The Intruder’s Lighter Side
Introduction

The Intruder is a tremendous combat aircraft, fully capable of executing the Navy’s most demanding strike warfare missions. It is however, highly dependent upon the aircrew’s skill, preparation, and determination to successfully complete those same missions. Luckily for our nation, the A-6 community has always been blessed with gifted and hard working aviators dedicated to the spirit of attack. The aircraft’s design, the demands of the all weather attack mission and the personality and spirit of aircrews within the squadrons combined to make flying the A-6 and serving the Navy one of everyone’s most enjoyable and memorable life experiences. Comraderie within A-6 aircrews, airborne and on the ground, is special.

This booklet is dedicated to the aircrews that have made up the A-6 community for over 30 years. They have taken a fabulous aircraft and employed it in dangerous and demanding environments throughout the world. Simultaneously, they have had the times of their lives. This memento tries to capture some of those special times. The idea, and indeed all the work, putting this project together came from Fred House. “Ferd” has been a big part of the community for many years and we all will be grateful for his efforts on this project in particular. Thanks, “Ferd” for your continuing support.

CAPT Randolph “Dirt” Dearth
Commanding Officer
Attack Squadron One Two Eight
“There we were...”
This booklet is dedicated to all A-6 aircrews past and present.
There we were... flying our PS/NS-17 graduation hop in the RAG as we two students were to join VA-52 in mid-cruise. The profile was a high altitude leg, dropping down to fly the low level that ends up at Bravo 16 near Fallon. For this simulated nuclear mission we carried a 2000# shape with a smoke charge on the centerline. All our pre-flight planning was done. Charts, fuel figures, divert fields, RSP, kneeboard cards, were cascading from my nav bag. The high portion and the low level went fine. Entry into Bravo 16 was right on our target time with a High Loft delivery planned. My 12 mile radar prediction didn’t look like my scope or the RSP the squadron gave me... expanded display was worse. We’re accelerating to 500 knots now and the ride is bumpy... 8 miles to go and I’m still not sure of the target... “Master Arm is ON... the pickle is hot!” At 2 miles to go I ‘fess up and tell Larry I don’t have the target...He said, “I got the run-in line and the target visually’. I felt so relieved... I said, “Great, we’ll do our LABS backup!” I reached up and selected LABS but, unfortunately, the wrong one of two choices. We were doing a LABS TGT instead of what I selected, LABS IP. Well, as advertised at 55.2 degrees, a thud from the ejector foot and the shape was on its way. Larry was busy flying the 1/2 cuban eight as I looked at the armament panel (A-6A). I immediately knew what I had done... and lowered my seat as low as I could. “Goldplate One, no spot, sir... oh, wait a minute... holy smoke! ... it's at the base of that mountain out there!”

Switchology will get you everytime. The way I saw it, a 5-mile hit with a nuke could still be a bull’s-eye!

YARHAM / HOUSE VA-128 JOs 1971

As a former MILESTONE and RAG instructor presently working in CV-43 CATCC, I knew the older Main Battery aircrews pretty well. Always maximizing service to the fleet, I willingly conspired to help a mischievous SDO / SKEDSO chain check one of the nugget crews. These “gung-ho” JO’s were pumped to practice EP’s in the WST on CORAL SEA. When they came to CATCC to pick up the “keys” to the WST, I first chewed them out for being “late”. Then, I sent them down to the 7th deck to a non-existent frame number. 15 minutes later they called to confirm the location. OF COURSE, they had gotten it wrong and worse yet, TD CPO was on my back because the wayward nuggets were UA. After this call they knew they were in deep kimchee. After another 15 minutes of huffing and puffing their way up and down the ladders and trunks in the bowels of CORAL MARU, they realized they’d been hoodwinked. Later, they proved they weren’t Marines when we tried to get them to stand the mail buoy watch.

“TOO TALL” INDORF CVA-43 1982

There we were... on our way to sunny and warm NAS Roosevelt Roads for a January weapons det. We stopped and hot refueled at Cecil, and decided we could continue as part of the formation, even though we didn’t have any cockpit pressurization. I had brought a can of Pepsi, and thought that I could drink it quickly, even though cabin altitude was higher than it normally would have been... much higher. So, to minimize the time off of oxygen and maximize the time required to drink the Pepsi, I left my oxygen mask on as I smartly pulled the pull tab. Much quicker than instantly, this brown, evaporating, sticky mist covered me, the cockpit, and my patient B/N, who just looked at me and muttered, “You dumb s__!”. Nothing got wet and it was then I remembered my Pepsi can might have experienced what was probably known as an explosive decompression. And there I was, just as thirsty...and a whole lot stickier!

EDDY/ OHNEMUS VA-85,197/7
*There we were* ... one night in the marshall stack ... with three carriers operating in the Tonkin Gulf at the same time airspace and ship maneuvering water was limited. It seerned that every other time we would turn back in towards the ship (away from the beach), we would get a “singer low” on the RHAW gear. Back on deck we plotted out that the marshall stack extended into a known SAM envelope! Needless to say, we both stayed awake in marshall that night!

YARHAM / HOUSE VA-52,1972

TRANSPACing from Barbers Point to Cubi, without tankers, what a great deal for a nugget aircrew! The stopover at Midway Island was too short (the female AGs were awesome) and the RON at Wake Island was a blast. However the most memorable part of the trip for us came several days after we arrived at Cubi. Someone from Guam mailed us a copy of the evening paper published the day we departed NAS Agana. On the front page there was a picture of our departure flyby with our C-9 in the lead of a V formation with 3 A6’s tucked in tight on each wing. The caption under the picture read: “SECRET BOMBER ESCORTED BY 6 FIGHTERS ENROUTE TO KOREA”. The day before we arrived at Agana, some border guards butchered a couple of GI’s in the infamous tree-chopping incident along the Korean DMZ. It was the only time in our careers we didn’t mind be I ng associated with fighter pukes.

JET ROUTE” COFFEY / “TOO TALL” INDORF VA-196 1976

I had an XO once who called the Ready 5 duty office on ENTERPRISE asking us to pick him up from the Cubi O’ Club at zero dark thirty. He was trapped inside, alone, after taking a “combat nap” In the head.

“TOO TALL” INDORF VA-196 1977

“Sully, you’ve got to wake up now, it IS critical” (Ask Don Sullivan for the rest of the story, it’s a beauty!)

“TOO TALL” INDORF VA-196 1977

*There we were*... at FL280, 420 KTAS+, 40 NM south of SEA in solid IMC inertial direct to a SOCAL CQ det. Suddenly, there was a loud explosion and the cockpit changed from a relatively quiet, warm cozy place to an ear-splitting, frigid, icebox. The entire plexiglass assembly of the BN’s canopy had just become another TFOA statistic. When it departed the aircraft it took the pitot static boom on the vertical stabilizer with it. Squawking 7700, flying on AOA and using pointy- talkie language in the cockpit we turned back toward NUW and managed to find VMC at about 4,000 AGL on the radalt. Communicating with center using STBY and 7700, we opted to pass TCM and the other diverts and RTB. We regained comm when we dirtied up but a power failure at the rock precluded comm with the SDO on base radio. NUW tower told the SDO over the phone we were returning with an unidentified problem. The ODO, Al “Big Bird” Lundy, met us in the line, gave us the obligatory “WTFO” reserve salute look, didn’t blink when I tossed my navbag down to him but he did a world class double take when I climbed out of the jet and he noticed the canopy was still closed!!

“TRASH” SMITH /”TOO TALL” INDORF VA-128 1979

I love “PIXIE” McHugh’s (VA-115) story of returning from cruise and at dinner on the first night home asking his mother to “pass the f___________ butter”.

“TOO TALL” INDORF VA-128 1979
A couple of us ship’s company A-6 bubba’s were manning the rail on the starboard side of CORAL SEA as she made her first approach to the Subic Side pier following the change of command where one of our INTRUDER hero’s, CAPT Dick Dunleavy, turned command over to CAPT Jerry Johnson, an A-7 driver. We commented how the bridge was overflowing with light attack weenie’s, i.e., the skippers, strike ops, VA (Light Attack) CO’s and XO’s, assistant navigator, and a couple of shooters. On the pier to greet these former shipmates was now COMUSNAVPHIL, RADM Dick Dunleavy. It was apparent that the “light attack” bridge team lost control of the vessel in the steady wind. The tugs couldn’t keep us from clobbering the pier. With screaming go-go dancers Jumping off their platforms, the Subic band running for their lives, crusty Subic CPO’s cussing the inept CORAL SEA shiphandlers, and wood splinters raining down on the Admiral (who was shaking his head in disgust and ducking for the safety of his staff car), the A-6 bubba’s had the biggest laugh of the deployment. This proved, once again, that when you have a tough job to do, don’t send light attack...send the INTRUDERS!

“TOO TALL” INDORF CV-43, 1981

During a DACM hop on a Yuma weapons det, the nugget pilot got target fixation, rolled the wrong way and ended up 90 degrees nose down roaring through the soft deck. After two calls on the ICS got no response, I screamed “PULL OUT!” on the radio and the nugget obediently pulled out of the dive with over 7.5 g’s on the meter! After a couple of seconds of regaining my composure and watching the nose point away from the dirt, I asked him where we bottomed out. He quietly and correctly said, “The altimeter read about 2100 feet, sir.” Then I reminded him we were flying over terrain that was about 1600 feet MSL. I’ve never seen anyone swallow as hard since.

“TOO TALL” INDORF VA-128, 1979

On a fine spring day in 1967 LCDR Fred Metz and LTJG Dante Kolipano (VA-85, USS Kitty Hawk) were scheduled for an Iron Hand mission over Hanoi to cover an ALFA strike on a truck park, or maybe it was a rice field, or maybe a herd of water buffalo. At any rate it was one of those well worthwhile targets that McNamara, in his infinite wisdom, used to enjoy assigning to military pilots. Dante was a native Filipino, a graduate of Manila University in engineering, and a fine Naval Officer and BIN. However, he had one disconcerting trait and that was to lapse back into his native tongue, Tagalog, whenever he became highly excited. So, there they were at 20,000 feet over Hanoi trolling for SAMs. Suddenly Dante became excited and started gesticulating wildly, pointing aft and starboard of the aircraft and rattling along in Tagalog. Of course in the A-6 this is a blind spot for the pilot and he can’t see anything in that direction.

Now Fred is getting excited and is trying to get Dante to tell him what the problem is.

“Dante, what’s going on?”
Response in highly excited Tagalog.

“DAMMIT Dante, what the hell is going on? Speak English, dammit!”
Again more frantic waving and a stream of Tagalog in response. Just then a missile exploded under the aircraft throwing it into a series of violent uncontrolled maneuvers. Fred valiantly fought the airplane and was finally successful in getting it back on an even keel and in controlled flight, at which point Dante keyed the ICS and said in perfect, blase, English: “Forget it.”
There we were ... at the O’Club with Jeff Renner, the Channel 5 weatherman who had spent several weeks with VA-128 doing a documentary on A-6 training. He had just completed his A-6 flight and was reveling with the gang at Happy Hour. One of my JO’s recommended I show him what a Flaming Hooker was all about. I showed him and now he wanted to try it. I tried to discourage him but to no avail. After extensive workups and trial runs, he went for it. He blew it. He jerked upon sensing the heat and fumes. It dribbles down his chin, chest, on the table and onto the floor. His “second” hits him with a wet towel; we beat out his aflame chest, the flaming napkins, and floor. His eyes were real big, his signature mustache was looking real bad, and his chin was starting to blister. Oh boy, could be the end of my life as I know it. Could be real bad news. He takes it like a pro and waves off any concern. His next TV appearance Monday night showed tangible signs of heavy makeup and a reduced sized mustache. He made vague reference to it but gives his whole Whidbey experience hearty thumbs up. “Whew”

Boxman VA-128 CO

There “they” were ... from time to time the Intruders 2-man cockpit layout allowed numerous missions. In addition to low level all weather attack, it serves as a taxi. News reporters, VIPs, Admirals, all have been driven around the friendly skies. One bright and sunny day as the ship was steaming off the line toward Cubi for an in-port period, the Admiral (CTF-77), who used the Kitty Hawk as the Flag ship, needed a “ride” into Cubi for a meeting. Our flight schedule was published and I luckily made the fly-off. The pilot chosen to fly the Admiral was one of our sharpest ... he had a previous combat tour in Spads, a leader of 20 plane Alpha Strikes, his line on the greenie board was always green ... LCDR “Butch” Williams. Butch and the Admiral were listed as a single ship event ... not as part of the rest of the flight. We razzed Butch prior to, and during the brief, as to the whereabouts of his new B/N. We reminded him of the importance of the codeword-card-of-the-day... how to do a SINS alignment...the proper technique his new BIN would have to use to “Steel-Toe update” the computer after the cat shot, etc.

As the rest of us manned up, Butch was still looking for his B/N. The air boss went through his spiel about “helmets on, chin-straps buckled...start all aircraft”. We were parked next to Butch’s plane in the usual A-6 pack forward of the island. As they hooked up the buffer to us, I saw a squadron rep come up to Butch and yell a message to him over the buffer noise. Butch, by this time, was nervously pacing around his boarding ladder. The message was that the Admiral was on his way and to go ahead and get the aircraft started. So he did. We were already started by this time and had the canopy closed. Normal procedure was to turn up on button 7 (ZIP-LIP land / launch). Butch got started, and sat waiting anxiously with the canopy opened. The Admiral emerged from the catwalk with two squadron reps who would help him get strapped in. It was a minute or so, with one of our reps still on the B/N’s ladder, when over the radio (usually Zip-Lip) we hear, “yes sir Admiral, the right one is ICS and the left pedal is the UHF key.” It could get embarrassing if you key the wrong one to talk...” I was watching this whole evolution. Butch was leaned over, head down, and stretched as far as his seat harness would allow toward the B/ N. His left hand was on the throttle and was explaining this to the Admiral. You know I just couldn’t resist ... actually, no one who was on button 7 could resist... “That’s right Butch, don’t get your buttons mixed up...! “We don’t have that problem in A-7s “... “Gotta talk with the correct foot, Butch “! “Way to go, Viceroy!” Butch’s head lifted up quickly and looked over at the throttle quadrant ... his eyes then continued over toward our aircraft as we both were applauding his performance.

Respectfully retold by F. House
LCDR Walter “Butch” Williams / CTF-77 VA-52 1972
USS “Boat Farm” was on cruise in the Med and had pulled into Naples for some routine liberty. The Senior A-6 Commander on board (CDR Intruder) went ashore for some liberty. After an evening and night of sampling some fine Italian wine and other libations he went down to the fleet landing to catch the last (0200) P-boat “back to sheep”. These particular P-boats were the ones that had the fore and aft sections laid out as mirror images of each other. The sections consisted of curved benches, with the forward section passengers facing aft and the aft section passengers facing forward. Well, CDR Intruder got on board the P-boat, did a couple of circles in the cockpit, got disoriented, and went forward to take his seat. CDR Intruder looked around and saw what he perceived to be a gross breach of Navy etiquette. Here was a bunch of JOs sitting in the “aft” part of the boat, which is reserved exclusively for senior officers. He became enraged at this breach of etiquette and the impertinence of these JOs to sit where they weren’t supposed to be and immediately ordered them to the front of the boat where they damn well belonged. The more the JOs argued their point the more enraged CDR Intruder became. CDR Intruder had a reputation for being extremely pugnacious when in this condition, so the JOs took the prudent course and poured into the aft part of the boat.

