

ROLLING THUNDER
An Historical Novel of War and Politics
(Wings of War Book 1)

by **MARK BERENT**

Copyright Mark Berent
(rev 03/04/17)

WINGS OF WAR SERIES

ROLLING THUNDER
STEEL TIGER
PHANTOM LEADER
EAGLE STATION
STORM FLIGHT

.....

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Acknowledgments](#)
[Dedication](#)
[Reviews](#)
[Map of Southeast Asia](#)
[Chapter One](#)
[Chapter Two](#)
[Chapter Three](#)
[Chapter Four](#)
[Chapter Five](#)
[Chapter Six](#)
[Chapter Seven](#)
[Image: O-1 FAC Plane](#)
[Chapter Eight](#)
[Chapter Nine](#)
[Chapter Ten](#)
[Chapter Eleven](#)
[Image: Mission Card](#)
[Chapter Twelve](#)
[Chapter Thirteen](#)
[Chapter Fourteen](#)
[Image: III Corps Mike Force](#)
[Chapter Fifteen](#)
[Image: Flaming Arrow](#)
[Chapter Sixteen](#)
[Chapter Seventeen](#)
[Chapter Eighteen](#)
[Chapter Nineteen](#)
[Chapter Twenty](#)
[Chapter Twenty-One](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)
[Image: F-105s Refueling](#)
[Image: Flaming F-105](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)
[Chapter Thirty](#)
[Chapter Thirty-One](#)
[Image: Camp Alpha](#)
[Image: Captured Pilot](#)
[About the Author](#)

[Image: Author and F-100](#)
[Spotters](#)
[Glossary](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The list is long. It starts with Lt. John Williams, a USAF public affairs officer in Los Angeles in the sixties and runs up through Special Forces Captain (Retired) Jim Morris and Ethan Ellenberg in New York in the eighties. In between are writers and editors such as Stefan Geisenheyner, Peter Lars Sandberg, and USAF Colonel John Frisbee, former editor of *Air Force Magazine*; all of whom played a vital role in convincing me to write. I am indebted to these people.

Yet nothing would have happened had it not been for my wife, Mary Bess, who found me in Paris in the seventies reliving the war instead of writing about it. She brought me back.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the KIA, MIA, and POW aircrew from Air America, the U.S. Air Force; the U.S. Army, the U.S. Coast Guard, Continental Air Service, the U.S. Marine Corps, the U.S. Navy, the Royal Australian Air Force, Royal New Zealand Air Force, and to the men of the U.S. Army Special Forces.

.....

Cover by Brian Hogan (former Royal Australian Air Force) Queensland, Australia.

.....

Dear Reader:

This story is not entirely fictional. There are many recognizable characters coupled with many true events and published conversations. In effect, it is factual in content but fictional as relates to the main characters and some events. About my characters: They are composites of various people I have known or read about.

Also, typos and/or poor grammar do slip through. If you note any, I'd be much obliged if you would notify me at fly@markberent.com with the errors. Just list the portion of the sentence with the error and I will use FIND and REPLACE. With your permission, I will list your name under SPOTTERS after I make the correction. Let me know how you want your name presented. However, it may take weeks or months before your name appears due to uploading procedures.

Note there is a **GLOSSARY** at the end of this book.

.....

REVIEWS

"A taut, exciting tale of good men in a bad war. Berent is the real thing." --- Tom Clancy

"*Rolling Thunder* is terrific - a novel of exceptional authenticity that hits like a thunderclap. A decorated Vietnam pilot, Mark Berent knows planes and men and battle, and he whirls them around in a story of uncommon strength. I can't wait for his next book." --- W.E.B. Griffin, best-selling author of *Brotherhood of War* and *The Corps*

"Mark Berent writes with great authority and utter realism, immersing the reader in his characters' every sensation and emotion." --- Dale Brown, best-selling author of *Flight of the Old Dog* and *Tiger's Claw*.

"The fighter pilot's war - you love it and hate it at the same time, and Mark Berent writes it that way." --- Stephen Coonts, best-selling author of *Flight of the Intruder*

"Berent tells it like it was!" --- Chuck Yeager

"The best Vietnam air novel I have read. Berent captures the essence of flying men at war, their agony, emotions, courage, and triumph." --- Brigadier General Robin Olds



[MAP OF SOUTHEAST ASIA](#)

CHAPTER ONE

1320 Hours Local, 17 December 1965 Airborne in an F-100D near Bien Hoa Air Base, Republic of Vietnam

Precisely how a crashing jet fighter breaks up is a function of its speed, of its angle of impact, and of the topography of the ground it strikes. A high speed impact at a ninety degree angle ensures small pieces mashed into a neat circular hole with narrow wing trenches extending from each side. Depending on soil consistency, the engine can burrow down 30 feet and be compressed from twelve feet in length to three. Lesser angles of impact splash the wreckage in the direction of flight. A near-zero glide angle on smooth terrain is another matter entirely. Unless the aircraft cartwheels, which it often does if one of the landing gear collapses, the wings will usually remain intact although probably separate from the aircraft. Large sections of the tail assembly and fuselage usually remain. If the pilot is not killed upon impact, he may survive if the wreck doesn't burn. Usually they burn.

USAF Captain Courtland EdM. Bannister knew all this as he delicately babied his shotup F-100D Super Sabre jet fighter toward his home base of Bien Hoa located 15 miles northeast of Saigon in III Corps, South Vietnam. There were six half-inch holes in his airplane, two nearly lethal.

Less than an hour earlier, Bannister and his flight leader, Paul Austin, had been scrambled from runway Alert to aid an American Special Forces unit in trouble up near Loc Ninh in War Zone C. In pairs, Bien Hoa F-100 pilots pulled three types of Alert: runway, cockpit, and standby. Each flight of two could be airborne streaking toward a target in one minute, five minutes, or 20 minutes.

