Down in Laos

HEROISM & INSPIRATION
DURING THE VIETNAM WAR

FRANCIS J. PARTEL, JR.

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Chapter 6.

"CTF-77 assigned *Ticonderoga* and Air Wing-19 to work with us. Now we get a chance to prove the worth of our technology." The Ghost Squadron, VO-67, was based at Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Base, Thailand.

"You taking the first mission, Skipper?"

"You bet." The words expressed enthusiasm, but they were delivered in a well-modulated manner that more accurately reflected determination. "We're gonna prove that our acoustic and seismic technology is as valuable on land finding trucks and tanks as passive acoustics proved finding Russian submarines at sea. Would make a real contribution to this war and open up a lot more career possibilities for patrol plane types."

"Yeah, we have a helluva psychic investment in this," responded the Squadron Duty Officer. "Been a helluva a development cycle, sir. If it weren't for ARPA I don't think BuOrd and AirPac would have gone along."

Operation Igloo White pertained specifically to missions run by VO-67 flown from Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Base (NKP) in Thailand. The squadron was established from former anti-submarine pilots and airmen who flew the OP-2E, a twin, piston-engine airplane with a crew of 9. This was a modified P-2V Neptune, a long-range anti-submarine patrol plane that was being replaced by the P-3 Orion. Instead of dropping sonobuoys into the sea, VO-67 dropped sensors called Acoubuoys into the jungle treetops to listen for enemy activity, and seismic detection sensors into the ground to sense the vibrations of trucks and tanks. The latter device, ADSID, was aimed from 2500 feet by a Norden bombsight, a device last used by heavy bombers in World War II.

CAG began the meeting. "First, just to be clear, the operation, the existence, the technology and everything about this squadron is top secret. Strictly need to know. This is not to be discussed broadly in the ready rooms. Just the guys flying the missions."

"Yes, sir," responded the commanding officers of his three attack squadrons.

"Well, these ASW types have these sensors that they typically drop during daylight over the known logistics routes used by the NVA.

Intelligence reports indicate activity has really picked up in Laos and western Quang Tri Province since the first of the year.

"As you know trucks do not move during the day. They travel at night so that we can't easily see them. Some people believe the North Vietnamese Army is prepositioning for a major offensive in the south. Admiral Weinel wants to reserve the Intruders for missions up North, but he wants to see what we can do working at night against trucks and tanks coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail."

"How's this going to work, CAG?"

"VO-67, call sign, Lindy, will sew the sensors during the day and the Air Force will have an EC-121, "Batcat," up at night to read the sensor data. They are like our Willie Victors. They will give us a rendezvous point, and we will check in with them, and they will guide us to the sensors which are hot. After that it's like FAC work. You'll use flares, and use bombs and CBUs against hopefully something worthwhile—trucks, tanks, troops."

"Will the ship add cycles or shift her schedule?"

"We're working on the air plan now. CTF-77 thinks moving us back to 12 to midnight works best. *Bonny Dick (Bonne Homme Richard)* will operate from 06 to18 and leave *Ranger* at 18 to 06 with her A-6 Intruders flying at night. It's the least disruptive and gets the job done. Now who has serious night experience?" Campbell's squadron commander spoke up.

"23 has Ti Campbell sir, He's one of our Iron Hand guys."

"Anybody else? Anybody from the Golden Dragons? The Chippies?"

"No, sir."

"Turn around from the last cruise has been short CAG. Just haven't had time to train for it."

"Yep, I know." CAG stoically clipped his words. The attack squadrons based in Lemoore were turning around in three and a half months after a ten and a half month deployment—scarcely enough time to allow squadron personnel to get to know their families again. A lot of their training time was taken up practicing nuclear weapons drops which could not be done while in the war zone and which no one ever wanted to do for real. It required an Immelman or a Half Cuban 8—difficult maneuvers where the plane climbed steeply at maximum power and just before the apogee released the weapon, lofting it towards the target while the pilot

abruptly rolled and turned the aircraft away. He shifted his tone. "Campbell, you have about 20 night hops with 155. Is that right?"