CDR Intruder was maintaining his solitary seat in the “proper” portion of the boat and wondering where the rest of the Senior Officers were when the coxswain finally started up the boat and headed out for the ship. CDR Intruder watched the harbor lights out of the window for a while when it finally dawned on him that things weren’t quite right. Instead of the lights proceeding from forward to aft, they were going from aft to forward. Realizing that he was probably the senior officer on board, CDR Intruder resolved to set things right and proceeded to the cockpit to deliver one of the more memorable lines of the cruise, “G__ D_____ it, Coxsun, are you going to back this boat all the way to the G__ D_____ ship?”

There we were ... another tanker hop. A squeaky voiced fighter guy with a south-Texas accent jumps on the air with “Say Texacoouo”. I just can’t resist, so I reply with “Texacoouo”. His voice lowers an octave as he says “Say tanker posit”. I’m on a roll so I give him “Tanker posit”. CAG jumps in with “Say double cycle. “Overhead, angels 5”, says 1.

“Wacker” Wyckoff 1976

There we were...the whale tanker can’t fly. We take an A-6A with a buddy store and four drops and set out for “Red Crown”. We hear the fighter bubbas getting vectors, giving angles, etc. I look on the radar and there they are about 20 nm out, so I sez to Red Crown, “Got a Judy 10 left, 5 low at 20”. Red Crown wants to know if we need vectors and I tell him “Negative”. The “Bubbas”, of course, also refuse assistance. As we close with the sun at our six, they haven’t seen us on radar or picked us up visually. We see them and Deb says, “Hold what you’ve got and we’ll join on you. “ The normally verbose “Bubbas” tank with nary a word, while we Just giggle a lot. Back at the boat over sliders, the “Bubbas” wanted to know how we did that. We-just smiled and chewed. From then on, the first words those two crews heard from any tanker were “Hay Bubba, you need vectors”.

DEBBENPORT / WYCKOFF VA-52 1971
There we were...headed for Pensacola for another RAG CQ Det. Off to the land of oysters, sand, and traps on Lady Lex. I was flying with a student pilot, LT Steve Selph. We were In a flight of four. We leveled off at our cruising altitude, loosened up our formation, and relaxed back in the starboard wing position. I decided to get a few rays in preparation for the land of the beach. I told Steve that I was going to take off my helmet and soak up some sun. He had the radios and if he wanted something, I would put on my helmet to talk. He looked at me quite skeptically but said OK. After all, I was the fleet experienced guy. Who was he to argue? Boy, it sure was noisy when I took off my helmet. I didn’t have any foamy earplugs so I used a trusty kneeboard card. You know, the same cards we used for ashtrays, sun visors, and ears plugs. I tore off a chunk of card, masticated it a bit, rolled it into a plug-like shape. Inserted it into my right ear. No sweat. Works good, lasts for a long time. Tore off another chunk, chewed it a bit, rolled it up, and inserted it into my left ear- A little loose, push it in a little more. Oops! It goes in too far and now I can’t get it out. Rats! Bend my head over and try to tap it out. No good. Stupid! Shake my head, wiggle my ear lobe, briefly try to drag it out with a pencil tip. Not a good idea and doesn’t work anyway. I put my helmet back on and tell Steve what is going on. I tell him I’m going to take my helmet off again and ask him if he can see it and try to grab it. He agrees. Off with the helmet. He tries to pinch it out but can’t reach it. I put my helmet back on with another great idea. We’re cruising along at Flight Level 240. “Here’s what we’re going to do. Steve, you make sure your mask is on good and tight, I will take off my helmet again and hold my mask tight to my face. I will dump the cabin pressure which will cause the pesky spit wad to come right out “. He looks at me really skeptical now. He says, “Let’s go over this again. We’re going to do what? OK, if you really think this will work. Oxygen on, mask tight, thumbs up, let’s do it”. I throw the switch on the center console that dumps the cabin. WHOOSH! We get movement! I try unsuccessfully to grab it and Steve can’t get it either. Rats! Now I have to re-pressurize which will probably drive the soggy projectile into my brain. Not good. No choice, have to do it. I throw the switch again to re-pressurize. It moves the plug in even farther. Oh great! Helmet back on. OK, If it doesn’t go even deeper as we descend into Tinker AFB for our refueling stop, I’ll zip over to their hospital for a professional extraction. Descent goes OK and we land. Taxi to the fuel trucks, shutdown. “Steve, you do the refueling duties and I’ll meet you in the gedunk for a quick burger “. I headed for base ops and casually asked where I might see a flight surgeon. The guy indicated a flight line medical office just down the hall. Good deal! I still had my G-suit and torso harness on but had taken off my vest. Got to look good in front of the Air Force pukes, plus it might get me some expedited treatment. You know, gotta hurry and get back in my jet. I stroll into the medical office and ask to see a flight surgeon. They ask me what the problem is. I say vaguely that it’s nothing serious but I just need to talk to a flight doc for a minute. Soon there appears a doc about my age (young) and we go into his office. He inquires about what I need. When I tell him an abbreviated story of the story, he looks at me like I’m an escapee from a loony bin. He peers into my ear, shakes his head and grabs a long pair of tweezers. Out comes the recalcitrant plug. He looks in my other ear but I tell him that I had done a better job on that side. He agrees we don’t need any paper work on this simple problem. Good, I’d hate to have anybody know about this. Plus the AMA Journal has more important stuff to publish. He gives me a hand full of regulation foamy earplugs and I depart quickly with my hand over my name tag.

When I rendezvoused with the gang in the burger shop, I got looks of disbelief and inquiries about the truthfulness of Steve’s slight slip of the story. Yeah, yeah, no big deal, it’s all taken care of. My face was red from a combination of pre-tan and embarrassment but was undaunted. We proceeded south and get the job done. On that 3-day det, I bagged 45 traps flying with five different pilots. No problems with hearing or sunburn.

Some of your buddies just can’t manage to forget some of your small compromising situations.

Boxman - VA- 128 JO
There we were... at the O’ Club at Happy Hour. Stealing drinking flags had been a popular activity over the previous 2-3 weeks. We at VA-128 had stolen VA-95’s flag and they had stolen ours. Skipper Jerry Rosenburg was in the process of making a public statement about our flag while standing on the bar. Timing is everything and our timing was a little off. The big boss, Fred Metz, had invited a dozen or so of town big-wigs to come to Happy Hour to see how the gang at the base relaxed. I took great offense at what Rosie was doing to our simulated flag so several of us charged their group to stop the outrage. Soon there were 25 or 30 guys wrestling, sweating, cussing in a fur ball in front of the bar trying to take possession of the flag. It was a worthy cause. Fred didn’t like the impression we were making. Rosie and I were locked in deadly battle. Soon Fred took charge and broke it up. Rosie and I had a private on-the-spot meeting with Fred who threw us both out of the club. We were certain of our positions in the matter but Fred was unimpressed. The townie guys were impressed. Clearly, this was not a gathering of librarians or stamp collectors. These guys worked hard and played hard. About a month later, Rosie and I were allowed back in the club. I had been threatened about losing my job but in the meantime, local morale soared to new highs. You gotta do what you gotta do.

Boxman - VA-128 CO

There we were...headed out to the ship for the cruise fly-on. USS Carl Vinson was on the way for its maiden cruise. We left from Norfolk and would end up in Alameda during the around the world trip. It was January. There was lots of wind...40 to 50 knots of wind. When Bert and I checked in with Strike, we heard the report that the ship was backing down 10 to 15 knots and to anticipate the wake being in front of the ship. Hard to believe but true. For over 8 hours, the ship operated in reverse in order to reduce the amount of wind so the air wing could get aboard and go on cruise. Coming into the break gave YOU a weird vertigo feeling. The signature wake we were all accustomed to, originated at the bow rather than at the stern.

Boxman and Bert - VA-52 CO and Stick

There we were.. JO’s enroute to the east coast in a flight of three 128 birds to attend a shipmates wedding at Annapolis. Sully brings his portable radio. He lays it on the glare shield and stretches out the antenna. He plugs in the ear jack in the radio, takes his gum and sticks the ear phone right next to the mike in his mask. Oxygen off, go light on the VOX and the ICS and we have stereo all the way across country. Reception is good at FL 290 but you have to change stations a lot. Good tunes (country, of course) get broadcast now and then in short bursts to our wingman by merely keying the UHF button. Late that night after the pre-wedding party and stag night trip into town, Sully only slightly sticks his sword in my sternum during a fight with ceremonial swords and shit-can lids. Didn’t defend good enough. No real harm done but we did sober up a bit. Bones are hard and don’t bleed much. Return trip home is less colorful.

Boxman and Sully - VA-128 JO’s

There we were .. JO’s on our first day at Fallon on the air wing det. We are started and waiting our turn to taxi out of the line. Our A-6A has a new chaff panel on my upper glare shield that we had been briefed on. I toggle the manual switch once and could hear a neat sound over the ICS. Abe asks me what was that noise. I show him. He says, do it again. I do. Soon a frantic troubleshooter runs up waving his arms to (yet our attention. His buddy troubleshooter has his shirt off which now contains a whole bunch of chaff. We look back and see lots of shiny chaff blowing across the ramp. Not good. But we heard that chaff was good for an engine. Makes it clean and shiny inside. We don’t dump anymore chaff on the ground. We do, though, get our butts chewed on return to the ready room. Chaff switch must have been mis-wired. We got good hits though.

Boxman and Abe - VA-165 JO’s 13
There we were... returning from another SOCAL RAG CQ Det. We had just launched out of NAS North Island working to break the record for shortest flight time from brake release to touchdown at Whidbey. We were headed north in a max rate of climb passing about 15,000 feet. I had my mask dangling off to the side of my helmet and started to get a little tingling feeling and a little light-headed. I noted the altimeter and asked Sully what the cabin pressure was. He said it read 22,000 feet. I quickly turned on my oxygen and put on my mask. I told him that was impossible; we were only passing 15,000 feet. Pretty soon, we got the initial phases of pressure breathing through our masks. Wow, this was bizarre. We were pretty confused. We noted the altimeter passing 17,000 feet with the cabin pressure now above 30,000 feet. We thought our pitot static system was screwed up, in addition to a non-functioning pressurization system. We were concerned about having busted our altitude clearance limit plus having to limp back to Whidbey. Then I noticed a slight opening in the canopy. It had opened about 3/4’s of an inch. I told Sully about it and he de-Isolated the hydraulic system and I reactivated the canopy switch. The canopy came closed and the pressurization system rapidly drove the cabin down to the normal 8,000 feet. We then determined that the slightly open canopy had created a huge suction in the cockpit and in fact the cabin pressure had been accurate and we had been pressure breathing. We abandoned our speed record attempt and proceeded normally. We had to re-close the canopy several times on the way home. Just another hop in an A-6A in the good old days. That incident and others like it always made me wonder why we didn’t have a cabin pressure warning light on the annunciator panel. I’m sure it could have saved many lives over the past 40 years. But then, if your oxygen mask is always on it’s no problem. Right?

Boxman and Sully - VA-128 JO’s

There we were…feet wet after chasing monkeys out of trees. Carried a buddy store just in case somebody needed a sip. Triple Sticks joins up and we slip him 1.5. As he departs, he lights the burners and pulls his nose to the vertical. Deb looks at me and sez, “Whattajerk!” We switch tower and hear “Boss, this is Triple Sticks for a low fly by.” Deb sez, “Watch this”. I sez, “Oh crap”. We tuck in underneath the F-4 and as we fly past the boat I get a nice view of the hanger deck overhead. We follow Triple Sticks through a victory roll and break off in the opposite direction. After our post-flight interview with CAG, the Skipper has his turn… “There’s only one reason I’m no grounding both of you … the troops loved it!”

DEBBENORT / WYCKOFF 1971 VA-52

You know what always gave you a warm and fuzzy feeling (NOT!) was the fact that these F-4 “tactical fighter-bombers” (as dubbed by the media) who would carry six, count em, six MK-82s on a bombing hop and come back with two hung also doubled as the “eyes of the fleet”. Why, then, were these guys never able to find the A-6 tanker overhead the ship (high or low station)? “Tanker Posit”, I have come to believe, was part of their call sign. Why did we, as A-6 crews, always seem to see them first and rendezvous on them? Inquiring minds want to know!
There we were...we left Oakland Center and checked in with Seattle and asked for inertial direct Whidbey. Seattle said they were unable. I’m cursed with one of those voices which is readily recognizable on the radio. Someone heard me check in and said, “Wacker, is that you...welcome home”! I said thanks and center asked how long I was gone. I said, “Three years...got back from Japan in Oct” (1982). Their reply was, “November Juliet 800. Seattle Center clears you present position inertial direct NAVY Whidbey. “ Pretty nice, huh?

“Wacker” WYCKOFF 1983

There we were...a bright, beautiful, but boring night at the shoals off the PI as the Midway makes its way back from the 10. We’re part of the flight of four armed with flares and MK-76s, and our mission is to strike the dreaded hulk. Over the air we hear the sound of a telephone ring about six times. Soon it rings again and somebody sez, “ANSWER THE DAMN PHONE, WILL YA”! No more boredom that night.

“Wacker” WYCKOFF

There we were...on the midnight-to-noon schedule, the 7th cycle of an 8 cycle Kitty Hawk flight plan...in a KA-6 tanker enroute to the Hawk’s BARCAP, our third hop of the day. Having two radios in the cockpit was such a novel concept to us A-6A types that it made the tanker hop somewhat entertaining. You can “dial-in” all sorts of people...other squadron’s base freq, other carriers in the area...all sorts of people. Well, I just happened to hit on a freq that had the typical fighter-pilot argon goings-on...“I got a Judy left five, I’m going high...you break right...blah, blah.” I quickly cycled through that freq in search of something less annoying and obnoxious. About the same time, on the other radio, we get instructions for a “steer” away from the BARCAP’s usual location and vectored toward feet-dry direction. We were told to switch to a specific freq and did so with the first words I hear were, you guessed it, “Tanker Posit”. Well, I’m tired. My body hasn’t adjusted to the mid-night to noon thing yet...I just turned, looked at Larry and just shook my head...I was so tired of these fighter types...I refused to answer. About the fourth “Tanker Posit” Larry finally gave in and gave them a tacan cut from a station they weren’t receiving yet. I saw them and pointed at our 11 o’clock to Larry. (You could see them from many miles away because those “tactical fighter-bombers” didn’t have smokeless burner cans yet). Shortly thereafter, we hear, “One’s got a contact, 10 right at 8, steer 125, Judy...two’s get ‘em, blah, blah, blah, blah...”the same old typical stuff. However, they seemed a bit more verbose than normal...a bit more excited...kinda like on adrenalin. It seemed like it went on forever. Like it was never going to stop. When there was a bit of a lapse in their conversation with the lead, dash 1, lead’s RIO, dash 1’s RIO, I keyed my mic and said, “Gosh, doyou guys get MIGs this way”? The response was, “YUP, you bet!” Well, as it turned out that freq that I had found was these guys and they were actually mixing it up with two MIGs! They actually shot down two MIGs and really needed the gas. My only concern now was they better hurry and recover before their heads swelled so much they wouldn’t be able to get their helmets off!

