it did. The Navy came up with a delivery system using aircraft already in their inventory. The USAF developed a monitoring system and used the old Super Constellation C-121 to carry it. The military intelligence community developed a CIC.

The CIC was located at Nakom Phanom RTAFB, in northeast Thailand just across the Mekong River from Laos. The Super Connies, designated EC-121R with the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing, were stationed at Korat RTAFB. I don't know where the Navy worked out of. They may have been in country South Vietnam.

The plan was to build the CIC and get it operational, drop the sensors by air, then the EC-121Rs (call sign, Batcat) would fly a racetrack pattern to monitor the sensors and data link the raw information to the CIC where it would be computer enhanced. Additionally, the Batcats would tape record and manually log the sensor information. The logs and tapes would be flown the next day to the CIC to be compared with the computer enhanced data received from the Batcats.

We originally had three orbits; green, yellow and blue. One was around the DMZ near Kesahn, another in the Ashau Valley area of South Vietnam and another was in the South Vietnam Delta area.

As the year went by, these were more or less our major missions. Occasionally, another area would heat up, sensors would be sown and we would shift aircraft over to monitor the new area.

We had the three orbits covered twenty four hours a day. Each orbit required three aircraft per day, eight hours of on station time per mission. This meant maintenance had

to really work to have nine aircraft each day ready to fly, plus generate a spare for each takeoff.

Did it work? Yes and no. Yes, the Navy could deliver the sensors along a trail and the sensors broadcast the sounds of movement on the trails, i. e., trucks, elephants, bicycles, water buffaloes. Yes, the Batcats monitored the sensors and down linked the data to the CIC computers. But, there the system tended to break down.

The CIC personnel marked the hot spots on their computer printouts and sent the information to the tactical mission planners. By the time the planners got the information and fragged a mission for the area, the information was one to two days old. When the strike aircraft got there all the activity had moved somewhere else.

I heard after I rotated to my next assignment, the Batcat CICO was allowed much wider latitude. If he had something really good and there was a FAC in the area, he could call the airborne TACC. The TACC would have the FAC check out the area, and, if it was hot, the TACC would call in a fighter strike within minutes.

But, in a nutshell, that was the mission I flew at Korat. I flew EC-121Rs, call sign Batcat, in support of Operation Igloo White.

First Mission Out of Korat
EC-121R

We got to Korat and waited for almost six weeks before we flew the first mission. We flew local "familiarization missions over to Takhli, Ubon, Udorn, Nakom Phanom and Don Muang. But, nothing remotely associated with the mission we had come here to perform.

And then the time for the first mission came. Which crew would fly it? Colonel Gus Wieser, the 553rd Recon Wing Commander, flew the first Batcat mission out of Korat. I was the copilot on Major Bob Coloney's crew. We flew a mission the next night.

Before we left Otis AFB, MA, the rumor mill was working overtime, twenty four hours a day. When we first got to Otis we didn't know what our mission was going to be. All we knew was that we'd be flying Super Connies. Then we heard we'd be flying radar missions in the Gulf of Tonkin near Hanoi, North Vietnam. Then we got the Igloo White briefing. We came out of that shaking out heads. Did MacNamara seriously think the bad guys would allow aircraft to orbit one area monitoring their activity for twenty four hours a day and make no effort to shoot them down? The people at the Pentagon were crazy. Stark raving stir crazy mad. A lot of us rechecked wills and life insurance policy beneficiaries. We heard there were MIG airfields just north of the DMZ, well within range of one of the orbits we were scheduled to fly. Sitting around waiting at Korat did nothing to ease any of the kept-in fears we had. And, we had fears. The kind of fears you don't want to talk to anyone else about in case they might laugh at you or, worse, in case they might have the same fears. If you're in a bomber or fighter you have some degree of self carried protection. We had nothing. Some wag came up with the idea we could carry missiles on pylons under our wings. I was against it. When you become capable of inflicting damage, people, who were not interested in you before, suddenly become interested in you.

We flight planned the mission the day before. But, what do you flight plan other than heading, altitude and fuel? You can't plan for the unknown and we had plenty of unknowns. Was there flak in the area? Intelligence said no, but they knew the bad guys had a mobile flak capability. The only emergency airfields were back in Thailand or in South Vietnam. Nothing in Laos over which we would be orbiting.

I don't remember not sleeping good the night before the crew's first mission so I must have slept alright. The next day I slept late, had breakfast and began getting ready for the 1500 briefing. Wear your dog tags, carry only your military ID card, no family pictures nor anything else such as letters or anything that might tell the enemy anything about you other than your name rank and serial number, no squadron insignia on your flight suit, only your military rank which was black.

The officers met in front of the KABOOM at 1430 and waited for the bus. We went to the Wing operations building to the briefing room. There we got the weather briefing (cumulo buildups to thirty thousand feet plus with thunderstorms likely), the route briefing by the crew senior navigator, the emergency briefing by the aircraft commander and the intelligence briefing by the wing staff intelligence officer.

"The crew from last night just landed a few hours ago. They saw lots of vehicle activity on the Laotian roads. There were a few sightings of flak up to about 12 or 15 thousand feet, but it was only sporadic," he said.