"Yes, sir. In '66, from the *Connie*, sir."

"Was Bud Ingley CO of VA-155 then?"

"Yes, sir. Flew on his wing a few times."

"Damn good pilot. Knew him from Korea." CAG paused as if to recapture a nostalgic moment in time with Bud Ingley. "Okay, so brief me on how 155 would generally run a night mission, Ti."

"Yes, sir. Well, we worked mostly Routes 1 and 15…trucks. The threat environment was a lot better back then. We carried low-level, lay-down ordnance—bombs and CBUs, and, of course, flares. We would launch and join up over the ship, head northwest, and tank before we went feet dry. Usually one of us would be at 4000 AGL and we would coast in to the target, lights out, using only visual navigation, and the lead would get to Route 1 at about 500 feet. We dropped our flares at 2500 feet, and the low flier would wait for the flares to ignite then he would get under the flares. You can't see anything above the flares. You gotta get below 'em."

"Below the flares?" CAG was skeptical. "That's really low. Didn't you worry about guns, about small arms?"

"Yeah, we were afraid of guns and silver bee bees in daylight and would avoid flying below 3500 to 3000 feet, but night was a different story. Back then, they didn't have many radar guided guns on the roads. We felt safe down low at night. It was more a matter of getting used to the dark and looking out for the hills and our ability to put ordnance accurately on the target. That was our biggest problem. It's a bitch to line up azimuth, altitude and air speed when you're down in the weeds and very close range from the target. If you back off, you'll never see the trucks at night."

"Gutsy."

"We would get down to 100 to 200 feet and hammer them with snakeyes, rockeyes, or 20 mike mike. On a typical mission we'd get a couple of trucks. Maybe three or four. Once we caught 30 or 40 trucks out in the open near the Thanh Hoa Bridge, but that was kinda lucky. Usually it was nothing dramatic. But not much moved when we were there. We were more productive than guys working at day from higher altitude and dive bombing. That really didn't seem to work that well."

"What about the Intruders?"

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"We were better truck hunters than the A-6. They were better against hard targets. The sense in the air wing was that we really complemented each other."

"So how would you suggest that we work with Batcat?"

"Well, if I understand correctly, VO-67 will drop the sensors quite precisely, so Batcat should have a good sense of where the targets are, but we're still going to have to see them to hit 'em. We're still going to have to illuminate. They have more radar-guided guns now. It's going to be hairier. I don't think we want to spend a lot of time flying the axis of the road. Better to come in at an angle, line up on the road under the flare, unload and get off the road. That's what they can do for us. Keep us from flying the axis of the road." Campbell stopped to check if he was registering his points with the senior officers. "Commander Ingley thought two guys flying down the axis of a road in daylight was a bit crazy, sir. Radar is going to reduce some of the advantage of night, though. Definitely no second runs in the same area."

"They're saying that we can DF on the sensors."

"DF? DF?… how accurate would that be at our airspeeds?" asked Jim Hessmann, CO of VA-195. Campbell answered.

"Sir, if they drop their sensors very near the roads, a line of bearing across a known road, a mapped road—that's as good as a fix. That would save us from flying the length of the road. We could focus on the areas where the sensors are hot. If the technology works as advertised, it takes a lot of the reconnaissance out of the recce, if you will, sir. We could set up an IP, if you will, come in on angle and rollout on the heading of the road. The guy up high pops a few flares, the guy down low hunts and drops. Could be very productive and mitigate our risk."

"The air force is willing to drop flares for us," added CAG. Again Lt. Campbell responded,

"I'd rather drop our own flares. Drop them in pairs. Timing the flare drops is kinda critical, sir. It's not just having enough burn time from the flare, but a flare has an initial surprise effect, then it has an alerting effect, and you want to be on them and hitting them before they recover and get a bead on us. That'll require some coordination to get that right."

"May be we ought to go over to NKP and meet with 'em on this, CAG," suggested the CO of VA-192." CAG abruptly broke off the discussion.