YARHAM / HOUSE 1972 VA-52
There we were ... returning from a CQ det in Pcola via Holoman so FRP can have lunch with his Air Force sister. After lunch we takeoff and check in with center. The controller is a former sailor, traffic is light, and he’s in a mood to chat with the NAVY. Turns out he used to be an A-6 plane captain before coming an air controller. Heavy buildups ahead so I ask to deviate to the right and he approves the request. Just then a flight of 4 southbound F-16s checks in and asks for vectors around the weather. The controller says he’s unable - IFF only - but has an A-6 available if they really need help. “A what? sez the Air Force. “A NAVY A-6, “ sez center. “Ah… weather’s no sweat …we can hack it”. Their next couple of transmissions sounded like something coming from a hovering Huey ....and I could just imagine the smile of the controllers face.

“Wacker” WYCKOFF VA-128 1984

There we were ... in VA-128’s Ready Room about. The top midshipman in the senior class at the Naval Academy was airborne in one of our jets as part of his indoc program to try to get him to go aviation. Things were not going well. His pilot had called the SDO to tell him that his port main gear was showing barber poled when he dropped the gear to land. Hugh Replogle (Huge Rep) was the Safety Officer and was in the ready room. After all the recycling and trying to blow the gear down with no success, Huge recommended the Duty Officer tell the pilot to open the canopy and lean out of the cockpit to see if the forward gear door was open or closed. Great idea if you want your head torn off. We all quickly vetoed that idea. After foaming the runway, getting the SAR helo airborne to standby, they finally took a no sweat arrested landing. The boat school guy went subs. Huge didn’t make an input for an emergency procedure change.

Boxman VA-128 JO 1972

There we were... in Las Vegas for the Tailhook Convention. A bunch of the A-6 guys from VX-5 in China Lake had made the trek to join up with buds from Whidbey. Saturday night. Remembering the old VA-196 tradition of having a picture taken of the squadron drinking flag next to the Hilton flag all around the world, we decided to steal the Hilton flag instead. The grand entrance to the Vegas Hilton is lined with about 50 huge flagpoles. A few of us created a big diversionary distraction near the main entrance while two other guys snuck out and ran down the flag. They wadded it up and stuffed it into the camper that we had driven over from China Lake. No sweat. Very clean heist. The next day on the way home, we inspected our prize. OOPS! Wrong flag. They nabbed the Nevada State flag instead of the Hilton flag. It was a real nice flag though. Hope there is a statute of limitations for borrowing a state flag.

Anonymous JO 1977

There we were ... at the Intruder Ball. It’s after dinner, the speeches are over and we’re enjoying a great cigar and multiple after dinner drinks. Somebody sez they hungry. Too late, chows all gone. Somebody grabs the table flower arrangement and woofs down a tulip. Not bad, he reports. Why not, we all grab one and munch it. My XO, Andy Solum, decides to slam a chrysanthemum. Tastes bitter he reports. Not only that, he starts to look a little funny and grabs his throat. Throat feels swollen. Not good. A quick trip up the hill to the hospital gets him some magic potion good for flowers and moths. Marines should always stick to tulips.

Boxman VA-128 CO 1984
There we were ... at the El Centro Air Show. The Blues were putting on their first show of the season. On Saturday, all the static display Jets were lined up with their data placards and ropes set up and the early crowd was starting to filter in. The VA-128 JO’s decided to give the crowd a treat and show them Flagger’s famous El Centro station wagon. It’s name was FI Banyo (The Toilet). It was beat up, painted up in authentic aircraft markings but was plenty good to haul multiple person’s from the base to the border and high speed runs to great Mexican restaurants in town. Flagger had made a great official looking placards extolling the speed, range, horsepower, and the number of dangerous trips across the border. They popped open the hood and hung the placard after setting up their own perimeter ropes. It was parked on the line with all the other combat aircraft and seemed to fit in fine with the F-14’s, F-16’s, A-6’s, etc. Dutiful spectators slowly walked by and stopped to read the sign. It seemed to us that they were impressed and naturally thought it was part of the military display of hardware. They would peer into the engine compartment and quizzically scratch their head. We saw one guy and his kid have their picture taken in front of it. The NAS XO was less than amused by it all. In fact, he got down right indignant. Sadly, the people who came on Sunday didn’t get to see it.

Boxman VA-128 CO 1984

There we were ... on the same VA-128 Vis Weps Det at El Centro. The instructors’ Margaritaville had been quickly reestablished and was working smoothly. The student watch bill for who was going to make the nightly run across the border to bring back the triple sec for the instructors was implemented. Because of BOQ space shortages, the base put most everyone in a base house, about 4 guys per house. Staff versus student high jinks and suitable retaliations were a det tradition and an obligation for the sake of morale during the three week det. The local K-mart had a great bargain on Uzi style squirt guns that would shoot about 30 feet. One Sunday afternoon a bunch of the staff guys decided to raid one of the student houses where they were busily planning the next days hops. Because of the international political climate at the time, we decided to tie towels around our heads and raid the place like a bunch of zealot rag-heads. We smoothly rolled up the street in Flagger’s station wagon, El Banyo, and plied out of the machine screaming and yelling and raiding while waving our Uzi’s. Unfortunately, the Base CO decided to live right next door. He and his guests at his barbecue stared over the fence watching us but didn’t seem to see the humor in the event. He thought the bad guys had gotten the wrong house and were after him. He explained that carefully to me the next morning. Four or five days later, the students borrowed two blue dummy 500# bombs and with no small amount of effort, laid one on the porch and one on the lawn of the instructors’ house. Some guy saw them on his way to work about 6 o’clock that morning and called the police and bomb squad. He didn’t know about blue bombs. The base CO didn’t seem to understand the need to continue these morale raising events. He had a real nice office. I got to see it quite a bit on that det.

Boxman VA-128 CO 1984

There they were ... (as relayed to me second hand) ... having just arrived in Cubi at the start of cruise. Eating a live gecko was considered a necessary thing to do after having a drink or two or nine. Just ask “Ferd” Jung). Some times of the year, geckos are hard to find and even when they’re plentiful, they’re real hard to catch. Not to worry, a slight substitute should qualify. Larry Munns decided to get his X in the box by slamming one of those big moths that were flopping around that night. Big, hairy, dusty-winged moths. Down the hatch after some wild wing beating on the face before entry. Great. Not great. Lips feel funny, cheeks are fire engine red and his throat feels tight Holy Shit! Get him to the hospital. They do…and the doc doesn’t like the story or the result. A little magic potion and an overnight at Jungle General and things are fine. “Moth” Munns sticks to geckos in the future. I doubt he’ll amount to anything.

Second hand to Boxman 1974
There we were...in the Pl. We were near the end of cruise and we had appropriately met the Lizards of VA-95 when they flew into Cubi as they started their deployment. After having some light libations at the BOQ pool with our Whidbey buds and throwing Scrapper in the pool, uniform and all, Arb and I decided we had better haul it into town where 196 was having a going away dinner for some short timers. As we walked three or four blocks up the streets of Olongapo toward the Rose Room restaurant, we saw a balloon vendor on the sidewalk. Gotta have a few balloons to be in the festive mood. No, - Arb decided we needed all the balloons. I'm sure we got a hell of a bargain from the guy. We entered the restaurant and distributed the balloons that were soon tied to the drink glasses and were seen merrily bobbing up and down. After dinner and prior to the speeches, the gang was smoozing and hitting the head. I came out of the head and lit a cigarette. I walked toward my table and saw Skipper Gordy Nakagawa leaning over talking to somebody. I walked up behind him and held my cigarette to the nearest balloon, expecting a modest pop. WRONG! I got a huge fireball that torched all the hair off my left arm and trimmed by stylish left sideburn. The fireball roared to the ceiling where the flames rippled out like waves in a pond as it gobbled up the dust and dirt clinging to the overhead. Gordy lurched up and threw his back out. We all thought we were dead. Instead of helium, they had used hydrogen. (!!). Not good. After seeing the place wasn’t going to burn down and Gordy or I didn’t need a doctor, my fellow JO’s thought it was a great show. Several more small nukes went off in the place before the Skipper declared it uncool.

After the ceremonies were over, balloons were seen exploding in the sky outside after lighting short-tied paper napkins. Preflight your balloons carefully.

JO’s Boxman and Arb VA-196 1975

There we were... mid cruise, “Blue Sky” exercise off Taiwan, Coral Sea INS alignment was normal, 45-60 miles in error. The track between Taiwan and Red China was given to the Richmond/Ackerbauer crew. Low level, bad INS resulted in the Red Chinese launching a fighter intercept and flying wing on the Lizard A6. “Keep your head down, Ack, we are headed back to the ship”. Throttles were bent forward and a lizard came home safely. Investigation followed with the staff on board. It was tough trying to show the Chief of Staff (VF type) how to use a DR plotter, explain navigation and a bad INS alignment. Just give a fighter pilot the “Tanker Posit” and he’s happy. Thank God for CAG (Hoagy Carmichael). We all survived.

CO Westfall VA-95 1975

There we were... happy hours are great for innovative ideas, problem solving, career enhancing talks. “How about a motorcycle group in the 4th of July parade, wearing “SH flight suits, and T Toms can parachute into the parade?” Skipper, you can lead the group ... just ride straight and don’t fall down”. “Hot Shoe Porter” organized and practiced the ‘lizards’. Parade day, all went well with circles, weaves, and figure 8’s, T. Toms landed safely in the bank parking lot off Hwy 20/Pioneer. Debrief was conducted at the O.H.T. (where else!?) A ‘lizard’ came in...we won a trophy as the unique group in the parade. Command Guidance... “Get it and bring it back. We’re in the middle of a de-brief.”

CO Westfall VA-95 1975
There we were ... liberty in San Diego was wonderful except when fourteen “lizards” in one rental car were stopped by a California state patrolman after a night on the town. As he stood there, shaking his head, he said, “Take two guys out of the four in the trunk and get the hell out of here.” Being good Naval officers we complied and returned to Miramar.

XO Westfall VA-95 1974

There I was ... becoming CO is the greatest job in the Navy, but ... are there problems? NEVER!!! Well, you have the XO of the Coral Sea calling you to his stateroom. “Skipper Van, we have a problem” as he presented me with a huge garbage bag of empty bottles ... none were Coke cans. Wonder how many ex-CO’s and now 0-6s can remember this?!

CO Westfall VA-95 1975

There we were ... happy hours are great except when a young JO - T. Toms, a qualified parachute instructor says, “I'll teach you and we'll all have fun.” Instruction followed and jump day arrived. Steve Richmond, a ‘hot sh-t’, broke his leg trying to show up the skipper. John Schork drifted into the trees, not once but twice, as the group is yelling “Cross your legs”. Those were the days.

CO Westfall VA-95 1975

There we were ... midnight tankers were always interesting, fond memories, consolidating with the 0 100 (CAG) and ready to go back to the “Coral Maru.” Seems like the tankee transferred too much fuel, OOPS - “CAG, we need a little touch.” Plug went well, transferred commenced. B/N monitoring fuel sez, “We aren’t getting any.” Pilot panicked, B/N started yelling ... didn’t need the ICS. Seems like there was a switch problem ... if you have the dumps on it’s hard to get enough fuel for a few approaches. We have all seen the ‘red light’ and an 1800# trap.

Scraper/Westfall VA-95 1975

There we were ... in overhead high-holding, after giving all of our KA-6D “give” away to F-14s so they could chase Bears coming out to see USS Enterprise from Cam Ranh Bay. Killer and I were at 23,000 feet minding our own business, playing hangman on my kneeboard (I’m left handed, so it works out well) when all of a sudden the sun disappeared. “What the ... !?” As we looked up, we could count the rivets on the underside of that beautiful Soviet maritime patrol aircraft. As I keyed the mic to clue the ship as to the whereabouts of Boris, Killer pulled aggressively on the pole, forgetting we were “hanging on the blades.” After flopping through a few thousand feet overhead Mother, we recovered, and decided that Bear chasing was better left up to the guys with the big watches.

Killer/Pappy VA-95 1988
There we were ... off So Cal prior to the ’72 cruise. USS Kitty Hawk / CAG I I WEPTRAEX workups. Strip charts overflowing from nav bags, kneeboard code word cards, “Red Flag” special weapons handling procedures booklets, etc, etc. We emerged from the catwalk and found our trusty airplane. We were loaded with, not one, but two B-61’s ... sleek, chromed, shining beauties! It’s the A6 with the armed Marines all around it! (I wonder if they also had training rounds in those M-16s).

Preflight, startup, and nuclear weapons checklists all done by the book. Launch went right on time, as per the air plan. Our mission was a two plane for part of the way, a simulated drop on a Yuma target, and eventual recovery at NORIS. Our wingman was an A-7. We rendezvoused overhead at the pre-briefed point and headed for the So Cal coast. We played the game as much as possible with the low level entry, TACAN to receive, IFF to STBY and zip lip. The late afternoon weather was the usual haze with scattered clouds at coast in.

To this day, I don’t know how we got lost. I could blame it on a bad system, bad alignment, the ships PIM or whatever. We’re DR nav-ing this route, trying to stay VFR, dodging a few clouds, with the A-7 flying off our right wing. You just kinda get this feeling that you’re not where you think you are. Going from chart to ground and ground to chart...I pointed to that big river headed our direction out the pilots window... “Is that the Rio Grande River over there?” About that time my helmet hits the canopy and we’re in a left turn, pulling 4Gs headed north. As the river goes under the wing, one’s mind kinda thinks how the headline in the National Enquirer would read? NAVY A-6 CREW NUKES MEXICO...film at 11:00. Needless to say we “detached” the A-7 at that point, sooner than planned. I figured my career was history. The TACAN went to transmit/receive and we “found” ourselves. (The IFF came back on when we were back well inside the good old US of A). We landed at NORIS like nothing happened. Larry still, to this day, reminds me about this one. Ah, yes, those were the days...