At the word, "FLAK," everybodies' ears perked up. We tried to be cool and nonchalant, but I think we failed. Everyone wanted to ask questions about the flak, but we were so inexperienced we didn't know what to ask.

We left the briefing room, went out to the bus and rode to the parachute building. We drew our parachute harnesses (the packs were prepositioned on the airplane), our survival vests, our knife and gun belt and other assorted equipment. We reboarded the bus and went to the aircraft.

I remember little of the preflight. I went through the motions. I took special pains to position my parachute pack where I could get to it.

Start engine time came and we started engines. We taxied out and took off. We climbed to the east towards the Mekong River and Laos. We crossed Thailand at 10,000 feet. Approaching the Mekong River, the border between Laos and Thailand, we continued our climb to 22,000 feet. We arrived on station and activated our mission equipment. When Igloo White reported they had our signal, we relieved the aircraft that was on station.

We were to fly a race track pattern defined by radials and DME off a Tacan maintained by the CIA in Laos. Each of the four corners of the racetrack pattern were defined by a radial/DME. Each leg was four minutes long, each turn took four minutes, thus it took 16 minutes to fly a complete racetrack. In eight hours we would fly 30 racetrack patterns.

By this time it was dark. Bob and I turned the cockpit lights down as low as possible so we could better see outside. We pulled the curtains immediately behind the two pilots' seats to shut out the light from the flight engineer's position. We turned our instrument lights down further.

We could see random lights moving on the few roads below us. All of a sudden, as we approached the northeast corner of our orbit, there was a sudden string of red lights moving up towards us. We were at 22,000 feet and they seemed to top out at about 12,000 to 15,000 feet so it must be 15 millimeter shells we were watching. It looked like a fireworks display. Since none of us had ever seen flak before, we guessed that's what it was. We had also heard that every eighth shell of flak was a tracer and that was what we were seeing. For every red light we saw, there were seven shells we didn't see. Sobering thought.

The night wore on. We saw vehicle movement, called it to our Combat Information Control Officer (CICO) and he in turn called it to Igloo White at Nakom Phanom. But, we never saw any action being taken on our calls, so we started to just watch it and not bother to call it. And, sometimes when we passed the northeast corner of our orbit, the flak shells would spout up.

Towards the end of the mission, we were almost becoming blase, but not quite. We still had to dodge thunderstorm buildups and try to remain near the orbit. If we banked too steeply Igloo White would lose our signal because our transmission antennae, on the bottom of the airplane, would be pointing out into space.

Finally, we heard our relief checking in with Igloo White. They established their data link and relieved us. We turned and headed for Korat, about an hour and a half away. A half hour out of Korat, we started our descent and soon were on the ground. We had taken off at 1800 and were back, eleven hours later, at 0500 the next morning.

We parked in our parking slot, off loaded the aircraft and got on the bus. We stopped by the parachute building and turned in our survival gear and parachute harnesses. We went to maintenance and intelligence debriefing. Intelligence used our information on flak to confirm the earlier missions' reports.

Debriefing done, we rode the bus to the airmen's area and they got off. The bus stopped at the KABOOM and the five officers went into the mess bar. The bar was open 24 hours a day. We got a table for ourselves and Bob Coloney bought the first round. Bob made a toast to our having completed our first mission. "Only about a hundred to go," he said.

I couldn't bear to think of having to do another hundred missions. And, I didn't. Remember I was at Korat for almost two months before I flew the first mission. Then when the new crews starting filtering in before the old crews could rotate, there were fewer missions per crew to fly. I wound up with seventy-four missions, I think. I flew every mission I was scheduled for plus some extra ones.

When we started on the mission yesterday, it was inconceivable to any of us that it would be refined down to a boring, uneventful eleven hours. But, that's what it became.

Thank goodness.

Milton Caniff

Milton Caniff died in 1988. He was famous for his comic strips, "Terry and the Pirates" and "Steve Canyon." I had read his comics since I was I was a little kid just learning how to read.

When the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing was being formed, our Wing Commander, Colonel Gus Weiser, asked for suggestions for our wing emblem. Someone suggested asking Milton Caniff to design it for us.

An officer was selected to head the project. He wrote to Milton Caniff and he readily agreed to design our new wing emblem.

A few weeks before we deployed to Korat RTAFB, Thailand, our wing had a dining in. Mess kits were dug out of mothballs, dry cleaned and readied for the big evening. Our guest of honor was to be Milton Caniff. He would unveil the wing emblem he had designed for us at the dining in. The wing sent a Connie down to his home in Connecticut and flew him back to Otis AFB for the evening.

After the dinner, Mr. Caniff was given the floor. An easel was set up beside him with the covered emblem on it. He made a few remarks about how he had been briefed on the wing's mission, as much as security would allow, and how he had used this to design our emblem. He reached over to the easel and took the covering cloth off our new emblem.

It was a Batcat. Against a yellow background was a blue-black cat with the wings of a bat. The Batcat's eyes glowed yellow symbolizing its capability to see in all weather conditions. At the bottom of the emblem was a globe of the earth with the Batcat's paw touching the North Pole. This signified the earth's being covered by the Batcat's mission. Beneath the globe of the earth were the Latin words, "Cavete Cattam." Translated it means, "Beware the Cat."