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"Okay, guys. Mr. Campbell, thank you. I'm going to meet with the squadron COs now, and your skipper will get back to you." Ti Campbell left Flag Plot where CAG liked to hold his meetings when there was no admiral embarked which was usually the case because the big decks, like *Ranger*, were better suited to carry an admiral and his staff. "Gentlemen, there's a lot of materiel teed up to come down the HCMT. Maybe waiting for the Tet holiday truce to move it south. We don't have time to train up. It's going to be on-the-job training."

"What I'm going to suggest to the skipper and CTF-77 is as follows: one mission tomorrow night, two the night after, three the third night, and then we go from there. Now as to tactics… Ingley and Campbell flew the A-4C. The Foxtrot version has a superior bombsight. None of this stuff about being below the flares. I want you above the flares where you are not lighted-up for the gunners. Use 30 degree angle dive bombing which reduces the chance of vertigo at night. Pull out at 5,500 feet so that when you level off you are above the small arms fire. We don't need to pay any more in tuition to learn these lessons again. There is no need for the Foxtrot version to be down in the weeds. There is nothing down there worth an Air Wing 19 pilot and his plane. We need to learn our way carefully into these tactics." CAG paused before resuming. "Jeff, I'd like you and Campbell to go first. You work out how you will work together and brief me. I'd like 23 to put up a section every night."

CAG had a second less obvious reason for asking Jeff Gibson and VA-23 to take the lead. The two F-8 fighter squadrons, VF-191 and VF-194, along with the attack squadrons, VA-192 and VA-195, had been together for several deployments on Yankee Station. VA-23, although it was one of the earliest attack squadrons in the war and the first to carry Shrike missiles on Iron Hand missions, and although this was their third combat deployment, they had not yet gained full acceptance with the rest of the air wing. When CAG learned that Campbell was in VA-23, he hoped that choosing VA-23 to be the first in Igloo White would help. He had set it up so that they would initially have more experience with Igloo White, and the rest of the wing would be required to turn to them as a resource.

"Campbell put his finger on a big issue. Aiming the ordnance is a big deal." He paused and joked, "We won't be measuring CEPs" The senior officers chuckled at the gallows humor. Circle of error probable, the shorter the radius, the tighter the circle, the more accurate the pilot. Every attack pilot had a CEP the way baseball players have a batting average.

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CAG resumed, “I’d like 192 to begin to ramp up the second night, and Jim, I don’t know if your guys with the Charlie version should fly these missions…. Debrief the hell out of these missions, gentlemen. Learn every little damn thing that you can. I know 153 and 155 really liked night work. Never got the recognition they deserved, but I never liked night work. And the winter of 1968,” referring to the monsoon over the Gulf, “ is a helluva lot different from mid-year 1966. The flak is better directed by radar, and the weather over the ship at this time of the year sucks.”

“IFR night landings” Gibson said under his breath.

“What was that?” CAG looked around.

“I said instrument night landings in lousy weather, CAG.”

“I know. I know.” CAG was solemn and took a deep breath as he exhaled he said. “We’re professional naval aviators, gentlemen.” He let the import of his words sink in before continuing. “Now, frankly, we got a squadron of ASW rookies with a twin engine patrol plane flying below 2500 feet dropping sensors. They have been trained to track and destroy submarines. Not trucks and tanks protected by triple-A. And we have an Air Force Willie Victor monitoring the sensors. A little complicated. Inter-service communications. It’s novel. But somebody believes it’s necessary. Everybody understand?” CAG again looked at his squadron commanding officers one by one. It would be an understatement to say their expressions were unenthusiastic.

“Jeff, you’ve got a good boy there. Use him as a resource, but squadron commanders lead. You lead the mission. I want you to lead the mission, and I want to see you both back aboard.” CAG looked his squadron commanders in the eye. The years of flying in two wars, the stress and strain of flying from aircraft carriers and penetrating deep into enemy territory, left deep creases of experience in his face. “And that goes for all of you CO’s. In Naval Air, the commanding officers take the tough missions and roll in first.”