YARHAM / HOUSE VA-52 1972

There we were ...we launched off the Coral Sea as a target for an Taiwanese Air Defense Exercise. Unfortunately the Air Boss gave us the wrong launch position on the 5MC. We were one degree farther North (i.e. 60 NM closer to Red China) than we thought. Our low alt ingress (with radar off in order to delay our detection) combined with a bit of salt spray on the windscreen caused us to be only about 9 miles from land before we could see it. Unfortunately we were expecting to see Taiwan on our right and saw Red China off to our left. Almost simultaneously we heard lots of garble on guard and “Hot Dog” calls. None of whose meaning was briefed by CVIC etc. We were intercepted by numerous F-5’s and who either thought we were lost or disoriented. One took trail position while the others tried to get us to follow them. They gave us the international sign for you have been intercepted and we want you to land there... pointing to Taipei. When they did that, Steve gave me some great advice... just look straight ahead... don’t even look at them. As we disregarded their signals, we proceeded south over-flying the entire island of Taiwan at medium altitude. Once feet wet we descended and flew to the ship as low and fast as our trusty Intruder could go. Soon they turned around as we ran them out of gas. We thought we’d be home free and nobody would be the wiser.

Not so fast. Immediately after we got on deck they wanted to see Richmond and Ackerbauer in the war room. It seems that the SDO had heard that we’d landed at Taipei. Intel had learned that the Red Chinese had launched every up MIG on the west coast to have a piece of us. Luckily we had turned East just in time and they were unable to catch us. We had obviously violated Red Chinese airspace and were close to being shot down. Our skipper, CDR Westfall, stuck up for us and threw his command pin on the table with the words, “You can take this pin but you won’t touch my guys.” We were called to the warroom Just about every night at midnight for a week while the State Dept and DOD asked us inane and irrelevant questions about the incident. Fortunately that was our only punishment because the skipper stuck up for his boys and we never read about it again... except in the welcome home skit.

(Acks version) RICHMOND / ACKERBAUER VA-95 1975
There we were...at 20’ above the water headed for Red China. We were supposed to be sneaking up on the Chinese Nationals on Taiwan. When we manned up for launch the ship’s posit was announced over the SMC by the air boss. I saw Ack write it on his hand. It was about 60 miles off from our true position. We got an alignment and launched off on a DR heading for our first turn point. I made Ack turn off the radar, TACAN to receive, IFF off, we were really going to sneak up on those guys!

We saw a coastline but we weren’t sure what it was. I eased up a little higher and got a TACAN azimuth only lock-on pointing back behind our wing. Bad news! This coastline must not be Taiwan, but Red China. We turned and started to “buster” for the USS Coral Sea just as we were intercepted by a couple of National Chinese fighters. They were calling us on guard using our BuNo telling us to land at Taipei. Fat Chance!! Ack and I knew our careers were over but we were going to tell our story on the boat. I told Ack not to answer on the radio and not to look at the guys joined on our wing. We just proceeded straight “back sheep”. I was never so happy to see two F-4s join-upon us and escort us back to the ship. That got rid of the CHINATS.

Fast forward to the Admiral’s stateroom where we were drilled, on and off, for seven nights in a row. The CHINATS thought we were trying to start WW III. Our skipper, Van Westfall, backed us 100% At one point he tossed his command button on the table and told the Admiral, “Don’t try to hang this crew. I’ll put the navigator, the ship, everybody involved on report! “ The Admiral basically answered, “Not to worry…nobody was going to hang. “ Turns out he was right, but at the time it looked like the end of two illustrious careers.

Take my word for it. You never want to be involved in an “International Incident”.

RICHMOND / ACKERBAUER VA-95 1975

There I was... in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on USS Coral Sea. We were told we would have five hours of liberty because we were on our way back to the states and that’s all the time we needed to load some provisions on board. Of course, all the JOs headed straight for the O’Club. As we were leaving, an announcement on the 1 MC said to be back aboard at 1330 instead of 1500 since the ship would be leaving early. I thought it was just a scare tactic to get us aboard early,

At the O’Club we tried to drink all their cold beer before time ran out. I fell in love with a waitress at the club about 1300. (This was between marriages for me). We went for a ride in her GTO while all the smart JOs went back to the ship. A little while later I noticed the cranes were lifting the brows from the ship. Oh, Oh!! We went screaming down to the dock. I jumped out and ran to the sponson where the quarterdeck is located and yelled “Throw me a line! Meanwhile 4,000 guys in whites are manning the rails and watching to see what this LT would do next. I made a running jump and caught this 1/2” white nylon line (the ship was only a few feet from the pier). As soon as I caught the line, the four or five sailors on the other end started to pull me up. Unfortunately, I kept whacking my shoulder against the rounded bottom of the sponson. So it went..., Heave...whack my shoulder. Swing back out where they could see me..., Heave - whack my shoulder again. Finally, I got up and over the railing... trying to cover my nametag with one hand and salute with the other. My hat was long gone. It’s a good thing my CO was up on the bridge and the skipper of the ship thought it was funny or else I would have been in “hack” again. My XO, Van Westfall, didn’t think it was funny at all and chewed me out as only he could. He said, “That’s strike two. One more and you’re out of the squadron”.

Years later, when Van was XO of USS Ranger and I reported in as flight deck officer I asked him, “New ballgame, new strikes?” He said, “You’re still working on two strikes ... same ballgame”.

JO Steve Richmond VA-95 1973
There we were... at 1,000' over the “Connie” during a practice airshow. We were supposed to have two A-3 tankers, an F-4 was to plug into one, and we were to lilt the other one just as we overflew the boat. Unfortunately, there was only one A-3 up this day, and CAG briefed the F-4 to plug in first, then unplug and let us plug in overhead. The F-4 unplugged with about a mile to go and in my haste to get plugged in and look good, I had to use full power to get in and then idle / speedbrakes to stop the closure rate. Unfortunately, I shut both engines off by mistake. Realizing what I had done, I unplugged, started a glide, pulled the RAT (Ram Air Turbine), and started a relight attempt. I told Dick to “get ready to eject” (fortunately I had my boom mike on so he could hear me - It was real quiet in that cockpit).

At 400 feet MSL, Dick ejected. Boom! Kneeboard cards went everywhere. He went through the canopy. I had idle power at 100 feet. I started leveling off at approximately 50 feet, got it trimmed up and reached for the face curtain over my head. Just then the old A6 engines started really thundering and it zoomed backup. Dick landed just aft of the destroyer (we were making our pass bow to stem). The helo came in to pick him up but wouldn’t go into a hover until I left the area. I was circling him at 500 feet, 60 degree angle of bank, full power, and the adrenaline was pumping big time.

My buddy, Dan Brandenstein and his B/N Bud White came down and joined on my right wing, coaxing me away from the crime scene. The Captain came up on the radio and asked me if I had any other problems, except for a hole in the canopy. I said “NO SIR” so he told me to hold until the rehearsal was over and recover aboard.

I dropped my 10 Mk 82 bombs one at a time in a safe area and watched them blow up (we were supposed to be in a bombing demo later in the show... but I was excused). I landed solo and received a grade of “OK - 3 wire (Little not enuf B/N)”. Of course the helo had already picked up my B/N, Dick, and deposited him safely aboard the boat where he told everyone “his stupid pilot shut the engines off.” I was mad because I had my story already worked out - this might have been the first A-6 double flame-out caused by fuel ingestion from a defective air refueling drogue. My skipper, CDR Lou Dittmar, asked me if I thought that would ever happen to me again - I said, “No Sir!” So he let me fly in the actual airshow, but the B/Ns had to draw straws to see who would fly with me because Dick was down for a few days with a compression fracture. He forgave me, eventually, and we flew together for one whole cruise. I never did that again!

LTJG Steve Richmond / LTJG Dick Littke VA- 196 1969

President Regan had had enough of the Iranians in 1988, especially after USS Samuel B. Roberts hit a mine in the Persian Gulf. VA-95 got to exercise their war-at-sea TACPRO. I was a second cruise LT, so I was able to bag extra flight time with DCAG. CDR “Bud” Langston took me up the Straight of Hormuz on my first “green ink” hop. The ship we were looking for had to be visually identified (defined as reading the hull number) before engagement. After numerous attempts to ID our target from a stand off position, it was decided that a high speed (a relative term in the A6), low pass by the vessel would be the only way to positively ID it. As we flew down the vessel’s port side (with the junior crew member’s side of the aircraft closest to the contact), I noticed what seemed to be flashbulbs popping on the port bridge wing. It took me a moment or two to figure out that the Iranians probably weren’t taking our picture. We read the hull number alright ... and as we pulled off target, CDR Langston quipped over the ICS, “So Pappy, do you think that was them?” I’m not sure, but I swore I could see him smiling behind that mask and visor...

Pappy VA-95 1988
The following are thoughts from Steve “Smiley” Enewold...

**BEST TRAINING COMMAND EXPERIENCE** - I got an A-6 “Fleet Seat”--What’s an A-6? June 1974

**MOST INSPIRING ROAD SIGN** - “The Sound of Freedom” - Whidbey Island’s Route 20 - December 1974

**LEAST PRIVATE HOUSE DESIGN** - Back to back bedrooms with Bob and Linda Taylor - The duplex on the Seaplane Base - 1975

**FIRST TIME I SAW HEADLIGHTS ABOVE ME** - While flying Joe Accord - July 1975

**QUICKEST CLimb TO EMERGENCY SAFE ALTITUDE** - A-6A emergency on a night low level -”Rookie” Word - July 1975

**FIRST STUDENT-STUDENT FLIGHT** - “Chic” Merwine - YUMA June 1975

**FASTEST B/N PUKE** - “Chic Merwine” - YUMA - Taxiing for takeoff - June 1975

**FIRST “TAILHOOK” LOW LEVEL** (IR-342 for the new guys) - A-6A Dave Russell - August 1975

**FIRST “FLEET” SORTIE** - With the Milestone - Jim Burin - August 1975

**MOST EMBARRASSING SORTIE** - Getting temporarily disoriented (Lost) enroute to Coupeville for FCLPs -Mike Heath 1975

**FIRST TIME I FELT THE CONCUSSIONS** of live ordnance - LCDR “Boxman” Wood November 1975

**MOST CONSISTENT PUKE AND BOMB, THEN BOMB AND PUKE PERFORMANCE** - George Shaffer - 1975 through 1980

**BEST CREW COORDINATION AND FIRST COMPLETE SORTIE WITHOUT SPEAKING** - George Shaffer - 1976

**BEST DEAL AROUND** - “Mom’s”, Fallon. A lucky buck, a roll of nickels, and a free drink for a dollar (Military only) - Circa 1975-1985

**ALL NIGHT AMAC TESTS AND LOADING DRILLS** - The milestones - George Shaffer / Bob Jabobs -Circa 1976

**FIRST SQUADRON TAILHOOK AWARD** - “The Big E” - The Milestones - 1976

**BEST EIGHT MAN BUNKROOM ON THE BIG “E”** - Indorf, Shaffer, Love, Estes, Fuchs, Coffey, Cozad - 1976

**BEST STORY TO TELL A NON-MILITARY FAMILY ABOUT DEPLOYMENTS** - “I left before my daughter was walking and returned after she was talking” - circa 1981

**BIGGEST JOKE** - Called a Fighter Pilot by Air Force test pilots - 1983

**LARGEST EXTERNAL LOAD FIELD TAKEOFF** - 15 Mk 83’s - summer - China Lake - George “Dutch” Vantine - 1985
FIRST CHRISTMAS AWAY FROM HOME - The Milestones - 1976

BEST FOREIGN BEER - Tasmania - Cascade beer from special “Enterprise Vintage” - Hobart, Australia -1976

BEST SENIOR LEADERSHIP DEMONSTRATION - The senior “WOG”, crossing the line ceremonies - Skipper John Helligus - 1976

BEST RETIREMENT CEREMONY - The entire air wing threw brown shoes overboard - Big “E” and the Milestones - Circa 1977

BEST QUOTE BY A SHIP DRIVER - CO of the tugboat, CRFE, “I could tell it was an A-7 because of the two big intakes,” after bombing the CREF - 1978

BEST PICTURE - CO of the CREE on the front page of the San Diego Times with a new leather flight jacket and aviator sunglasses - 1978

MOST CONSISTENT RELIEF TUBE UTILIZATION - (Usually immediately after takeoff) - Jamie Kelly - Circa 1978

MOST HUMILIATING DISCOVERY - Cat I FRS record revealed I was equal to or better than 2% of my contemporaries - Circa 1978

BEST PACKING JOB - Skipper Bull who got a full set of golf clubs in the birdcage - 1978

FIRST INSTRUCTOR HOP AND MOST GRATEFUL - Had a fire at Boardman - Night landing at Pendleton - Lee Hull “Willie” Washer picked us up at Pendleton airport and took care of us.

BEST BOMBING DERBY SAVES: 1) Bob “Jake” Jacobs for the airborne photo of the cockpit buno face plate to validate our pictures; 2) Denby Starling for the night AMTI MRL/Visual combination - Bullseye; 3) Brett “Burt” Bernier - The verbal bomb tone at Spokane

WORST STALL SERIES EXECUTION - An Air Force test pilot departed during a wings level dirty stall and recovered from an inverted 30 degree nose low unusual attitude - 1979

LONGEST LOW LEVEL - VFR from Edwards AF13 to Mt. Baker and the IFR approach into Whidbey - Bill “Otis” Shurtleff - 1979

MOST DISAPPOINTING FLIGHTS - With the 3.0G “Bombers” - Intruder Community

WIERDEST OCCURRENCE - Cockpit light stayed on after shutdown (see cockpit fire) BOXMAN 1979

MOST DEDICATED FCF CREW - “B” Profile functional test flight while the super bowl was on - Don Brown - 1979

MOST UNIQUE B/N COMMENT - “I can give you steering to the moon”, after finding the lunar sphere on his “new” FLIR - George Shaffer - Circa 1980 - The Golden Intruders

A-6E BLOCK 1A UPGRADE HOP - China Lake - “Shuffle” Shuffield - June 1993
WORST HOP - Getting lost with the PCO Pat Huaert on an IR-340 Route - 1980

FIRST AND ONLY NIGHT IFR TANKER FCF FROM CV - Air wing was launched in Zero-Zero conditions and needed the fuel - Boxman 1981

MOST EXCITING RIDE - Vertical departures - Indian Ocean - Boxman --Circa 1981

BEST ACEY DUCEY TOURNAMENT - Singapore - Brad Clark 1981

BEST CONTROLLER (DENVER APPROACH CONTROL) QUOTE - “All you little guys that are down low and VFR, Shut Up!” - as our three plane did an emergency breakup enroute to Buckley in a thunderstorm. - Don Sullivan 1980

WORST PLUG - The CO tore the basket off an A-3 tanker - sending the rest of us to divert fields all over the Southeast - Dave Wagner - 1981

WORST TURNAROUND - Barksdale AFB during a SAC exercise - same day

WORST PITCHING DECK - USS Kitty Hawk - summer IO – I lost the landing area lights after calling the ball -Don Quinn - 1981

FIRST AND ONLY ARRESTMENT WITH THE BALL OFF THE TOP - Kitty Hawk - Don Quinn - 1981

THE MOST SCARED - Woke up in the high tanker pattern and found the B/N asleep - Boxman - circa 1981


LEAST SUCCESSFUL IDEA - Vacuuming the cockpit inflight by opening the canopy during negative G inverted flight conditions - Boxman - circa 1982

SECOND LEAST SUCCESSFUL IDEA - Using a huffer to “blow” the RAT for electrical power for a start - Brent “Giggles” Beck - 1981

SECOND SOREST BUTT - 8.6 hop from Diego to Cubi and the fly-by at Midway - “Jaws” Russell - May 1987

BEST INFLIGHT MEAL - Pizza between Diego and Cubi.