After he finished his brief remarks, he sat down to thunderous applause from the wing personnel at the dining in. The emblem and the call sign were enthusiastically received.

And, that's how the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing got its emblem and its airborne call sign.

Cross Wind at Korat
or
Jake and the Cowl Flaps

There are two main methods used to land in a crosswind.

One is to turn the nose into the wind and crab enough to keep the aircraft movement over the ground aligned with the center line of the runway. Just before touchdown you're supposed to kick out the crab and align the nose with the runway so as not to land in a crab. Landing in a crab is very hard on the landing gear.

Another way is to lower the upwind wing into the wind and use the rudder to keep the longitudinal axis of the aircraft aligned with the center line of the runway. You hold this attitude all the way to touch down, touching down on the upwind gear first, then the downwind gear, using the rudder to keep the aircraft rolling down the center line of the runway.

Returning from a mission to Korat one afternoon, we had a pretty stiff crosswind from the left. On short final, I lowered the left wing into the wind and used the rudder to keep the longitudinal axis of the aircraft aligned with the center line of the runway. I had it cold. I kept the upwind wing lowered slightly and used just enough rudder to stay on the center line. As I was rounding out to touch down on the left gear first, it seemed the wind suddenly switched from the left and was now coming from the right. The aircraft veered to the left and I really planted the aircraft on the runway in a crab. It was more like a controlled crash than one of my usual smooth landings. I couldn't understand why the wind had suddenly shifted.

Feeling really embarrassed as I reversed the props, I looked over my right shoulder at the engineer's panel as I often did on the roll out. What I saw explained the sudden crosswind from the right.

On the landing roll, one of the items on the flight engineer's checklist is OPEN COWL FLAPS. This keeps the engines from overheating on the ground. Inflight, the cowl flaps are kept almost fully closed to keep the engine from being cooled too much by the air flow passing over the cylinders. If the cowl flaps are opened on one side, inflight, this will cause the aircraft to yaw in that direction.

What I saw was that the cowl flaps on engines one and two were fully open while the cowl flaps on three and four engines were moving from partially closed to fully open. What my beloved engineer, Jake, had done was open the cowl flaps on the left two engines just as I was rounding out. This caused the aircraft to drift to the left as though there were a crosswind from the right.

"Jake, you sorry son of a bitch, you opened the cowl flaps on the left side, didn't you?" I bellowed at him.

He assumed the innocent look of one who has been falsely accused. I might have believed it if I hadn't seen the smile starting at the corners of his mouth.

"Capt'n, it looked like number one and two were starting to get a little hot and I just cracked the cowl flaps a little to keep 'em cool," he answered with his grin getting bigger. "And, I couldn't let you get away with another grease job on the landing, could I?"

How could you get mad at someone who paid you a left handed compliment like that. And, he more than made up for opening the cowl flaps by inviting me over for his cornbread and pinto beans.

Detroit City, the Song

In the Korat RTAFB Officers' Club bar, one of the most popular songs on the jukebox was, "Detroit City." In case you don't remember it, here are the words to the first two verses. I don't recall the third verse, if I ever knew it.

Detroit City

Last night, I went to sleep in Detroit city,
And, I dreamed about the cotton fields back home.
I dreamed about my mama, dear old daddy, sister and brother,
I dreamed about the girl who's been waiting for so long.

Chorus

I wanna go home,
I wanna go home,
Oh, how I wanna go home.

My folks think I'm big in Detroit city,
From the letters that I write, they think I'm just fine.
But, by days I make the cars, at night I make the bars.
If only they could read between the lines.

I wanna go home,
I wanna go home,
Oh, how I wanna go home.

Imagine a bar full of F-105 Thud pilots, Connie crew members and the other personnel singing this after they're about half tanked. At times it was very heart wrenching to watch and hear grown men sing this song with tears running down their faces. There were a lot of homesick men at Korat.

Thai Drummer

We got a lot of USO singers, dancers and other performers through Korat as they made their tour of Southeast Asia. When they came into Thailand, they'd usually pick up a combo in Bangkok. They'd probably have a couple hours of rehearsal and then head out to tour the Thailand bases.

One of these groups was playing in the Officers' Club one evening. It was one of those groups that featured the cute little female singer in her mini skirt with her Thai combo. The singer was no one you'd ever heard of and would never hear of again. She had an electric guitar player, an electric bass player, a saxophone player and a drummer. Everyone of the musicians had a music stand and sheet music sitting on the stand.

But, it was the drummer that fascinated me. He had the music set up on his left and he followed it religiously as he looked at it as he drummed away. The thing, however, that amused me so much was when he came to the end of a sheet of music, he would stop playing, lick his finger, turn the page and start drumming again. And, it went on. Rat-a-tat-rat-a-tat, pause, lick the finger, turn the page, then rat-a-tat-rat-a-tat, pause, lick the finger, turn the page, then rat-a-tat-rat-a-tat, etc.

It's the only time I've ever seen a combo drummer playing from sheet music.

God Bress Amelica

One of the USO shows that came through Korat was an all female group from Korea. They were pretty good musically definitely good to look at with their long, jet-black hair, dark brown eyes and dressed in short white mini skirts with knee length whit patent leather boots. Their show lasted about an hour.