“Yes, sir. We’ll be careful, CAG, but if we get a chance at trucks and tanks, sir, we’re goin’ to hit ‘em.”

“Damn right.”

While the winter monsoon weather presents poor flying conditions along the coast and in the Gulf of Tonkin, inland, west of the Annamite Mountains, the weather is better. The monsoon season inland usually arrives in late spring and lasts for half the year. In the Khe Sanh area along

the Laotion border, after the morning fog lifted, the visibility was reasonably good.

Over Laos, Batcat loitered in an orbit above a broken layer of clouds at 12,000 feet waiting for the VA-23 A-4s to check in. “Batcat, Batcat, Lawcase 305, 309, flight of two, alpha four foxtrots, checking in.”

“Roger 305; we have been tracking you inbound to us. Batcat on station, at base plus angels 6. We’ll be about 30 miles north of your target area, copy?”

Lawcase 305, Gibson’s plane, answered, “Batcat, Lawcases descending to angels ten. Lawcase 305 will remain high until we eyeball a target; 309 will descend to 5000, be the first flare ship.” Gibson wanted altitude separation and he wanted to commence his dive bombing runs from at least 10,000 feet. “What target info, Batcat? ”

“Lawcase 305, Batcat has positive indications about 9 miles from you. Suspect trucks and tanks. Interrogative your weapons?”

“Mark 82s, Rockeye CBUs, and 20 mike mike.”

“Lawcase 309, flare ship, call Batcat when ready for a vector to the first hot area.”

“Click, click.” Five minutes later Campbell called the EC-121. “Batcat, Lawcase 309 level at angels 5.”

“Roger steer 340 for 8 miles, standby to drop.”

“Click, click.” Less than a minute passed before Batcat called with a minor correction.

“Come right, 5 degrees; prepare to drop…now, now, now.”

“Flares are down, 309, Batcat.” Campbell dropped two flares and waited for them to ignite.

“Okay, Lawcases, you have it from here. Call Batcat if you need us. Batcat will monitor.”

“Click, click.”

Each A-4 carried two pods of eight flares. The flares were magnesium parachute flares that provided two million candle power of illumination, and because they drift with the winds in the target area, they require flight adjustments by the pilot to maximize their effectiveness. They ignited at 3000 feet. Two flares lit up an area about as big as seven or eight square blocks and the visibility was remarkably good although the jungle over the trail offered excellent concealment.

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Campbell descended to four thousand feet making 400 knots and began a race track pattern around the area of illumination looking for targets. Within the triple canopy of vegetation, he could see the thin, narrow dirt road that made up this particular branch of the multi-branched trail that was collectively referred to as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but he saw no targets after several orbits. “No joy this time, 305”

“Click, click. Batcat, did you copy that?”

“Roger… Can we try 500 yards to the north?”

“Ay-firm,” responded Gibson. Ready, 309?” Campbell had already returned to 5000 feet and was ready to drop more flares. He flew a little further north and corrected for the wind drift of the flares in the target area.

“Flares down. By the drift of the flares I’d guess maybe four to five knots of wind from the northwest.” Gibson made a note to set his bombsight for the winds accordingly. Again Campbell descended a thousand feet to search for targets, but he saw none. Gibson was not surprised. At 4000 feet and at 400 knots, a pilot in a single seat jet airplane had difficulty picking out a moving target on an interstate highway in daylight. Now it was pitch black, and the trail and parking areas along the trail were concealed by thick vegetation which made up a triple canopy of cover. And the enemy had learned its lessons, too. They knew it was wise to be still and motionless as soon as they heard airplanes. “Negative targets, 305, break, Batcat, any suggestions?”

“Maybe 300 meters further up the trail.”