LARGEST SHIP’S ROLL - 28 degrees on the VGI - USS Midway- John Arnold - 1987

TOUGHEST HOP - E-230 indoc flight with John Lehman - 1987

MOST DISGUSTING LIBERTY - Babies and cobras in Karachi - 1987

MOST SURPRISED - Seeing my head on Grumman’s Intruder advertisement - “FEW KNOW THE POWER” - Dave Cook - 1987

MOST GRATIFYING ECP - The command ejection system and the first save of a “would-have-been-sure-fatal” mishap, circa 1993

BEST FISHING TRIP AND THE WORST SUNBURN - The Diego Garcia fishing expedition with Dan Wendling and “Marblehead” - April 1987
MOST SURPRISING HIT - A CCIP Bullseye at B-19 on a 450 KT/80 FT AGL laydown on the “first ever” A-6 CCIP release with a developmental software tape. - LCDR Lucchasi/Dr. Russ Rupp - circa 1985

BEST OF TIMES AND THE WORST OF TIMES - A-6F development with the “Intruder family” - Joe Ruggierio / Werner Hueber / Roy Westcott / Joe Cagnazzi - 1986

BEST FUEL USAGE - Landing at Whidbey with 1500 pounds after having 4.2 flight hours over Mountain Home AFB - FL 450 - LCDR Lucchasi - circa 1985

MOST KNOWLEDGEABLE A6 “SYSTEMS” ENGINEER - Bill Dykama - Ballistics and software engineering - E-1.5 through E-300 Operational Flight Programs - 1972 through 1995

BEST COMPLIMENT FROM A B/N - “When we fly together it is like there is one pilot and two B/N’s” Dave “Marblehead” Maybury - circa 1987

MOST UNUSUAL SDO DUTY DAY - Issuing NTPI loading badges from one side of the desk and 38 revolvers from the other - Eagles - 1987

SOREST BUTT - 9.1 hour hop from Cubi to Diego - Mark Eaton - February 1987

THE BEST SQUADRON CALL SIGN - “The B-Eagles” during the four month VA-I 15 Eagles Det to the Kitty Hawk. Hosted by the VA-165 “Boomers” - 1987

SECOND LARGEST DECK PITCH - Midway launched an A-6 through a wave breaking over the bow - Sea of Japan - “Gunney” Gribble - 1987
There he was... every war produces one illustrious bad guy, who, through a mixture of daring exploit and circumstance, rises in reknown above all other enemies we faced. Hence, he is forever linked with the history of that conflict-particularly, in the minds of those good guys who fought him.

In the skies over WWI France, it was the Red Baron. In the sands of WWI North Africa, it was Rommel. And, on the swamplands of Desert Storm’s Bubiyan Island, it was “The Red Rove Ranger” CDR Denby Starling, squadron CO. for the VA-145 Swordsmen, remembered him well.

Bubiyan Island, the large island just east of Kuwait City, was one of the first places the Iraqis took during the war. Almost every day we flew in and out over there. And as we approached, we’d routinely see small-caliber AAA coming up. It looked like some guy waving around a long, luminous red rope.

There was a police station on Bubiyan. It was the only thing on the whole island that was marked on our maps. It just said, “Police Station.” That’s where this guy was thought to be.

And every night, when we flew over, we’d look down and coming up from this police station would be that red rope of AAA. I don’t think it ever got high enough to hit anybody-but, in principle; it just kind of pissed us off! So that became the dumping ground for all our unexpended ordnance. Till the last day of the war, if we had bombs we didn’t get off, that guy down there-the Red Rope Ranger-became the target. I don’t know who the guy was, but he probably took more hits than all the other targets in Iraq and Kuwait combined. Saddam shoulda taken him back to Bagdad and pinned a medal on his chest, because if there were Iraqi guys running, he wasn’t one of them.

The day the war ended, we flew over Bubiyan Island, looked down, and there was still this little red rope of AAA. Later, while I visited with Maj. Seth “Growth” Wilson of the 706th TJS Cajuns, the Red Rope Ranger came up. He referred me back to gunners he’d seen in Vietnam who were just as ineffective-so ineffective that nobody wanted them replaced:

In Southeast Asia, they had various places around the air bases that they used for training gunners. Guys that shot a lot, but not very good. We called them “3-level gunners.” One of the things you new wanted to do was knock out a 3-level gunner, because, if you did, they might replace him with a 9-level gunner, who could hit what he was shooting at! I suppose, if our flyers had considered that point, they might have eased off on the Red Rope Ranger. But, as it turns out, the bombing of the police station had major tactical significance. In targeting it, our pilots had also unwittingly targeted a vast Iraqi troop concentration, as Lt. “Franz” Bijak, of the Silver Foxes, discovered:

“We thought Bubiyan was a swamp. We didn’t know there was anything there. Our rules of engagement (ROE) had a restriction saying that, if we didn’t know exactly where the target was, we had to bring our bombs back. Nobody wanted to kill any civilians. So, when we’d go in and wouldn’t find our target, we’d think, Oh, crap! We couldn’t drop our bombs! Then we’d head back and drop them on Bubiyan Island. There was only this one little blip, a radar significant target, on Bubiyan Island. It was a police post on the island’s eastern end. So, four or five times a night, we’d turn back south after being unable to drop our bombs, and we’d look at our radar screens and think, Well, there’s a blip over there. Let’s bomb that! We just wanted to jettison our ordnance someplace, and Bubiyan Island seemed to be as good a place as any. We didn’t think anybody was there. There was no INTEL saying they had people on Bubiyan. But, as it turned out, there was actually a whole brigade there-the Red Rope Ranger and all his Bubiyan Boys! We had been bombing the shit out of this brigade, and didn’t even know it!”

Nine days into the war, our INTEL intercepted some communications from the brigade on Bubiyan Island. They said, “Hey, Saddam? We think you’re a great guy, but we can’t take this shit anymore! They’re bombing the hell out of us!” It was hilarious. After that, we purposely went in and did some stuff.
There they were…in the VA-52 Ready Room aboard the CORAL SEA in 1968. LCDR Warren Clarke and LCDR Al Siebeck are weighing-in for a contest between themselves to see who could loose the greater amount of weight. Warren was known to be a real straight-shooter and as honest as the day is long. On the other hand Al (nicknamed “Dancin Bear”) was also a straight-shooter, but was akin to using “gamesmanship” to gain the desired outcome. The first weight check found both parties to be approximately the same weight. Al had been observed eating in the wardroom mess with no restraints. This concerned Warren somewhat as he had been dining on dried toast, tea, juice, and all those not so fun foods. The second weight check found Al to have lost a substantial amount compared to Warren with no change in wardroom “grazing patterns”. Warren was now concerned that Al was not playing by the rules, and rightfully so, but could not find anything out of order. The third weight check was the final straw. Warren weighed in with a respectful loss for the week and waited in anticipation of at last beating Al. Al stood confidently on the scale and again weighed with a greater weight loss! Reluctantly, Warren conceded the contest. Warren asked Al, “How did you do it?” Al’s reply, “It was a case of mind over matter”.

The truth of the matter was that Al had taped 10 pounds of lead weights to his legs at the initial weigh in and had been reducing the amount at each weight check. WINNING IS EVERYTHING!!!!!!

CLARKE / SIEBECK VA-52 1968

(Background: VA-52 JOs feel it’s time to have a little fun with Boxman, then rocket one. Seems the urinalysis report message arrived with the perfect break in pages to insert rocket one’s social security number with a “positive” result. Also in on the ground floor was XO Sully and CAG Slater. The “bogus” message was inserted into the squadron RR message board. The bait is set.)

There he was…Boxman picks up the message board and sits down with a cup of coffee to what is suppose to be a routine reading. NOT!!!! When he comes to the urinalysis message a look of surprise comes over his face. He looks around and with one smooth motion rips the dreaded message from the board. He calls XO Sully to his stateroom and shows him the message. Sully suggests the best thing to do is to probably let CAG Slater know (not one of Boxman’s favorite people). After conversing with CAG, Boxman maintains his innocence. CAG goes through the standard “seriousness” brief and that there is basically nothing he can do and that he will probably face disciplinary proceedings. Boxman again maintains there has to be a mistake and he is innocent!! Pause………..CAG…….pause “Boxman, you’ve been had by your JOs”! Boxman is of course is relieved to know he will not hang but is already thinking of hanging some JOs. After gathering the “guilty” ones together, Boxman proceeded to do some “stemum-bruising” with his index finger and topped it off with a “I don’t ever want to see something like this again!! “ There were lots of “yes sir’s” and “you can count on us” from the JOs. (This is just the prelude to chapter two).

Chapter Two

There he was, again … Sometime later, the call again goes out for urine samples. The random number drawn claims Boxman as a provider. He does his duty and awaits the results. Bad news Boxman! Results indicate he is positive for codeine. He immediately gathers those parties who were involved in the first episode. There is unanimous denial by all the JOs. (This is a valid positive). Boxman seeks the help of the flight doc. He starts to question Boxman if he has been taking any medication. “Only aspirin”, sez Boxman. Doc looks over the bottle and asks, “Where did you get these?” Boxman states he got them while fishing in Canada. Doc proceeds to point out that over-the-counter aspirin in Canada can contain codeine and this particular bottle so indicated. End of story.

Needless to say when the call for urine goes out, the Boxman is a little nervous.

VA-52 JO’S/BOXMAN 1984
Fonz- “I don’t understand how that pitot probe got bent”?

Speaking of pitot probes, “What is that burning on your probe, Sockeye.”

“Wake me when it’s critical” - Sully

“I don’t think $1,000 is to much for a really good baby grand” - Boxman

“No, my 350 SL is not for sale!!” - Metz

“I know I sold that vette for chicken feed.” - Pariana


There we were...In 1969 Grumman had created a variant of the A-6 know as “TIAS.” It was suppose to give great info on threat emitters and launch a smart Standard Arm missile. The concept was floundering and the aircraft was to be flown by a VA-52 crew from NAS “rock” to Pt. Mugu. LTJG “Sully” and Grummie rep Chuck Mastin got the nod. “Rabbit” Hesch, a VA-52 B/N, asked us to take a little Chihuahua dog and deliver it to his “EX” when we arrived at Pt. Mugu. Sounds easy enough and “Rabbit” guaranteed that he would tranquilize the pouch and secure it in a nice box.

The next morning scheduled launch time arrived and “Rabbit” was no where to be found. We decided to launch, minus the dog. Just after engine start “Rabbit” arrived with the dog in a deteriorated cardboard box and seemed not to be tranquilized (although “Rabbit” seemed to be--late night out). He convinced us that it would be no problem. NOT!!!!! Taxi out was uneventful and a peak into the box verified the dog is OK. Takeoff and initial climb out was normal. At approximately 10,000 feet the dog started scratching at the end of the box which was sitting on the center console. Chuck tried to hold the box together but the little guy broke free and jumped up on the glare shield. I reacted with a “grab that little s___.” I’m flying while Chuck is making attempts to grab the dog. Chuck was successful and snagged the varmint. The dog had a really surprised look, his eyes were a little “bugged out “ and was in the process of leaking on Chuck. Chuck decided that the box was no longer a suitable container and decided to use his helmet bag. He held the dog up while I slipped the bag around the “beast “ and Chuck then zipped it closed. Once leveled off and cruising toward Pt. Mugu check of the bag found the dog to be very slow to respond. Chuck, concerned that the problem may be the lack of oxygen, decided that he would insert his mask into the helmet bag. The rest of the flight went normal until we started our descent. That’s when the Chihuahua came alive and began biting the sides of the helmet bag and the mask. I’m sure the change in cabin pressure didn’t help the situation. Chuck turned over the helmet bag and dog to rabbit’s “EX” who was, needless to say, not happy. Rabbit received a nasty call from his “EX” and Chuck was out a helmet bag, a mask, and needed to wash his flight suit.

Bottom line, let FEDEX haul the animals.

LTJG “SULLY” / CHUCK MASTIN VA-52 1969
There they were... In the Spring of 1971, VA-52 was flying the A-6B PAT ARM which was capable of firing the General Dynamics Standard ARM (STARM) Missile. This missile was effectively a TERRIER missile strapped to the wing of an aircraft and was able to travel about 50 miles. The TERRIER was a shipboard missile designed to shoot down incoming aircraft, but the Standard ARM version had a seeker head, which acquired and homed in on enemy radar signals. That spring most of our missions were against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. Previously, it had been very quiet there, with only some AAA, but then the North Vietnamese started shooting SAMS at aircraft in the area. These SAMS were being launched from sites both in Laos and in North Vietnam along the border. To counter this, a STARM Patrol was established. The intent was to fly a long figure eight pattern over Laos along the North Vietnamese border. If signals received in the cockpit indicated that the North Vietnamese were about to launch a SAM, then the A-6 was to launch a STANDARD ARM to prevent it.

One day a Knightrider crew, who shall remain nameless (but one of them spoke with a strong southern accent), were flying the STARM Patrol when they got a strong signal coming from the direction of North Vietnam. The signal remained steady so they maneuvered the aircraft to fire the missile. When all conditions were correct, and the missile had locked on, it was launched in an almost due easterly direction. It was then they realized that North Vietnam was about 30 miles wide at that point, and they had just fired a missile that could travel in excess of 50. A little simple arithmetic showed that a good-sized portion of the Gulf of Tonkin was now included in the lethal envelope of the missile, some of which contained presumably friendly ships from the United States Navy. So, suddenly, everyone in Southeast Asia heard a voice with a strong southern accent issue the following transmission over the Guard frequency... “ALL YOU SHIPS IN THE GULF OF TONKIN, SHUTDOWN YOUR RADARS!!!!” Presumably, either they did shut them down or the missile was in fact locked on some enemy SAM, because no U. S. ships pulled alongside the Kitty Hawk complaining about missing a radar dish.

Along the same theme, and a cruise later... there they were... the STARM Patrol could be exciting in other ways. One day LCDR Mike Cockrell and LTJG Duncan Lewis were flying the figure eight pattern at the normal speed of about 300 knots, talking to their Air Force controller on the ground in Thailand. Suddenly, instead of a SAM indication from the east, they received air-air intercept (AI) warning strobe from the west. They thought it might be a spurious signal, but asked their controller if he had anything out there. Receiving a negative reply, they continued the mission. The strobe continued to get longer, which, on that piece of gear meant the threat was getting closer. Beginning to get concerned, Mike increased the speed somewhat and started moving the aircraft around a little bit. Suddenly, they received indications of a missile launch and Mike broke the aircraft hard left. After the break, two air-to-air missiles went flying by the spot where the A-6 had been. Definitely moving the aircraft around now, they started yelling at their controller to find out what was going on. From him they learned that a different controller in the Air Defense Section had launched a section of F4 CAP against what he believed was a North Vietnamese MIG, (no doubt, a MIG flying a 300 knot figure eight pattern at 20,000 feet over Laos). They now admitted the screw-up and the F-4s were directed to return to base. Mike and Duncan also decided to call it a day. The Air Forces pilot’s name, as I recall, was Murphy. He received a great deal of flack back at his squadron for two reasons. First, he mis-identified and shot at a ‘MIG’ that had a big ugly nose and refueling probe unlike any other aircraft in the world. Secondly, he missed.