When they finished the show at the KABOOM, they packed up their gear and moved over to the NCO Club for a show. When they finished there, they moved over to the Airmen's Club for their final show of the night. It would be a busy night for them.

The group consisted of a drummer, an electric bass player, a rhythm guitar player and a lead guitar player. They all sang. They played all the popular rock and roll hits of the time and received a good reception at the KABOOM.

Their closing number was Irving Berlin's "God Bless America:. But, being Oriental, they had trouble pronouncing Ls and Rs. They generally got them reversed. Thus when sang, "God Bless America", it came out more like"

"God Bress Amelica, rand that I ruve, stand beside her and gride her, with the right of the ramp flom above. Flom the mountains, to the plalies, to the oceans white with foam, God Bress Amelica, my home sweet home."

No matter. The crowd loved them and sang along, many with tears streaming down their faces. Yes, by God, we did love America.

Pinto Beans and Cornbread

Korat RTAFB, Thailand, 1968. Master Sergeant Jake Jacobs, my flight engineer would call me at my BOQ room.

"Captain, I got a pot of beans on," he'd say.

"What time do you want me there?" I'd ask.

"About five o'clock, okay?" he'd answer.

"Right. I'll stop by the Club and pick up a case of beer. See you at five," I'd say as I hung up.

About 1640 I'd leave my room and go to the Officers' Club package store. I'd get a case of Falstaff or Busch Bavarian beer. Probably cost $2 or $3. With the case of beer on my shoulder, I'd walk over to Jake's hootch. There were usually two or three other guys there. Jake's pinto beans and cornbread were famous.

As a Senior NCO, Jake lived in one of the better enlisted hootches. I don't recall how many shared a hootch, but he had a screened-in porch. He'd have a hot plate plugged in and setting on the table. On the hot plate was a simmering pot of pinto beans cooking with a big chunk of salt pork.

He had an ice chest he'd taken over to the NCO Club and filled with ice. We'd transfer the beer to the ice chest. He generally had an iced-down six pack for us to drink while the case of beer chilled. We'd have a few beers, shoot the breeze and wait for the evening to start to cool off.

After a while, Jake would say, "Excuse me, I've got to get my cornbread on." He'd go back into his room and emerge with a mixing bowl and spoon and cornbread mix. His wife mailed the beans and cornbread mix. He'd mix up the cornbread while we continued to drink beer and talk. He'd get his large electric frying pan with a lid. He'd dump the cornbread mixture into the frying pan, put the lid on it and set its temperature control.

About twenty minutes later, he'd take the lid off the frying pan and, with a spatula, lift up the edge of the cornbread to see if it was brown on the bottom. If it was, he'd use two spatulas and turn the cornbread over to brown on the other side.

Meanwhile, the smells of the beans and the cornbread would almost drive you mad. With the lid back on the frying pan, Jake would again disappear into his hootch. He would reemerge with plates, spoons, knives and forks, a bowl of grated cheddar cheese, a bowl of chopped onions and butter for the cornbread. Tabasco was already on the table. He'd check the pinto beans and give them a final stir. Jake had a good contact in the NCO Club kitchen to get all these staples and supplies.

About ten minutes later the cornbread would be ready. He'd unplug the frying pan and push it to one side of table. With the pinto bean pot beside the cornbread, Jake would call, "Come and get it."

Jake would fill a plate with beans and hand it to one of his guests. No formality here. With the plate of beans in your hand, you gave them several hefty shots of Tabasco and added chopped onions and grated cheese over the top of the beans. Jake would cut the cornbread into squares and lift a square directly from the pan to your plate. You'd get a knife and fork, put a big glob of butter on your cornbread to melt, find a place to sit, spread the butter, make sure you had a fresh beer within reach and dig into your dinner.

It was heavenly. Although home was 10,000 miles away, it was just a little closer with a plate of Jake's beans and cornbread.

Twenty years later, I can recall, as if it were yesterday, how great those pinto beans, cornbread and cold beer tasted. I don't know if I ever really told Jake how much I appreciated his kindness.

President Johnson at Korat

One night, between Christmas and New Year of 1967, a group of us were standing at the bar in the Officers' Club. It was about 2230 and the place was crowded. A local Thai combo was performing and the booze was flowing freely.

The Base Commander walked in and went straight to the small stage in the bar. He stopped the combo and announced into the microphone, "The bar is closed. No more drinks will be served until I say so. All Thai nationals will leave the bar at once."

This announcement was greeted with a chorus of boos, but it was complied with. We nursed our drinks as long as we could, but soon all the drinks were finished and the glasses were put down behind the bar. All of the local Thai staff and the combo had left the building.

About thirty minutes after the Base Commander had made his announcement, he went to the bar's outside entrance. He stood there looking out occasionally for the next five or ten minutes. After he looked out one time, he turned back to the crowd in the bar and shouted, "Room, teenhut!!!"

We all jumped to our feet wondering who was the important visitor who was coming to see us so late at night. The Base Commander held the door open and a group of Secret Service men preceded President Johnson into the bar.