“Roger, Batcat.” Again Campbell climbed back to 5000 feet. He could see the dying flares from the previous run, and he dropped two more flares, seconds apart, just a bit further to the north. He waited for the flares to ignite at 3000 feet. This time he descended lower to 3500, remaining above the flares, and began looking intently for targets as he flew in a racetrack pattern around the illumination area. Gibson remained above at 10,000 feet waiting for indication of a target.

“Think I have something, possibly a truck. Let me try and confirm that when I turn back.”

“Click, click.” Gibson straightened up a bit in the cockpit. Campbell turned back and tried to avoid providing indication to the enemy on the ground that they had been spotted.

“Ay-firm. Vehicles. Likely trucks…maybe a few bicycles… Just about 75 yards to the north of the center of the flare umbrella.”

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"Roger, nosing over, now" Gibson selected the ordnance station where he had three, 500 pound bombs under his port wing and armed the bombs. He set the pipper on the trail at the approximate point suggested by Campbell. From Gibson's altitude it was more of an area drop than aiming for a specific target. The Skyhawk picked up speed in a 30 degree dive. At 5,500 feet Gibson pulled the pickle switch and released the bombs, "Ordnance away." Then he pulled back on the stick, shallowed out of his dive at 4500 feet and began his climb back to altitude. Two 37 millimeter anti-aircraft guns opened up at the sound of his engine as he applied power and climbed out, but the gunfire was wildly mis-aimed.

The three bombs detonated near where Campbell thought he had seen the trucks, but there were no secondary explosions to confirm that the bombs had hit a genuine target.

"Batcat, your gadgets pick up the detonations?"

"Affirmative, sir."

"Can your gadget offer any guidance on the next drop?"

"Wait out." Batcat took several minutes. Gibson impatiently orbited the target area. A "wait out" was generally an irritating response to an action-oriented, military pilot flying a jet airplane. Finally, Batcat, came back up. "Negative, 305. The sound volume and vibrations went off the charts."

"Nothing? Nothing useful at all?"

"No, sir. Negative, sir. We need to turn down the gain."

"Juliet foxtrot bravo," Gibson said to himself—a derisive, coded expletive for "just effing beautiful." "309 is low; 305 is level high."

"Click, click." Campbell, who had cleared from the area being worked as a precaution against a midair collision, turned back towards the area. "Gonna try and put the flares just a bit further north."

"Roger that," responded Gibson. Shortly thereafter Gibson called, "Orbiting at angels 10" Campbell proceeded for the fourth time to place his flares right over the trail, a little further north of his last drop.

"Flares down." When the flares ignited Campbell resumed hunting for targets. The 37 mm guns opened up on the flares. The tracer rounds snaked up like drops of water from a garden hose. "I see several vehicles…trucks…pos-sibly armor, tanks. Dead center of the flare umbrella."

"Commencing second run. Three Mark 82s." This time Gibson came from a different compass bearing and made a correction in his run. Again

it appeared to him to be an area drop, but he treated the trail as a bridge and approached the trail on a 15 degree offset to its axis and planned to drop his ordnance on a diagonal across the trail. Again the 37mm guns began firing. Gibson held the A-4 steady in the dive. The tracers got closer to him as he got lower and the gunners aimed at the sound, but they could not see his aircraft above the flares. Their brilliance served to blind the gunners.

"Bombs away." Campbell watched the target area looking for detonations, but he cleared the area and began his climb to 10,000 feet. The pilots were exchanging roles and positions for the next run. Gibson again shallowed out of his dive and leveled at 5000 feet as he assumed the role of flare ship.

"On target," announced Campbell, as the attack aircraft repositioned. "Secondaries. Secondary explosions…fuel, maybe ammo." The fires burned brighter. "309 level at 10."

"Can you see the fires, 9?"

"Kinda. Maybe some smoke, dust in the area. Prefer some flares for the first run."

"Okay, you'll get'em. Recommend you treat the target area as a bridge."

"Click, click."

"Running short on time, 9. Do two runs. Mark 82s first. Rockeyes next. Drop everything. I'll follow with a single run with my CBUs."

"Wilco." And that's how the two VA-23 pilots finished their initial work over the target.