Needless to say, A-6 crews who subsequently flew the STARM patrols made no assumptions about the locations of ‘friendlies’ in any direction. Somehow, this incident had added new meaning to the slogan, “Sleep well, America. Your Air Force is alert!”

As told by Paul “Roul” Bloch VA-52 1971-1972
There it was ... the Summer of ’72 and the world famous VA-52 Knightriders were deployed with Air Wing 11 onboard USS Kitty Hawk. Th Air Wing Commander was the equally world famous CDR Jim McKenzie, who, in an earlier life had been CO of VA-52. CAG McKenzie flew a lot with the Knightriders on that cruise and spent a great deal of time in our ready room for mission and briefs and such. He was particularly known for the quiet little one-liners that he inserted into his briefs and conversations. For instance, whenever someone didn’t show up on time for a brief, he would usually ask something to the effect of, “Where’s Greg Wood? In the head retching as usual?” Beards and mustaches were also legal in those days, after Admiral Zumwalt, but before everyone got excited about oxygen mask face seals. However, when an officer would star to grow facial hair CAG relayed some advice that had been told him earlier one of his Air Wing Commanders... “Cultivate not upon thy face what grows wild in thine armpit!”

At times CAG would be briefing and would come to the section of the brief concerning the code words for the day. It must be remembered that there were code words for all sorts of contingencies and mission conditions. CAG would encourage everyone to use standard code words for that day, then would say something to the effect of “I don’t want to hear any ‘don’t eat the roast beef sandwiches!’” Since no one was quite sure what that meant, after a few briefs someone got up enough courage to ask CAG the meaning of the ‘roast beef sandwich ’ comment. He then related the following story:

In the days before the A-6, the Navy was populated with the great Douglas AD ‘Skyraider’, an aircraft second only to the A-6 as an awesome attack platform. In those days, Naval Aviation was very much involved in the SIOP, the plan for all-out war with the Soviet Union that everyone hoped would never come. Squadrons at the West Coast bases or carriers would often fly practice SIOP nuclear missions. For the ADs, this meant strapping on a large dummy bomb, then flying across the country to deliver this shape at some East Coast target. Since this was done at the endurance speed for a prop aircraft of somewhere between 160 and 200 knots, these missions were definitely all day affairs. In order to accomplish them the pilots had to carry a box lunch, and from these facts arose this situation:

A squadron, let’s call it VA-52, was engaged on one of these nuclear exercises and had to launch a series of aircraft on practice missions across the country. All were equipped with the requisite box lunch. The aircraft launched in series - about a half hour or so apart. Sometime into the mission the pilot in the first aircraft became hungry, opened his box lunch, and ate it. Almost immediately, he became dreadfully ill, and suspected a tainted sandwich in the box lunch as the culprit. Since he was unable to continue the flight, he landed at the nearest divert field and called back to the squadron to warn the succeeding aircraft of the dangers in the box lunch. The squadron accomplished by calling the FAA Flight Service Stations periodically, and asked them to relay the warning. Now transport yourself to the middle of, say, Texas, where the following exchange takes place:

“Navy Knightrider 502, this is Lubbock Radio, I have a message from your squadron.”

“This is Navy Knightrider 502, go ahead. “ “Roger, Navy 502 ... “Don’t eat the roast beef sandwich”. (Silence ... then a questioning voice says)

“Lubbock, this is Navy 502, say again. “ “Roger, Navy 502 ... I relay from your squadron .... Don’t eat the roast beef sandwich”. (Again silence ... but confused silence)

Now imagine our intrepid pilot madly going through his kneeboard cards and briefing notes...while racking his brain trying to recall the mission brief and fathom the meaning of the code words for all sorts of contingencies; mission abort..., go to the secondary target..., mission success codes..., etc. Some could be as obscure as
‘Don’t eat the roast beef sandwich.’ Finally, he gave up and asked again;

“Lubbock, this is Navy 502, please say again.”

“Roger, Navy 502, this is Lubbock Radio, I say again ... Don’t eat the roast beef sandwich. “

More confused silence and more searching through the cockpit. Then another plaintive call, “Lubbock, this is Navy 502, I don’t understand the message, would you please say that in the clear. “

Lubbock, who, by this time were probably wondering how this guy got his wings without being able to follow simple instructions, replied,

“NAVY 502, THIS IS LUBBOCK RADIO. DON’T EAT THE ROAST BEEF SANDWICH”!!!!!!

It took a few more transmissions for the pilot to understand the message on which hung the survival of the United States, or, at least, his continued good health ... he was not supposed to eat the roast beef sandwich.

After CAG related this story, the Air Wing understood the significance, and scrupulously avoided the use of those particular code words during the rest of that cruise. However, I know for a fact that, in later years and in different squadrons, occasionally one would hear the code word for, say, ‘Go to the secondary target’, I as “Don’t eat the roast beef sandwich!!!”

As told by Paul “Roul” Bloch VA-52 1972

There he was ... How LT Bob Berg of the VA-52 Knightriders achieved immortality among the Air Wing Eleven fighter pilots in 1971...

On the return from the 1970-71 cruise, USS Kitty Hawk departed Subic Bay enroute Pearl Harbor and home. The ship commenced an extensive housecleaning to insure that no drugs or other illegal materials were going to be smuggled into the States via the ship. The ship’s XO, CDR ‘Mo’ Peale was directing a search with the Master-at-Arms force, and all hands were asked to assist. The US Customs agents were going to come aboard in Pearl Harbor and search the ship prior to its arrival in San Diego.

Now, Bob was a very regular fellow, and preferred to use the same stall in the same head every day. He also was very observant, and, on departure from Subic, noticed that some of the screws from an access panel to a void located in his favorite stall had the paint stripped from them. It has to be understood that disturbing six or seven coats of thick Navy paint applied in the typical shipboard maintenance program could probably be spotted by a three year old. Sensing the drug bust of the century (it was a big void), Bob dutifully reported his suspicions to the Master-at-Arms force. They got some screw-drivers and entered the compartment. There they found, not the Mafia’s drug stash, but instead case upon case of some very fine liquor. Chivas Regal, Johnnie Walker, Wild Turkey, the really good stuff. It must be remembered that liquor like that was very cheap at the Package Store in Cubi ... perhaps half the stateside price, if that. Well, there was nothing to be done but take the contraband to the fantall and chuck it over. I heard “Mo” Peale himself say that there were tears in his eyes as he was deep-sixing the booze.

Bob Berg almost followed the liquor, if cooler heads hadn’t prevailed. It turned out that instead of the Mafia, some F-4 guys from the fighter outfits had gotten together to buy the booze, store it in the void, then unload the stash in San Diego for home consumption. As we used to say at Mom’s in Fallon, ‘you pay your money and take your chance’. They lost.

As told by Paul “Roal” Bloch VA-52 1971
There they were ... call signs could also provide some entertainment. Though is not an A-6 story, there was the time in the Gulf of Tonkin that a helo squadron was trying to establish communications with USS Enterprise to relay a message for one of the destroyers in the area. This was in the days before the JANAP 119 call signs were changed to remove insensitive connotations (for instance, when the VA-1 15 ‘ARABS’ became “EAGLE HILL”), and the destroyer’s call sign was something like “Lonesome Jack.”

After many attempts trying to reach the Enterprise, the helo finally admitted defeat, and told the destroyer, “Lonesome Jack, this is Indian Gal, unable to reach Climax.”

There we were ... diverting to “Romeo Alpha”. The codeword-card-of-the-day was always a source of entertainment and confusion. In theory it was (and perhaps still is) a great idea if the enemy listens in on all combat frequencies. Who actually generated the code words is unclear twenty-some years after the fact (I think it was Task Force Alpha, i.e., the Air Force).... but the Kitty Hawk would receive them (??) through secret message traffic then print and distribute them daily to all ready rooms. In the initial part of the ’72 cruise the cards were of different colors. The IOIC briefing officer would always hold up the correct color saying that “Today’s codeword-card-of-the-day is green, or fuchsia, or salmon”... until the ship ran out of colored paper stock. (If you weren’t in the habit of cleaning off your kneeboard, you could have quite a rainbow .. they also, when folded most uniquely, doubled as “ashtrays”, or in some cases, earplugs). Using basic white stock, they then went to a word or phrase imprinted on the top center that defined the correct one for the day. That worked pretty well. Eventually, I think, we ended up with something really simple - Julian dates (yeah, right!).

With these thoughts in mind, a Kitty Hawk alpha strike was enroute to a target just south of Hanoi, led by CAG Jim McKenzie flying with VA-52. Two F-4s were about 5 minutes ahead of the strike group and were the weather recee. Their report was, “Strike lead, we are Charlie Uniform and recommend Romeo Alpha”. Al “Dancing Bear” Siebeck usually flew with CAG and he interpreted all codes. (His kneeboard had multiple rainbows). He told CAG that the codes meant the primary target was socked-in for weather and recommended the divert target. CAG acknowledged that and told all strike elements that the target was now “Romeo Alpha “. He asked for each element to acknowledge. The A-7s from VA- 192 “Roger-ed “ as well as those from VA- 195, the CAPs from VF- 114 and VF-213 also acknowledge. The VA-52 STARM crews and all other players acknowledged. However, there seemed to be quite a delay but eventually the Viggie (RA-5C photo recon from RVAH-7) spoke up and said in a most humble tone of voice, “For those of us who don’t have today’s codeword card, could somebody maybe please tell us what that would be on yesterday’s card? “ It was pretty funny at the time ... about as funny as receiving a “Beadwindow “ violation over the air ... Ah yes, those were the days!

“Foxtrot Hotel” VA-52 1972
All those present here today who got “lost” going from NUW to Coupeville for FCLPs, go stand in the back of the hanger! We know who you are!
There I was...actually I wasn’t but wish I’d seen it! Paddles was on station for OLF Coupeville Runway 32. An aircraft reported, “5 miles North of Runway 32” and paddles responded, “Continue, you’re number one, not in sight.” About a minute goes by and the aircraft reports, “Initial.” Paddles replies, “Continue, still not in sight.” Now paddles turns on the runway lights to full bright, in addition to the carrier box lights. Another minute goes by and the aircraft reports, “Numbers.” Paddles, now wondering what’s going on, asks, “Not in sight.. check external lights on and say your tacan cut from Whidbey.” “The reply was “the 190 for 20.” (I’m not quite sure what TACAN he had selected or whether he spoke the truth). As the story unfolded later, I was told that there weren’t enough phones at base ops for all the noise complaints. All the complaints came from the Bremerton area ... so they must have attempted to make an approach to Bremerton Muni. After realizing their major FUBAR, they got vectors to Coupeville.

Sure would have liked to have been a fly on the wall for that debrief!

Meenie VA-128 LSO 1994

There I was ... the OLF Coupeville paddles on station. We had the MOVLAS (Manually Operated Visual Landing Aid System) rigged for the new CQ students. As the first aircraft arrived, I wondered in what ways they would scare me today. The first couple of aircraft looked good and after a few passes, I felt that I was controlling the MOVLAS fairly well. As the fourth aircraft arrived, the pattern became busier. The new aircraft flew a low pattern and got to a low start. I showed him one ball low on the MOVLAS...he went lower. I showed him a red ball ... he went lower still. So, next I show him the big red training-aids and he went around. I came up on the radio and said, “511 Paddles, you need to bump up your pattern numbers, get to a better start and watch your rate of descent in the groove.” “His replay was a quiet, “Roger “. Well, at least he was on speed.

The next pass he flew a high pattern and showed up high at the start. I showed him a high ball ... he went higher. I brought the MOVLAS up ... he went higher still. Without hyper-extending my arm, I moved the MOVLAS to the top
and transmitted, “You’re high.” As he got in close, in no position to land, I once again turned on the waveoff lights.

As I waved the next two aircraft, I tried to think of something to say to 511, but couldn’t. Well, I’ll just see how he does on the next pass. The next pass, he rolled out with a descent start, but with too-much-rate-of-descent (TMRD). I showed him a slightly sagging ball ... he went lower. I showed him lower. As he got lower still, I frustratingly waved him off and said, “511 Paddles, your signal; clean up and climb, right-hand turnout, contact approach button 5.” At least with him gone, my sanity would remain intact.

As I drove back to Whidbey, all I could think about was what must have been going through this nuggets’ head. In the debrief I asked the aircrew what they were thinking. He said, “On the first pass, you showed me a low ball…so I went where you told me. On the second I saw a high ball, and so, I went higher!” I was flabbergasted! I thought that with MOVLAS he should go where Paddles showed him. After I stopped laughing, I explained to him that MOVLAS should be flown basically like the normal ball.

But all ended well. I received an extra bottle at the K-court for this hilarious blunder.
I've conducted A-6 FCLP at Oceana, Fentress OLF, Whitehouse OLF, Choctaw OLF, NAS Sigonella, El Centro, Miramar, Whidbey, Coupeville OLF, Grant County (WA) Municipal, Ephrata (WA) Municipal ... and once on Camano Island...

The scene is set on a dark, but VFR, night when we were bouncing at Coupeville on Runway 14. It had gotten kind of quiet, waiting for the next student to show when I hear:
“805, Initial”
“805, Paddles. You’re Number One for Runway 14, the pattern is clear, winds are calm. Continue, I don’t see you. “
Seconds later... “805, abeam pilot is ...(he still denies this to this day) ... and then “805, Intruder ball, six point five”
“805, Are you sure you’ve got a ball? I don’t see you”
“805, Ball. “
By now I thought, he must be ‘in the middle’, then after another few too many seconds... “WAVE OFF 805, COME TEN MILES WEST YOU’RE OVER CAMANO ISLAND.”..Noise complaints anyone’?”

LSO MATH

Any old LSOs ever add up a student’s day grades, only to realize when he’s at six miles for his first night pass that his day grades were too low? Just curious.
One year “Hound Dog” McClain and I had nine CQ Dets ... and our biggest class was 21 students. That was the same class we bounced for three weeks at Grant County Municipal in Moses Lake, WA. Whether day or night, we would fly the LSO, LSO writer and hot seat crews over in the C-12. What a mess that was since it was about the time when NALO took over C-12 scheduling from the local NAS. Every day, message traffic on airlift requests... including cargo both for our Maint Det and aircrew flight gear. All in all, it went well. It was great to see all the support we had from the Moses Lake locals. Literally hundreds came out the first night we bounced there...and it was refreshing after the beatings we had been taking for noise at Coupeville and Ault Field. Unfortunately, we bounced until midnight and our night 90 position while within the confines of the OLF Larson AFB, was over what was now civilian housing.