The President was tall and dressed in a light khaki safari type suit with the shirt worn on the outside of the trousers. His black cowboy boots were shined to a glistening sheen. His graying dark hair was combed straight back as we had all seen in the news photos of the man. He looked tired and drained. You knew from looking at this man he had the most exhausting and demanding job in the world.

The Base Commander escorted the President to the small stage where several chairs had been set up. As the President came into the bar, the crowd burst into applause. In spite of what you might have been reading at home in the newspapers and hearing on radio and tv, President Johnson was very popular with the military. He was supporting us as much as Congress and the peaceniks would allow.

He acknowledged our applause and motioned for us to sit down. He read from a short prepared statement reaffirming his support for the Americans fighting in Southeast Asia. After the statement, he opened the floor to questions and comments. The person who had the question went up to the small stage and sat down beside the President.

While the person with the question or comment was talking with the President, the President's private photographer was taking picture after picture. I marveled at the film speed he must be using for he had no flash and the room was dimly lighted. I guessed the film was black and white and must have a speed of at least ASA 1000.

The main gist of the questions and comments seemed to be, "...why can't we bomb the shit out of North Vietnam instead of just bombing targets selected by the politicians back in Washington?"

The President listened patiently to all the questions and comments and said little about them. This went on for about twenty minutes and the President stood up (as did everyone in the bar) and said words to the effect, "...thank you for all your comments and your support. I will go over your comments with my advisors back in Washington. And, I will report to the nation they can be proud of their American fighting men." Starting for the

door, he walked through the crowd shaking as many hands as he could before he left for the NCO Club.

I got to shake his hand. It was not a handshake like you and I are accustomed to. When I extended my hand, the President gripped my extended hand by its fingers and shook them. I guess when you shake as many hands as he had to, you learn the technique of controlling the pressure on the handshake.

After the President left, the Thai bartenders, bar maids and the Thai combo came back in. We picked up where we had left off when the Base Commander closed the bar before the President came. A group of us talked about how tired and exhausted the President had looked. He had been in South Vietnam talking and visiting with the troops there and had stopped in at Korat on his way back to the States.

All of us were touched, however, by the fact the most powerful man in the world had taken time to stop by and visit with us.

Koolaid

The long missions we flew out of Korat RTAFB, Thailand dehydrated us. We drank lots of water and coffee on these missions. We carried 4 five gallon jugs of water. With a twenty man crew, this was not too much water for the standard eleven hour mission.

Plain water, however, tended to get a little old. One of the guys on the crew had his mother send him some Koolaid, the regular kids' drink from your childhood. We would then put Koolaid in at least two of the water jugs. This helped break the monotony of plain water. After that, all the crew asked their families to send them Koolaid. Eventually, the BX stocked it and we could buy it locally rather than having to rely on the mail for our Koolaid fix.

But, it was funny to hear grown men get on the airplane and ask, "What kind of Koolaid do we have today? I hope it's something besides grape." We were worse than little kids.

Even now I still like Koolaid.

Broken Watch

A couple of years before I went to Korat, I bought a Zodiac (brand name) wristwatch. The special feature of this watch was it had a 24 hour dial. I didn't really need the watch, I just wanted it because it had the 24 hour dial. I think it cost $45 at the BX. A Rolex Oyster was only $200 in those days.

I went into the Officers' Club bar one evening after getting down from a flight. A guy I knew well at the time (I can't even remember his name now) was sitting at the bar by himself drinking. He flew F-105s and had flown that day. I think we became friends initially because we both had red hair and freckles. He was a Major and I was a Captain, but we were both pilots. We got along fine.

I guess it had been a pretty rough mission with one of his wing men having been shot down over Hanoi. He was pretty well into his cups by the time I got to the bar.

I sat down on a stool beside him and ordered a gin and tonic. He turned and looked at me and said, "How the hell you doing, J. J.?"

"Fine," I answered. "Just got down from a flight."

"Bet you really had it tough up there. Did you run out of peanut butter sandwiches?" he asked almost jeeringly.

"No, it was just a routine boring eleven hour mission," I answered.

We often got a lot of verbal flak from the Thud jocks, but it was nothing personal. While they were on a two to three hour mission getting their asses shot off, we were droning around in circles fighting nothing more threatening than severe boredom. We Batcats knew they had a tough mission and none of us envied them for it.

My drink came and he changed the subject.

"What the hell kind of watch is that you're wearing?" he asked.

"It's a 24 hour Zodiac," I answered. I took it off and handed it to him.

"Is it shock proof?" he asked banging it against the bar.

"Supposed to be," I replied a bit apprehensive.

"Is it water proof?" he asked dropping it into his drink.

"Supposed to be," I again replied now starting to worry. The guy was drunker than I realized.

He pulled it out of his drink and looked at it. The second hand had stopped. He shook it and held it to his ear and then wound it. The second hand still remained still.

"God, I'm sorry, J. J.," he said seeming to sober up. "I'll have it repaired for you."

"Okay," I said and finished my drink. What the hell else was I going to say?

I walked to the Package Store at the rear of the Club, bought a bottle of gin and several bottles of tonic and left the club. I would do the rest of my drinking, for that night, in my room.

Several days went by and I ran into the redheaded Major again. I asked if he had got my watch fixed. He said he hadn't taken it to the BX Watch Repair Shop yet but would do it tomorrow. Over the next couple of weeks I asked about my watch a few more times and got the same answer.