"Alright, Batcat, thank you gentlemen. We're going feet wet." There was a sense of accomplishment among the adhoc Batcat-Lawcase team.

"Goodnight, Navy."

"309 are you climbing?"

"Roger, where do you want to meet?"

"Let's go to Panther's 280 radial at 40 nautical, angels 20."

"Roger that 305. Tedious work."

"Yeah. Seems it might have been worth the trip." Both A-4s flew separately making their way south of the DMZ heading east, climbing towards 20 thousand feet, to the safety of the sea.

"309, you still with me?"

"Roger, feet dry, switching button eight," the ship's strike control frequency.

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"Roger coming with you." Gibson headed east for the Gulf of Tonkin and ascended for the rendezvous point.

Later, back aboard *Ticonderoga,* Commander Gibson and CAG were on the darkened bridge and just finishing briefing Captain Tarrant on the first Operation Igloo White mission when the captain asked, "Gibby, how'd the young fella work out?"

"He's professional. Extremely cool in the air, sir. What you expect from a guy flying Iron Hand."

"Good. That's good to hear."

"I really like flying with him. He thinks right along with you. Brave, but not too brave, if you know what I mean, sir."

"I do, Gibby. Indeed, I do."

A day later VO-67 lost their first plane as the OP-2E plane criss-crossed several branches of the Ho Chi Minh Trail planting sensors. The plane was reasonably armored but the suspicion was that triple-AAA had taken the plane down by an alerted gun crew. Due to technical limitations in the sensing devices, the sensors had to be precisely planted from the aircraft at treetop level at 248 knots. The precise geographic location for each sensor had to be known to enable accurate bombing under flares later that night. VO-67 suspended operations for the next day to review their tactics. Lindy 7 and her 9 crewmembers were officially listed as missing in action. But as time wore on hopes for the 9-man crew dimmed although no crash site had been reported.

Four nights later, Lt. Ti Campbell prepared for his third Igloo White launch at 1930. As he taxied on the dark, rain swept flight deck, he said a brief prayer. "Lord Jesus, be with me tonight. Lord Jesus, give me the strength to do my duty and come home."

Augustine MacD. Campbell grew up in Korea during the war where his parents were Presbyterian missionaries who refused to abandon their congregation in Seoul. Quiet courage was a Campbell gene. As a young boy, he was no stranger to the stresses of being a refugee—lack of shelter, food, clothing and two legs were the primary means of transportation. As an adult, he displayed an unusual inner richness that synthesized the harshness of war, Korean culture, a quiet but indomitable spirit, an exuberance for piloting airplanes, and above all, a devout and abiding faith in Christianity. Within the squadron he enjoyed wide respect although he

was sometimes affectionately teased as a “no-fun” guy at the O Club bar or among the earthly delights of Olongapo and other ports of call in Asia. He was polite and socially deferential reflecting traces of Confucian harmony in Korean culture.

Shortly after the air wing came aboard, Campbell sought out Chaplain Osborne and asked to be one of the Chaplain’s Assistants. He also formed a friendship with Pete Peterson, also an Iron Hand pilot in the sister squadron, VA-192, and a Mormon from Utah who had spent his mission in Japan. Both were thoughtful, enjoyed comparing and contrasting Japanese, Korean, and American cultures, their religions with the various Asian religions, and taught each other Japanese and Korean.

As his squadron executive officer, Jack Martini, a Californian, once remarked after a fitness report review, “Dude, you are one helluva a cocktail.” Immediately thereafter he became known as “Cocktail” in the squadron which was an incongruous nom de guerre, totally out of character, but catchy, and therefore, it stuck with the squadron although Campbell preferred Tireless, a more honorable nickname. Back at Lemoore the squadron even had a contest to find out who could invent the best recipe for the “Campbell Cocktail.” Needless to say, it resulted in a smashing good party as sampling each concoction was a mandatory ritual of attendance.