Later that year, VA- 128 conducted a one-week FCLP at Ephrata Municipal, using Grant County Airport as a hot-pump/hot-seat/maint base. “Buddy” Storrs and I lived over there for a week. The “goods” were met by things like civilian puddle jumpers flying the TACAN approach into Ephrata, where the FAF was the same posit and altitude as our initial for the break. Of all the FCLP “Experiments” conducted in search of less noise, it was probably our best setup... “fair” at best ... and never complain about a “fair”.

SEMPER F1

The Marines got serious about CQ in the ‘eighties. Just how serious we saw when we disqualed our first USMC Major. We were pleased the HQ Marine Corps elected to extend this gent’s training track to allow a second attempt ... and he did great. Nevertheless, seeing these guys check into CQ Phase with 3000 A-6 hrs and only 6 traps in their logbooks caused us some concern.

One day at Coupeville, a different Marine 0-4 pilot and his Cat I USMC B/N entered a four-plane pattern for RWY 32. With a full pattern and the RWY keyhole cutout in the trees, I didn’t see these guys until they were through the 45... and they were low and deep.

“811, Intruder Ball”

“811, you’re long in the groove, wave off! You’re too low. Check your altitude. What’s the problem?”

“Paddles, Paddles ... we have an airspeed problem.”

Now wings level, 1.5 miles in the groove at about 250 feet, I could see the resolution to this problem from the LSO Shack...

“811, Drop your flaps and slats and let me know how it works out”...HRUMPH

LSO FISH STORIES

The first time I met Portuguese Joe, I took him a bottle of Jack Daniels. Joe loved it - His wife Nilda hated it. Before every det, we went to see Portuguese Joe in the A-6, and occasionally the TC-4C. Sometimes we would shutdown and sometimes, we would just keep one motor turning and load up the blivet. Picking up fish was one of the three hops for the month we could count on - the others being the obligatory day FCLP and the fly-down to the ship. Otherwise, we spent the month watching other people fly.

I remember a lot of smoked salmon on CQ Dets...always a pain to cart to the ship... sometimes it was worth it. Prior to one det, I wrote a check to Portuguese Joe for over $700.00. We always had to decide if we should give out the fish at the beginning of the det or at the end. One det on CONNIE, we dumped all the fish over the side.
IN THE NET

In 20 CQ Dets at VA-128, I only ever had one student cause guys to vacate the LSO Platform via the Safety Net. “Slam” Dunkle was waving (or is it waiving?... I’ve always wondered) and I was backing up this gent’s first night pass while on a SO CAL CQ Det. The pass went like this:
Settle, drift right start
I hit the waveoff lights and let out with three “waveoff” calls.
Pull nose up on low, right-to-left in-the-middle to in-close
As the aircraft was low and right, the pilot advanced the throttles to military and yanked back on the stick. But now he was so cocked up that MRT did not sound right ... I estimate that he went to 27-28 units AOA - and stayed there. After the three “Waveoff” calls, I went into 12 to 15 calls for “POWER” - then not understanding why those J-52 motors didn’t offer that glorious sound of freedom. Well, 12 LSOs and LSO-wanna-bees jumped into the net. Me and “Slammer” just stood there, as the jet continued left. We could only duck as the aircraft’s tallhook passed about 5 feet over the LSO Platform JBD.

His next pass was also a waveoff. One LSO went into the net again...and we sent this FRP and his IBN to the beach for the night. He qual’ed that det ... with no magic LSO math.

NORDO OR NOT HERE I COME

“Paddles, Air Ops”
“Yeah go ahead, CAG Paddles here”.
“512 is pushing in two minutes and he’s NORDO.
“Roger”…A few minutes later...
“512, checking-in at 18 miles. “
“512, Paddles ... are you NORDO?”
“Paddles, the pilot is NORDO .. But I can relay.”
“Roger. Relay to the pilot that it’s a MOVLAS recovery.”
“Wilco”

LSO “OH-BY-THE-WAY’S”

At one point, we had only two LSOs in VA-128. We had 9 dets that year. Shortly thereafter, we had five LSOs. One of my goals was to see each of us get a CAG LSO job ... and we did. At one point, all five former VA-128 LSOs were on CAG Staffs on the west coast ... and subsequently several A-6 squadrons were the top Tailhookers in their Air Wings. I was the CAG LSO in CVW- 15 when VA-52 won six line periods in a row. That sixth award was particularly competitive ... and it came as “Buddy” Storrs joined me at CAG 15...making coincidentally two A-6 guys as the forbearers of truth and sanctity at the back end of CARL VINSON.

I remember, more than once, spending over eight hours at OLF Coupeville ... and being woken by jet noise as an Intruder takes his own waveoff on his first pass.

I remember riding all around Coupeville with “Bullet Bob” Canepa, CNAP COS in an LSO truck so that he could talk to the aircraft in the pattern during FCLP.

I remember LT Randy Duhrkopf, VA- 128 Beach Det OINC at Pensacola exchanging a SECNAV cigarette lighter with, you guessed it, the SECNAV, on the Transient Line, for a NATOPS PCL. That’s about all of that story that I care to relate.
LADY LEX

Lexington dets were mostly always fun ... but I know that went in cycles. Typically, we would COD out to Lex and trap at the beginning of the A-6 period. Usually we had to run off the COD right to the Platform. The Intruders would follow the C-1 into the break gambling that the COD would trap. If the COD (and LSOs) would not full stop, it meant additional waveoffs and less gas for CQ for the A-6s ... until we could get to the back end.

Once on Lex, we had an A-6 with 5000# of gas waiting to taxi to the cat, when one main mount Just broke through the flight deck. With that VA-128 truly did become a Lexington Plank Owner. The ending to that story ... The main mount is sitting in a hole in the flight deck. Just below, a sailor in the top rack, now hysterical and looking at the business end of the tire. He was granted a week’s leave on the ship and a new rack assignment.

One det, “Little Tails” (i.e., Rich) Taylor, “Hound Dog” and I were on the platform where the typical platform banter and blasphemy abounded: It was “the Air Boss (this)” and “(some student) that” ... Hey, what goes on at the Platform, stays on the platform ... Until at evening meal, in the wardroom, the Air Boss came over and asked us about a fishing trip that had been discussed on the platform. Could one of the “blue shirts” been an Air Boss-spy? No, worse! We found out after much investigation that the hook spotter’s sound powered phones were on “Hot Mic” to the Tower. Situation remedied, confidentiality restored and a new det checklist item. Hope no national security-LSO items leaked out!

On one Lex det as part of an extended LSO-carrier landing refresher-training period (aka: BAG-EX), I managed to get 9 traps and two foul deck-waveoffs, burning only 3500# of JP. “Hound Dog”, also in the pattern, drew a hook-skipper, and logged 2 traps and 8 bolters.

Hound Dog: “Hey Neubs, did you like those turns to the 180 off the angle? ... pretty aggressive huh ?”
Neubs: “Yeah Hound Dog. They looked good every time I was on Cat 1.”

T-TOMS AND THE BIG DET

T-Toms loves LSOs (long pause for hysterical laughter).

The 21-student CQ det required extra leadership and the RAG Ops 0, LCDR Terry Toms elected himself as Supreme OINC. It actually went quite well - we actually set up two complete dets: one on ENTERPRISE, one at Miramar. Well, one night was particularly ugly for A-6 Cat I boarding rates and during a helo hot-pump, T-Toms called all our LSOs to the Wardroom for a little counseling. He thought that we needed to talk to the pilots more on the ball - We thought that we had been talking too much! He told us to get our act together and we said..."Yes sir!"

Paybacks ... The next day, during an extended LSO refresher CQ period (aka BAG-EX), old T-Toms emerged from Air Ops, clad in aviator garb, scurried across the deck, and hot-seated. Not talking to the pilots enough, huh? Well, before the ball call, “Keep your turn in...don’t climb ... easy with it .. got a ball?”
“800, Intruder Ball”
“Roger Ball, work on-speed... keep your scan moving... right for lineup... don’t climb ... power .. attitude.”
1-wire.

Once again, ball call and LSO talk-down. And now the Air Boss wanted to know what was going on. I relayed the scene from the previous night and then told the Air Boss what we planned for T-Toms. The Boss laughed and said only to keep it legal for the PLAT tape. In addition, we had all his ‘no-grades’ filled out in the LSO Book in advance, needing only to fill in the wire. After 4 talk-downs and traps, he was satisfied...and we felt we had made our point.
Here's Joe Cool returning from a hard day hanging around Barcar.

Departure, Flare 602 would like some practice plugs...

...Nec, you're liable to lose up the basket.

Screw you, departure. Roger... Say King number.

Steady... Steady...

Here's Joe Cool, his usual cavalier, swash buckling himself.

Yes sir?... No more, sir?... Patience?... Intelligence?... Take a what, sir?...

Let's see red, yellow, white, then coral and orange followed by Rolls Royce silver... or was it hot pink, tangerine, Adriatic blue followed by polar white, aubergine, and sepia brown.

It is with great humility I accept this honor as valedictorian of my rules of engagement class... Frankly I'd rather be buckling on a few swashes.
“BALLAD OF THE FIGHTER DUDES”
(Sung to the tune of Ballad of the Green Berets)

Fighting snots from Miramar
They’ve seen some sams, but from afar.
They stay feet wet while we attack,
“You guys stay here ... we’ll be right back.”

Hungry for a combat kill.
Then one day, an imbecile
Provided us with this reminder:
Can’t sink a boat with a sidewinder.

Reporting SAMS on Bubiyan
(When for two weeks they had been gone),
Loner claimed he dodged more fire
Than all A-6 crews. What a liar!

They fly CAPS clear of ground fire.
At night they cannot catch a wire.
Flat at the ramp, over the top,
“No DLC”! When will they stop?

Silver Stars for every clown
Who shoots a helpless helo down.
A-6s fly through walls of lead
and get two strike/flight points instead.

One final word to fighter boys:
We are tired of all your noise.
Fifty-three K waiver my ass!
Suck it up! Trap your first pass!

--YFSDO
Denby Starling VA-145 “Tumor Board” Desert Storm 1991
I can tell the cruise is getting short... everyone is beginning to jack up their release heights...
HANOI TONIGHT...

On the night of 30 October 1967, a lone A-6 Intruder jet aircraft was launched from a Seventh Fleet carrier in the Gulf of Tonkin. Its target was in Hanoi-the most heavily defended city in the world, and perhaps in the history of air warfare. For this single-plane strike, the pilot, Lieutenant Commander Charles Hunter, U.S. Navy, and the bombardier-navigator, Lieutenant Lyle Bull, U.S. Navy, were awarded the NAVY Cross for “extraordinary heroism” and performance “above and beyond the call of duty.” This is their story. (Written by Lcdr. William Graves, PAO COMSEVENFLT, in the July 1969 U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings).

The previous afternoon was like many others. The two had coffee in the stateroom Bull shared with another bombardier/navigator from their unit, Attack Squadron 196. Bull had just finished the planning for a routine night hop in which they would be going after trucks in North Vietnam. Finding and hitting moving targets in complete darkness was no trick for the crew or the highly sophisticated electronic black boxes in the A-6 Intruder. “Piece of cake,” they called it. They discussed the mission thoroughly, but Bull did the actual planning. The pilot looked over his navigator’s work very carefully, but, as was usually the case, made no changes.

The final weather briefing was scheduled for 1800. There was time to relax—it was only 1630—until a phone call from the squadron duty officer changed their plans. “Better get down to IOIC, Lyle, “ said the duty officer, “you’re going to Hanoi tonight.”

In IOIC (Integrated Operational Intelligence Center), Lieutenant Junior grade Pete Barrick, U.S. Navy, the squadron air intelligence officer, was ready for them. Charts were spread out on a long table. While Barrick left to get the target folder, Hunter and Bull glanced at the air defense charts of the Hanoi area, noting fresh red markings which indicated new surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites. In addition, hundreds of black dots showed anti-aircraft gun positions, and in the vicinity of their target—the Hanoi railroad ferry slip—it was almost solid. Hunter said one approach looked as bad as another.

This was to be a single-plane strike. The success of the mission depended entirely upon one A-6 and its crew. Barrick, Hunter, and Bull studied the target carefully. The photography of the area was good. Exact measurements were made to provide precise inputs for the computers in the aircraft. The Hanoi air defenses were evaluated. Hunter’s initial impression was right, there was no best way to get in or out. It was going to be rough because Hanoi was loaded.

Leaving IOIC, the two of them went up to the forward wardroom for a quick dinner. The meal was served cafeteria style. There was a short waiting line made up mostly of their squadron mates. “Stand back, you guys, here come Charlie and Lyle. They go first. This may be their last meal,” said one of the young officers. The two aviators laughed self-consciously and moved to the head of the line. There was more joking, but pervading it all was the uncomfortable feeling that perhaps the well-intended humor was getting too close to the truth.

The whole squadron knew Hanoi for what it was a closely-knit web of anti-aircraft guns and SAM sites. There were at least 560 known anti-aircraft guns of various calibers in the area Hunter and Bull were to fly over. Thirty MIG aircraft were based within a few seconds’ flying time from their target. They knew full well that the flight should be opposed by 15 “hot” SAM sites/sites that had been firing with devastating accuracy in previous days. During intelligence briefings, they were told that the North Vietnamese were transferring additional defense firepower to protect their capital city.

Hunter and Bull did not discuss the fact that they might not make it back. After all, six other crews from their squadron had gone through the heart of Hanoi three nights before. They took missiles and flak, but they all came home without a scratch. But that strike was different. It was one of the first strikes to hit in the area of the railroad ferry slip, and it obviously took the North Vietnamese defenders by surprise. The planes shot through with ten-minute separations, but each successive aircraft encountered steadily increasing defensive fire. Six SAMs were fired at the last plane.
Commander Robert Blackwood, U. S. Navy, the squadron’s executive officer, returned from the raid convinced that the luxury of surprise would not be available to any more multiplane strikes going into Hanoi, but a single plane might make it. He discussed the alternatives available with the task force commander, as well as the odds of success and survival. They both knew that shore-based as well as carrier-based aircraft had taken a terrible “hosing down” in the Hanoi area. The Admiral was convinced that there was no single best way of accomplishing this mission, but he also believed in making frequent variations in tactics. If they were to achieve surprise, the strike would have to go in low and at night. Could the A-6 do it? Hunter and Bull would be the first to know.

The launch, when it came, was much the same as the many that had preceded it. The catapult hurled the 27-ton aircraft down the deck with the always-impressive acceleration force that, in a space of 230 feet, propelled the aircraft to an air speed of 150 knots. The A-6 was airborne from its home, the attack carrier USS Constellation (CVA-64).

The lone Intruder swept over the beach at the coast-in point they called the “armpit,” an inlet north of Thanh Hoa and south of Nam Dinh. The planned approach to the target used the rocky hills to the southwest of Hanoi in order to take advantage of the radar “masking” which they provided. Absolute minimum altitude would be the only way the A-6 would be able to stay below the lethal envelope of a radar-guided SAM. The jet, moving at 350 knots, was now at an altitude of 500 feet.