One night on the way to my room from the club, I stopped by the Major's room. I knocked on the door and when he said, "Come in," I did. I walked straight to his bedside table, unplugged his clock radio, tucked it under my arm and headed for the door.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he asked.

Before I closed the door, I said, "I'll keep your clock radio until you get my watch repaired."

Without another word being said by either of us, I closed the door and went on to my room.

A few weeks later, I was in the club for breakfast about 0400 before going to fly. The Major came over to my table and said, "I picked up your watch from the repair shop. It's in my room. I've got to fly today, but I'll bring it over to the club tonight. What time will you be down?"

"We should land about 2000 and I'll be here about 2100," I answered.

"Okay, I'll see you then," he said. "Have a good mission."

"Yeah, you too," I replied, as I went back to my breakfast.

My crew took off at 0900. I knew the Major had been airborne by 0700 and would be back no later 0930. I envied him the brevity of his mission but not its severity. We had an uneventful day. It took us one and a half hours to get to our orbit area, eight hours on station, one and a half hours to get back and we landed at 2000. We turned in our survival gear, debriefed maintenance and intelligence and were dropped off at the Officers' Club by the crew bus.

The seven officers on the crew got a table and ordered a round of drinks. While we were waiting for the drinks, I looked around the bar for the redheaded Major. I didn't see him anywhere. I got my drink and went over to another Thud pilot I knew and asked him about the red headed Major.

"Did you just get down?" he asked.

"Yeah, we landed at 2000 and just got through with debriefing. This is my first drink," I responded holding up my glass as though it had a number 1 on it.

"Well, I guess you don't know then," he said waving to one of the Thai bar waitresses for another drink.

"Know what?" I asked.

"He (meaning the redheaded Major) got hit by a SAM today. The airplane went straight in and nobody saw a chute," he answered paying the waitress for his drink.

"Oh," I said, "I didn't know."

"We lost five guys today. It was a rough mission," he said downing about half his drink.

I could see his prime aim for the evening was to get blind ass drunk. I didn't want to interfere with his plans and went back to rejoin my crew at our table wondering about the hand of fate that takes some and leaves others.

A few days later there was the usual notice in the Base Daily Bulletin that was always included when someone had been killed or was missing in action. It read something like this:

'Anyone having any claims against the estate of Major John Doe, SSAN 123-45-6789
contact 2Lt James Jones who has been appointed to handle any claims at Ext 4389.'

Just that brief notice was the only official notification locally that someone had been shot down.

I called Lt Jones and told him about my watch and that I had the redheaded Major's clock radio. I took the clock radio and went to his office. He asked me to describe my watch. I did, to his satisfaction, and he gave it to me and I gave him the redheaded Major's clock radio.

I still have the watch, it still runs. It's in a small box tucked away somewhere in a drawer. Every year or so I come across it and remember the redheaded Major.

Pitch Out, Last Korat Mission

I flew my last mission at Korat RTAFB, Thailand in late September 1968. I remember nothing unusual about the mission so it must have been as boring as many of the others had been.

First Lieutenant Ralph Moore was the copilot, Master Sergeants "Jake" Jacobs and George Palm were the flight engineers, Major Richard Hughes and First Lieutenant George Ringhoffer (later killed in an F-4 accident) were the navigators, Staff Sergeant Comer was the radio operator and Captain Murray was the CICO. There were also eight CIMs, two ETs and two EWOs, but I don't remember their names, for a total of twenty.

We landed about the middle of the afternoon so we must have taken off about 0300 as our missions were from 11 to 12 hours.

We got set up on a long straight in visual approach. I had talked it over with the crew and told them since this was my last mission with the crew we were going to do a high speed low approach and then come back in and do a pitch out and landing. They thought this was great.

About a mile out I had the copilot call the tower and tell them we would be making a low approach and reentering traffic on a five mile initial. The tower said it was okay with them.

I called for METO power and Jake set the propeller rpm and throttles to METO. I called for the gear and flaps up. I continued the descent to 500 feet AGL. No need to be crazy about this and go below 500 feet. The old Super Connie seemed to relish this bit of insanity and accelerated smartly to 250 KIAS. Jake retarded the power and maintained the 250 KIAS for me. We roared down over the runway at 500 feet. At the end of the runway I rolled into a gentle 30 degree bank turn and climbed to 1,000 feet AGL, Jake adjusted the power to maintain the 250 KIAS. I rolled out on downwind and Jake kept the 250 KIAS.

About four and a half miles downwind, I made a 180 degree turn to initial. I picked a point 90 degrees abeam the threshold of the runway. When we were abeam the point, I rolled left into a 45 degree bank and called, "Pilot's throttles." That meant I would be making the power changes from now on until I called "Engineer's throttles" when we turned off the runway after landing.

I left the power setting where it was at 250 KIAS and the airspeed smoothly bled off in the turn to below the flap and gear limitation speeds.

In the middle of all this, the radio operator, Comer, called and said, "AC, I just heard someone call the command post and ask who was the AC on Batcat 5 (our call sign). (Oh, shit, I thought to myself, somebody's pissed off because I've made a high speed low approach and pitch out. Oh, well, I'll worry about that later. Let's get this old mother on the ground.)