It was a particularly black night. Cannon had the 1800-2000 OOD dog watch on the bridge, and he and the captain looked down on the flight deck and observed the launch. The F-8 Crusaders were first off the ship to relieve the earlier flight of fighters manning the barrier between the MIG airfields in North Vietnam and the fleet in the Gulf of Tonkin. The ear-splitting roar of the Crusaders in full military power and after burner was only slightly muffled by the rain and rattled pencils, dividers and coffee cups on the bridge. Low hanging clouds and monsoonal rain showers made for a very dark night and raindrops could be heard striking the overhead sheet metal that now enclosed what was originally an open bridge. The blue flames from the Crusader tailpipes, confirmation of full power, were reassuring to the catapult crew as the F-8s accelerated down the deck and were then gone into the night.

Cannon watched from the portside of the bridge above the flight deck as the A-4s taxied to the catapult bridles while the blast deflectors folded and were stowed. 18 and 19 year old yellow shirts, thoroughly soaked by the rain, moved quickly to secure the Skyhawks to the catapults which

were then set to deliver the required airspeed specifically to each airplane and gross weight. In the mostly dark, low light, he could barely see the side numbers. The pilots flicked on their red, anti-collision beacons to indicate they were ready to launch. Subsequently the "shooter's" lighted wand arced over his head and pointed down the catapult track towards the bow of the ship—the signal to fire the cat.

12, A-4s in all launched but only the first four, a section from VA-23 and another from VA-192, were assigned to Igloo White. As the last plane to launch went off, a KA-3 Skywarrior tanker from Heavy Attack 4, the flight deck transitioned from launch to recovery. Already an A-4 from the previous cycle was in the groove for the first of 18 aircraft to be recovered.

Cannon rechecked the wind indicator which read 30 knots at 350 degrees relative to the ship's head. His junior officer of the deck and the helmsman were conning within a half degree of Foxtrot Corpen at 20 knots making 30 knots of wind over the angled deck as prescribed.

Nothing was more hazardous than a night carrier landing in inclement weather, and they were particularly determined to do their part to facilitate the recovery. Air Wing 19 pilots often said they preferred two minutes over Hanoi to the last 20 seconds of a night landing on a carrier.

After having operated around the Mu Gia Pass to the north the night before without results, the experiment known as Operation Igloo White was back working the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the vicinity of Khe Sanh where the Ho Chi Minh Trail intersected Route 9, an east-west route to Dong Hoi on the coast of the Gulf of Tonkin. The commanding officers of *Ticonderoga's* attack squadrons were up for the mission.

As CVW-19 gained experience with Igloo White they had growing concerns about sequential attack runs on a relatively, geographically confined and defended target, and they wanted to consider what might be done to enable each section to make fewer runs and reduce time over target. This led them to consider adding a third A-4 solely to drop flares, and then employing two Skyhawks, flying together, in a strictly drop mode, to roll-in quickly, drop their ordnance, and get out. This could be challenging as all aircraft would be working in the dark, often flying below 5000 feet AGL without navigation lights, posing a risk of a midair collision at 800 to 900 knot closing rates.

The officers and men of VO-67 were heavily invested in Igloo White and were even more dedicated to prove the concept and to develop codified tactics and express them in their own rules of engagement after the loss of Lindy 7. Gibson and Campbell discussed whether the Lindy 7 crew was over-determined to the point that it affected their judgment, or whether they were simply constrained to very low altitudes at moderate speeds by the limits of their airplane and the sensors.

Experienced attack pilots consider courage a *sine qua non* but there was such a thing as trying too hard to win the war. Shakespeare identified the personality in Hotspur and Laertes, and Custer manifested the trait throughout his career until it ended badly at Little Bighorn.

Both VA-23 and VA-192 were getting more comfortable with the sensor-guided flare work. Tonight they would operate as they had before with one wingman dropping flares and hunting for targets where the sensors indicated probable targets and the other Skyhawk remaining high poised to attack. The squadron commanding officers would make a special effort to observe the strikes and consider what might be the best future tactics.