As the jet flew to within 18 miles of the target, a signal flashed in the cockpit, indicating that a SAM radar was locked on the A-6. Immediately Hunter snapped, “Take me down.” With precision accuracy, Bull guided the pilot by search radar down to 300 feet, with the jagged hills rising on either side. At the lower altitude, their instruments indicated they had lost the SAM lock-on. In the radar scope, Bull could see only the ridges of the hills on both sides above them and the reflection of the valley floor below. Four miles straight ahead was the initial point (IP), a small island in the Red River. The IP would be the final navigational aid en route to the target. From this spot, distance and bearing had been precisely measured to the railroad ferry slip. Both the pilot and navigator had to work as one if the mission was to be a success.

With his eyes fixed on the radar scope, Bull placed the crossed hairs on the IP in his radar screen. At the proper instant, Hunter was ready to turn on the final inbound-leg to the target. And again the warning flashed that another SAM radar had locked-on the A-6. Hunter eased the craft down to less than 200 feet, and he moved the stick to the left as the A-6 passed just short of the island in the Red River. The target was now ten miles ahead. The SAM warning signal did not break off with the drop in altitude. As the Intruder flew at near tree-top level, Hunter and Bull could see a missile lift off from its pad. The SAM was locked-on and guiding perfectly toward the cockpit of the Intruder. Hunter waited until the last second, and then he yanked back on the stick, pulling the aircraft into a steep climb. With the nose of the A-6 pointed almost straight up, the SAM exploded underneath it. The laden bomber shook violently, but continued into a modified barrel-roll, topping out at 2,500 feet. At the peak of the high-G roll, the A-6 was on its back. Bull raised his head and could see the ground beneath him lit up by flak. The Intruder rolled out close to the target heading. Bull fixed his attention on the radar scope, noting that the radar cursors had stayed on the target through the roll. “I’m stepping the system into attack,” he told Hunter.
Something caught his eye and he looked up. "I have two missiles at two o’clock, Charlie," Bull announced. "And I have three missiles at ten o’clock," was Hunter’s cool reply. Evasion was virtually impossible with five missiles guiding in on the A-6 from two different directions. Hunter quickly maneuvered the plane, dropping the A-6 to 50 feet. The terrain, illuminated by flak, appeared to be level with the wing tips. Bull could clearly see trucks and people on the road below. They were now only seconds from the target. The five missiles guided perfectly in azimuth, but could not reach down to the A-6. Bull sensed that the missiles exploded above the canopy, but he didn’t look up. His attention was momentarily fixed on the ground where multiple rows of anti-aircraft guns were firing at the aircraft. He watched the muzzle blasts as the jet shot past each row. They were like mileage markers along the road to the ferry slip. Then came the searchlights, scanning the sky as if rating the opening of a giant new supermarket. Some illuminated the Intruder momentarily, but could not stay with the speeding aircraft.

Now they were on the target. On signal, Hunter eased back on the stick and the bomber moved up to 200 feet. The next three-and-a-half seconds would be critical to the accuracy of the bomb drop. Hunter must hold the wings level and the course steady, so that Bull and the computers could do the job they had come so far to accomplish. The eighteen 500-pound bombs fell toward the ferry slip. Feeling the loss of nearly 10,000 pounds of dead weight, Hunter pulled the A-6 into a hard right hand turn.

The aircraft was turned into an outbound, southeast heading and Hunter, giving the Communist gunners a run for their money, began maneuvering the A-G up and down, back and forth. Again the SAM warning was given-four more missiles were locked on the Intruder. They followed, but could not track the Intruder through its evasive maneuvers and they exploded above and behind.

They passed over another flak site without incident, and then they were safely on their way back to the Constellation. For the first time Charlie Hunter and Lyle Bull had time to realize what they had been through.

Only a limited number of military airmen have challenged the main battery of guns in the Hanoi area of North Vietnam. Fewer yet can claim membership in the elite group who has successfully flown unescorted, at night, over North Vietnam’s capital city. For those of the latter group, certainly, any subsequent, new experience promised to be anticlimactic.
Westerman / Westin saga

One afternoon CDR Ron Hays, CO VA-85, and myself in Buckeye 1, and Lt. Bill Westerman and Ltjg Brian Westlin in Buckeye 2 were scheduled for road recce in Route Package 2 in North Vietnam, armed with MK-82s. Just prior to manning aircraft, a report came into the ship that a bunch of barges were massed up near the mouth of the Vinh River.

The staff (CTF-77), being short of TacAir experience, went ballistic and changed our flight’s target to these massed barges, and our ordnance load to NAPALM, of all things. In those days a NAPALM drop had to be executed at a very low altitude and airspeed in order to ensure detonation. We screamed bloody murder about our ordnance change (the target was great!), but to no avail and so we launched on the one and only NAPALM mission (as far as I know) north of Route Package 1 in North Vietnam.

The launch and join-up were normal with only one small problem with Buckeye 2. Brian’s radio system evidently had a short somewhere in the circuit and every time he pressed the ICS button he transmitted on the UHF. This was considered a minor annoyance so we pressed on to the target.

The briefed target tactic was that once the run was commenced, Westy would assume a loose trail position and make his own independent run. We were then to rendezvous over the water and proceed back to marshall. We got the target area, which was only 2 or 3 miles inland, and the barges were there, as briefed, ready for the slaughter. We made our run (all ordnance on target, of course) and pulled off left to head out to the rendezvous area. At this point we heard Brian ask “Are you hit”? Ron and I looked at each other, thinking he was asking us if we were hit and he was telling us something we didn’t know.

Just as we started to reply, Brian made his MAYDAY call stating that the pilot was hit and HE WAS FLYING THE AIRPLANE out to feet wet. Brian was flying from the right seat! Of course the flying was a little erratic, but effective, and we made a join-up with them in a loose formation at about 7,000 feet over the water.

A single rifle bullet, about the size of a 30-30, had entered the aircraft through the lower left aft portion of the canopy and gone through Westy’s shoulder. It probably would have been a clean wound, but the bullet shattered against Westy’s Koch parachute fastener and ripped his whole left chest open. Westy was able to fly the airplane to feet wet but Westy’s left arm and hand were completely immobilized, so he told Brian to take over the stick while Westy used his right hand to manipulate the throttles. Brian was a very busy boy at this point trying to fly, communicate, and take care of Westy. At this point, Westy was experiencing cycles of tunnel vision. His vision would blur and narrow down to a constricted tunnel and then expand back to normal. Finally, Brian remembered he had a miniature of the Flight Surgeon’s brandy in his nav bag. He broke this open and fed it to Westy who revived enough at this point to realize he had better do something quick. He told Brian to eject, but Brian chose to wait until Westy ejected. Westy then jettisoned the canopy and ejected. By the time Brian got himself ready for ejection, the airplane had gone on about 5 or 6 miles.

Meanwhile, back in Buckeye 1, I switched to Guard and broadcast a MAYDAY with our location, which was about 10 miles east of Tiger Island. Red Crown answered immediately and got the SAR helo on the way. We were still flying a loose formation and saw the canopy separate from Buckeye 2. We saw one ejection, lost the parachute, but finally picked up a raft and circled it. Since Ron and I had only seen one ejection we assumed that Westy had gone in with the airplane. What really happened was we saw Westy’s ejection, lost him, and then picked up Brian in his raft thinking the whole time that it was the same person!
At this point, the SAR SPAD flight arrived on the scene. The SARCAP was VA-115 (ARABS) from CAG 13 on Kitty Hawk. They were the last SPAD squadron to deploy to North Vietnam, prior to their transition to A-6A. The flight leader was LCDR Cliff Johns who relieved us as SAR Commander. He located Brian in his raft and vectored the helo in for pickup. We watched Brian’s rescue. The helo pilot then came on the air to say he had successfully rescued Brian, and that Brian said the pilot had ejected before him. This was the first indication we had that Westy was still alive.

Naturally an intensive search by all the aircraft in the area was set up to find Westy. After about 5 minutes, Cliff Johns saw a tracer cross his nose, dropped down, and there was Westy. What happened was that Westy, after he got in the water and out of his chute, was unable to locate his raft. (it was lost in the ejection. Westy had tucked his dead arm under the lap belt to keep it from flailing and thinks this action may have inadvertently jettisoned his raft). In the meantime, he’s watching all these planes and helos flying all over the Tonkin Gulf, but none are anywhere near him. Getting desperate, Westy somehow managed to get his pencil flare out and get it armed with one round. He vowed to shoot down the first plane that came in range. When Cliff set out to find Westy, he happened to fly right over Westy who aimed his pencil flare directly at Cliff and that was the tracer Cliff saw.

The helo was vectored in over Westy posthaste and the sling was dropped for pickup. Westy had been bleeding profusely and was in the middle of a pool of blood. Due to his wound Westy was unable to get into the sling. The helo did not have a swimmer on board, and Brian, who by this time had stripped off his torso harness and was wearing only his “G” suit and flight suit ordered the sling operator to lower him into the water. Brian then got Westy into the sling and Westy was brought on board the helo successfully. When they tried to lower the sling to pickup Brian the winch jammed and could not be operated. Westy was in desperate need of medical attention, so Brian waved the helo off and the helo called in the backup helo and went back to Red Crown, leaving Brian in the bloody water. He used his “G” suit as a flotation device by unzipping it and manually blowing it up. Sharks had been sighted in the area and Brian floated in that bloody pool of water for an eternity (in reality about fifteen minutes) until the backup helo picked him up and returned him to Kitty Hawk.

Westy had a lengthy and painful recovery, but went on to retire as a Captain, logging over 1,000 carrier landings and commanding an LPH. Brian went on to a career in EA-6Bs and was awarded a Navy Cross for his heroic actions in this incident.
The A-6 was developed to meet the U.S. Navy’s need for an aircraft that could attack ground and sea-based targets in any weather, day or night. These needs generated a Request for Proposal in 1956 to which eight companies submitted no less than twelve design proposals. Grumman’s design number 1280 was the winning entry and a contract was issued on March 26, 1959. The aircraft was originally designated the A2F-1, and the first flight of BUNO 147864 took place on April 19, 1960. When aircraft designations were standardized, the A2F-1 became the A-6A. The first A6A entered service with VA-42 in March 1963. The “Intruder,” as it was nicknamed, joined Navy/Marine squadrons on board fleet carriers in 1964, complementing A-4 and A-7 aircraft in the attack role. The A-6 provided the Navy with an all-weather strike capability for the first time. Its design enabled it to carry both nuclear and conventional weapons, which consisted of over three dozen types of ordnance, from guided missiles to cluster munitions.

The Intruder’s lack of eye appeal has resulted in a low-key image in the minds of many uninformed aviation enthusiasts. But throughout its 32 years of service, it has earned and maintained a reputation as the workhorse of Naval Aviation from the countless Battle Group Commanders who were responsible for projecting United States power abroad. Time is one of the key yardsticks used to determine the relative success or failure of almost anything man develops. And time has clearly signaled the success of the A-6 design. It leaves the fleet as it entered, the sign and how adaptable that design is to accepting improvements and technology. The A-6 has proven exceptional in both areas. The design has been adapted several times to include the A-613, a Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) suppression aircraft, the A-6C, the first aircraft equipped with electro-optical sensors (precursor of the A-6E Target Recognition Attack Multi-sensor or TRAM), and of course the KA-61 tanker aircraft. The mission capabilities have also been continuously updated to include state of the art avionics and sensors. The Intruder started with a Digital Integrated Attack and Navigation Equipment (DIANE) system using drum computers and separate track and navigation radars. The system now employs an integrated search/track radar, Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR) and Laser sensors used for target identification and self-contained Laser Guided Bomb delivery. The System Weapons Improvement Program modified the aircraft to include a 1553 digital data transfer bus. This upgrade enables the Intruder to employ multiple advanced precision guided missiles for attacking ground and sea based targets and also anti-radiation missiles for conducting SAM suppression missions. Many Intruders have been further modified to incorporate Night Vision Goggle cockpits, enabling aircrews to employ an additional sensor, Night Vision goggles, in prosecuting night multi-plane attacks.

One of the main advantages of the Intruder has always been its ability to carry a lot of ordnance, both tonnage and variety, to the target. The aircraft can deliver twenty-eight 500 pound bombs with pin point accuracy day or night. It also can deliver the Navy’s entire arsenal of available weapons, from bombs to ground attack and air-to-air missiles, flares, and also provide a full array of target services for air and surface training.

The Intruder’s range is also legendary. She can strike targets at over 500 miles from the carrier un-refueled. Her ability to go long distances with minimal additional fuel has greatly simplified strike planning for over 30 years, as airborne refueling has been and continues to be one of strike planning’s most irascible problems.

“Goodbye, old friend”
We are here today at this disestablishment ceremony because the world has changed so greatly since the birth of this wonderful aircraft. These changes forced the Navy to adapt and live within significant budgetary constraints. The direct result of this major military draw down is the Navy’s decision to retire this great war horse aircraft. The Intruder leaves the service of her country at the peak of her capabilities. She has accomplished every mission asked with perfection and departs without a replacement for her all-weather long-range strike mission. The A-6 INTRUDER has played an essential part in the changes that have reshaped the world, a fitting accomplishment for such a great aircraft.

So, “Thank You, Mr. Grumman, for building a truly outstanding aircraft that has served our wonderful nation for so long. We, her aircrews and maintainers, salute you! As a nation we’ve reveled in the comfort of your Sound of Freedom. To you we say, “Goodbye, old friend . . You’ve served us well!”

(Reprinted from the VA-128 disestablishment ceremony booklet - September 29, 1995)

A total of 693 A-6s were built; 488 A-6As, 95 A-6Bs, 71 A-6E TRAMs, 34 A-6E SWIPs, and 5 A-6Fs.
A Lasting Tribute

Permanently on display in the NAS Whidbey Island Officer's Club is a vertical stabilizer and rudder from BUNO 152603 (complete with working anti-collision light). Listed, by year, on the starboard side are 1,937 names of Category 1 Pilots and B/Ns who have been trained throughout the thirty-two years of VA-128's existence (including that time as a detachment of VAH-123). On the port side is listed the names of GOLDEN INTRUDER aircrew plank owners and the names of the aircrew who stood The Last Watch.

BUNO 152603 was accepted for the Navy Department by VMA (AW)-202 on June 23, 1966. It saw additional service with VA-128, VA-176, VA-85 and finally again, closing its distinguished career, with VA-128. It served during the Vietnam conflict with VMA (AW)-242 and during Operation DESERT STORM with VA-176. It was converted to an A-6E on December 13, 1973 and to an A-6E SWIP on June 18, 1990. The aircraft accumulated 5,721.4 flight hours, 842 carrier arrested landings and 843 catapult shots during her distinguished 29 year career. She finished her final flight with LT "Repete" Shafer and LT "Buckethead" McCreary in an "up and up" status.

...all of which brings a new twist to the phrase,

"Hey, there's a piece of tail in the O' Club with my name on it!"