I called for the gear and flaps down and called for the "Before Landing Checklist." The gear and flaps came down in the base leg turn and I retarded the throttles and kept the turn and descent going.

I rolled out on final approach about a quarter of mile from the runway threshold at about 250 feet AGL and 125 KIAS. We passed over the end of the runway and I made one of the better landings I had ever made.

I reversed the throttles, checked the brakes and turned off at the first available taxiway. Off the runway I called, "Engineer's Throttles, After Landing Checklist." The cockpit crew completed the checklist and we taxied to our parking spot. I was fully expecting to be met by a covey of bird colonels. But, nobody was there but the airplane's crew chief and the regular maintenance troops who met all returning mission aircraft.

The crew off loaded all our gear and got on the crew bus. As I walked from the airplane to the bus, I stopped and looked back at the old Super Connie. She was sitting there with her oil stained cowlings quietly dripping oil on the ramp as was her wont. Underneath one of the wings I could see a purple stain designating a fuel leak. I went back and pointed it out to the crew chief. It was rather sad to think I had just flown my last mission as an aircraft commander in her. As much as I had bad mouthed her, she was a good old airplane. She had given me a couple of anxious moments in our time together but she always brought me and the crew home.

On the bus I sat down next to Sergeant Comer, the radio operator. "Tell me about who it was that called the command post wanting to know who did the pitch out."

"Captain, that's all I know about it. Someone called and asked who Batcat 5 was and the command post said the Double J. I heard nothing more about it."

"Well, if there's any problem I'll hear about it at debriefing," I said.

We turned in our survival gear and went to maintenance and intelligence debriefings. All of this took the better part of 30 minutes to an hour.

But, I heard nothing more about it at debriefing. In the bar a few days later, Major Majors (yes, that was his name) came over to me. He had been on the squadron about two months. "Nice pitch out the other day, J.J.," he said. "I've never seen an airplane that big do a pitch out."

He went on to say he was sitting in the cockpit of his Connie waiting for takeoff time when we roared down the runway on our low approach at a great rate of knots. He had called the command post because he was simply curious who the AC was.

So, as usual, I was concerned for nothing.

Sleep, Oh Sweet Sleep, Where Are You?

My DEROS was just a few days away. I would fly down to Bangkok from Korat RTAFB, spend a couple of nights and then fly to the States. I knew the flight out of Bangkok would be a commercial contract carrier. And, I knew the seating would be 3 by 3 the length of the airplane. And, I knew the flight would be absolutely full to the last seat.

At that time, I had a hard sleeping on airplanes when I was flying as a passenger. I went to the flight surgeon and told him of my sleeping problem and asked for some sleeping pills for the flight.

He gave me a small white envelope with three pills in it and said, "Take one of these after takeoff and it should knock you out for seven or eight hours."

"Thanks, Doc," I said taking the envelope and leaving.

The big day came. We were herded like cattle through the departure procedures at the USAF passenger processing center at Bangkok's Don Muang International Airport. But, we were going back to the States, the land of the big BX. Our flight was a contract Continental 707.

Finally, we were boarded and the aircraft was packed from one end to the other as I had known it would be. The engines were started and we taxied to the runway. As we started to taxi, all the GIs on board broke into applause. We were really going home.

We had about a three hour flight to Kadena AB, Okinawa. There we were herded into the passenger lounge while the aircraft was refueled. About two hours later we were herded back onto the airplane. It would be an eleven hour flight to Travis AFB, San Francisco, California.

After we were airborne, the Continental stewardesses started serving the meal. Since this was a contract flight, no booze was served. After the meal was over and the trays cleared away, I opened my briefcase and took out my sleeping pills' envelope. I had been stationed at Korat with the two guys who were sitting on either side of me. I offered each of them one of my precious three sleeping pills. We all took our sleeping pills and settled back to sleep away the long flight to Travis.

I opened a paperback book and began to read. I could feel myself starting to nod off. I smiled inwardly and patted myself on the back for having been so smart.

I woke up. 'We must be almost ready for descent into Travis,' I thought to myself. I looked at my seat mates on either side of me. They were both sound asleep. I looked at my watch. I had been asleep for a mere three hours. We still had over seven hours to fly.

I could not get back to sleep. I tried reading in the hope that would lull me to sleep. I even tried counting sheep. Nothing worked. I regretted having given away my other two pills. If I had still had them, I would have taken at least one if not both of them in an effort to get back to sleep.

For the next seven hours, I read, looked at the seat back in front of me and envied my two seat mates who were sleeping like proverbial babies.

Finally, the nightmare was over. We started our descent into Travis. We landed, cleared immigrations and customs. It was about 1600. My Delta Airlines flight to Charlotte, through Atlanta of course, wouldn't be leaving until 2330. I wandered around the airport until flight time. Once on the flight to Atlanta, I was finally able to go to sleep.

Jake's Rat Bite

I left Korat RTAFB, Thailand six weeks before Jake. One evening after the usual eleven hour mission, Jake was unwinding with a few beers at the NCO Club. He had a table in the corner of the bar to himself. After his third beer, he saw something move on the floor beside his table. He looked closer and saw a small gray mouse. He reached down, picked it up and put it on the table. The mouse seemed not to be afraid of Jake. He poured out a little beer on the table for the mouse. It lapped hesitantly at the brew.