After several runs the North Vietnamese guns were very active. There were more guns than the previous nights, an indication that the enemy placed a higher value on the flow of materiel. There is an old saying in naval air. "Whatever is worth bombing is worth defending," and the logic could be reversed. Where there were defenses there were targets.

Campbell positioned for the fourth attack run of the raid. "309, coming fast from the north end on a westerly heading." Like the first night, they had no wish to be low and slow. "Speed is life" – another basic axiom of naval air. During the debrief of the first mission Campbell remarked that the Ho Chi Minh Trail was better concealed by jungle canopy than he remembered Routes 1 and 15 being at night. He said the task of sighting the targets was substantially more difficult than where they chose to hunt for trucks on the highways which was precisely the rationale for using air-dropped sensors.

"Click, click," acknowledged Commander Jeff Gibson, VA-23's commanding officer. Campbell saw the string of flares ignite at 2500 feet and pushed the nose over putting his plane into a 30 degree dive as he commenced his run planning to cross the trail on a diagonal where Gibson thought there might have been targets, but he was uncertain. Campbell put his pipper on a dark shaded area. Immediately a radar-guided 57mm gun

opened up with well-directed fire. Shortly thereafter two 37mm guns began firing wildly in the direction of the 57's tracers. Campbell had to remain steady at this point in the flight until he released his ordnance as the tracers were passing by his windshield. Campbell had been shot at before. To say the least, it was never pleasant; but he held the Skyhawk steady in the dive on the azimuth and at the air speed required for the gravity-type Mark 82 bombs. He rechecked that he had selected the proper ordnance stations, that the bombs were armed, and that ejectors were set for a string-release of his weapons. As he had done the first night, he came in at a 15 degree offset, heading 185 to the south and dropped all six 500 pound bombs across the trail where they suspected NVA trucks might be camouflaged and hidden.

The Skyhawk jumped ahead when freed of the weight and drag of the ordnance, and as he applied power and pulled off to the right. Now the 57mm opened up again. Campbell tried to stay low but he had to clear a 3000 foot karst ahead, and as he climbed more 57mm rounds from another site intercepted him.

"Negative results," called Gibson, "Damn."

Campbell was too busy flying the airplane to respond. He felt something hit behind him and something hit the underside of his right wing. "Took at least two hits, 305. Not sure. Definite flak. Think I'm hit somewhere in the control surfaces. Possibly the engine."

"Roger. Clean everything up. Drop the empty tanks and bomb racks."

"She's mushy, sir. Losing power, losing airspeed. Controls are stiffening." Campbell reached down to a T-handle near his left knee and pulled it disengaging the hydraulic control system and flew the plane manually. Immediately he felt the aerodynamic forces on his A-4.

"Your heading?"

"West, sir… I can't bring her around. Gotta get over this karst"

"Roger. Don't have a tally on you."

"Trying to fly her in manual. No joy. Have a fire alarm… About 1000 feet is my max rate of climb. Might just clear the karst."

"Stay with it if you can." There were no friendly troops below, "Could you make Khe Sanh?"

"Doubtful. She's very mushy. Probably the compressor…feels like she's ready to stall."

"Got it."

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"Just cleared the karst. I can push her over now but the engine is running rough." The stricken Skyhawk just managed to get over the karst, but damage to the right wing was causing drag and the aircraft wanted to yaw to the right. Campbell tried to correct with the rudder and the ailerons, but the rudder's effect was weak and in manual mode he was still fighting the forces on the control surfaces albeit they lessened as the A-4 lost airspeed. The plane was threatening to stall and enter a spin. In the dark, Campbell had difficulty determining damage to his aircraft. What he could not see, his rudder was a third blown away.

"I'll stay with you as long as I can."

"Sorry, skipper. I can't get back to the ship. I think I'm going to have to get out." He shoved his buttocks as tightly as possible against the back of his seat.

"Cocktail, call me. Check in with me as soon as you get down."

"Aye, aye, sir" Campbell reached up, pulled down the curtain and ejected into the night over Laos.