Jake called over one of the local Thai bar waitresses. When he showed her the mouse she yelled and fled. A few minutes later she edged back towards the table.

"Bring me another beer," Jake called to her, "and some cheese for my friend."

She disappeared into the kitchen and came back with another beer and a small piece of cheese. Jake tried to get the mouse to eat a bit of the cheese. He tried again with the beer. But, the mouse was having none of it. Finally, the mouse got tired of the proceedings and bit Jake on his finger.

This angered Jake and he hit the mouse over the head with an empty beer bottle and left the NCO Club. On the way back to his hootch, he decided he'd better have the flight surgeon look at the bite. He stopped at the hospital thinking he'd get a tetanus shot and that would be the end of it. He was half right. He got the tetanus shot, but the doctor wanted to see the mouse to check it for rabies.

Jake went back to the NCO Club to get the mouse. But, it had been thrown out with the garbage. He returned to the hospital and told the doctor what had happen to the mouse.

"Well, that doesn't leave us much choice, does it, Sarge?" the flight surgeon said to Jake.

"What do you mean about much choice?" Jake queried.

"If we can't find the mouse to determine if it is rabid or not, you'll have to take the series of rabies serum shots. A shot every day, at the same time every day, for ten days is what it means," answered the flight surgeon.

Jake thought about this for several minutes and then said, "Okay, when do we get started? I'm due to rotate in a couple of weeks."

"We'll start tomorrow at 1500," the flight surgeon answering writing some notes in Jake's medical folder.

The next morning, Jake briefed the Squadron Commander on the rat bite and the series of shots he would have to take. This presented no problems since Jake was so close to rotation. They would just have him pull squadron duty with no flying except for local maintenance test flights. These flights only lasted an hour or two.

Religiously for the next week, Jake reported to the hospital every afternoon at 1500. He received the shots in his stomach, a different location for each new shot. He said they hurt like hell, but he wanted to go home on time.

On the eighth day, the squadron called Jake for a test hop. It was scheduled to takeoff at noon for an hour's flying time. Jake took the flight and at noon the aircraft took off with two pilots, Jake as the flight engineer and a couple of maintenance troops to do the inflight checks. The flight went without incident and forty five minutes after takeoff, they were ready to land.

On the base leg to landing, the pilot called, "Gear down."

The copilot moved the gear handle to the down position. The main gear extended and indicated down and locked. The nose gear indicator showed it was not down and locked. The pilot made a missed approach and held to the south of the field while they tried to get the nose gear to indicate down and locked.

Time passed and 1500 was rapidly approaching. If Jake missed one in the series of ten shots, then the whole series would have to be repeated. Jake said he even considered asking the aircraft commander to let him bail out over the field so he could make the 1500 appointment.

"Don't worry, Jake," the pilot said. "We'll all be on the ground, one way or the other, to get you to the hospital by 1500."

About 1415, they got a down and locked indication on the nose gear. They re-entered the traffic pattern and landed safely at 1430. Jake hurried through the maintenance debriefing and got to the hospital in time for his shot.

Jake completed the rest of his rabies serum shots and rotated back to the States on schedule.

After he got to McClelland AFB, Sacramento, California, he wrote and told me of the mouse bite episode. It was really no surprise to me. Jake was always one with a good story and I figured he'd done it just to have another story to tell.

"I Know You From Somewhere, Don't I?"

While stationed at Headquarters TAC, Langley AFB, Hampton, Virginia, I flew the T-29 to get my flying time. The flights were usually just up and down the east coast. These were primarily passenger carrying missions. One of the more or less scheduled missions we flew was the Andrews Courier. From Langley, we fly to Andrews AFB, Maryland, just outside Washington, DC. We'd spend a couple of hours on the ground and then fly back to Langley. Another mission was called the TAC Courier. We'd fly from Langley to Shaw AFB, South Carolina and then to Hurlburt AFB, Florida. We'd spend an hour on the ground at each place and then fly back to Langley with a stop at Shaw.

One morning I was to fly the Andrews Courier. I went to Base Ops and met the aircraft commander. We filed our flight plan and then went over to the snack bar to get breakfast before we took off. As we walked into the snack bar, I thought I recognized a USAF major who sitting at one of the tables.

After I got my breakfast, I was carrying my tray to the table the aircraft commander had picked out. I went by the table where the major who looked familiar was sitting.

"Pardon me, I think I know you from somewhere. I'm J.J. Smith," I said resting my breakfast tray on his table and extending my hand.

The major stood up, and as he shook my hand my hand replied, "Yes, J.J., I was an EWO on your crew at Korat." And, he told me his name.

I was embarrassed almost to tears. Here was a guy who had flown with me on my crew at Korat and I hadn't remembered him. I mumbled some sort of apology for not having recognized him.

He saw my obvious mortification and attempted to ease it. "Don't worry about it, I was only on your crew for a couple of months before you rotated."

I said it was nice seeing him again and excused myself to go eat breakfast. The aircraft commander I was flying with that day thought the incident was funny. It was a long time before I could laugh about it.