Almost all Bien Hoa missions, whether scrambled from or scheduled the night before on the Frag Order, were air-to-ground doing what the USAF had been sent to Vietnam to do; support U.S. or Vietnamese troops in battle. The weapons hung under their wings were a mixture of bombs, rockets, napalm, and cluster bomb units known as CBU. Each carried 800 rounds of ammo for the four 20mm cannons mounted internally under the scoop nose of the fighter.

A radar controller in a small dark room had Bannister on his scope.

"Ramrod Four One, I have you twelve miles out on the 275 radial of Tacan Channel 73. Squawk Three Four, acknowledge, Bien Hoa." To 'squawk,' a pilot toggled a switch to send a burst of energy to the radar scope.

"Bien Hoa, Four One, squawking Three Four. I have a situation here. I need a straight-in. I'm leaking bad; gas and, ah, hydraulic fluid. Get me down quick, you copy Four One?"

"Roger, Four One, GCA copies."

The Ground Control Approach controller had picked up Ramrod Four One from Bien Hoa Approach Control who advised him the pilot had declared an emergency due to battle damage and low fuel. Bannister had not mentioned he was bleeding. Approach Control also said they had no contact with Ramrod Four Zero, Bannister's flight leader.

As the controller prepared to transmit, another voice broke in. It was neither as low pitched as that of the GCA controller nor as calm.

"Four One, this is Ramrod Two speaking, Ramrod Two. You got gear? You got three good ones down? How about flaps? You got flaps? Where's your flight leader?" Ramrod Two, Bannister's operations officer and immediate commander, had channeled into the conversation

using the squadron radio.

Bannister didn't have time to answer his nearly hysterical operations officer. He was busy keeping his crippled airplane aloft. Suddenly, a red warning signal lit up drawing his attention to a small hydraulic gauge on a lower panel in his cockpit. The needle of the gauge bobbed twice, then yielded up the few remaining pounds of utility hydraulic pressure as the main pump ground to a halt, then violently broke up deep inside the big fighter. Bannister thought he could feel the grinding. He quickly raised his eyes out of the cockpit to see if he could spot the runway. He had to squint and to blink away blood. All he could see was the jungle canopy a thousand feet below stretching out for miles into a reddish haze.

Several slugs from a big quad-barrel Russian ZSU-4 12.7mm anti-aircraft gun had stitched his Super Sabre from scoop shovel nose to just short of the tail section. They had punctured and ripped tubing and control lines causing a loss of hydraulic fluid which required Bannister to engage his emergency flight control system. That system was powered by a Ram Air Turbine called RAT by its acronym. The engine itself was untouched. One slug, however, had ripped a small hole in the belly fuel cell allowing fuel to stream out behind the F-100 like a smoke trail.

Another slug had crashed through the starboard quarter panel glass of the windscreen, smashing the gunsight, zinging fragments of metal and glass into Bannister's face. His helmet and oxygen mask protected all but the area around his eyes and forehead. He wore no sunglasses and had not lowered either the sun visor or the clear plastic visor mounted on his helmet. The fragments had etched a few minor lacerations above Bannister's right eye. While neither particularly painful nor disabling, the wounds produced prodigious capillary bleeding effectively causing Bannister to lose the sight of his right eye. Wiping with his gloved hand smeared it worse. Bannister unhooked his blood-filled oxygen mask and let it dangle. Pooled blood splashed down the front of his parachute harness and survival vest and mingled with his sweat. He heard the measured cadence of the controller through the headset in his helmet.

"Ramrod Four One, check gear down. Prepare for descent in one mile."

Bannister cupped the mask to his face with his right hand, bracketed the control stick with his knees, and pushed the transmit button on the throttle with his left hand. He countered a right wing drop with a leftward motion of his knees pressing on the stick.

"Bien Hoa, my situation is a bit worse. No Utility pressure, Flight One is out, Flight Two is going, and I'm not getting much RAT pressure, flight controls stiffening. Yeah, and I only got about 100 pounds of fuel." Bannister still didn't mention the blood. He did not consider himself wounded, merely inconvenienced at a rather harrowing time.

"Where's your leader, where's Four Zero? Ramrod Four One answer me."

"Get off the air, Ramrod Two," the GCA controller broke in, "there's an emergency in progress and I've got it." His voice was brittle, not the calming one he used with Ramrod Four One.

Bannister shoved down a lever with a replica of a wheel on it. The lever released the lock pins allowing the gear doors to open and the heavy wheels and struts to fall free. Then he pulled the lanyard that shunted emergency hydraulic fluid into the last two feet of hydraulic lines locking the nose and left main gear into place. The right main didn't lock causing its cockpit indicator light to remain red. Bannister pushed to test the green indicator bulb. It worked. He already knew his flaps wouldn't go down; he had tried them at a higher altitude doing a damage check. His flight leader was not there to assist him and report whatever damage Bannister could not see.

"Ah, Bien Hoa, the right main is still red. I don't think it's locked in place. And this will be a

no-flap landing. Put the barrier up, I've got to make an approach-end engagement." Without flaps he had to bring his plane in fifteen knots faster. Bannister didn't intend to eject unless the engine quit.

He punched a button activating a solenoid that released a heavy steel bar with a hook on the end which extended under the aft section of his plane. If he touched down in the right place, the hook would snatch the cable stretched across the approach end of the runway and yank him to a stop in a few hundred feet, exactly the way a Navy fighter engages a cable during an aircraft carrier landing.

"Roger, Ramrod Four One, Bien Hoa copies. Barrier crew notified. This is your final controller, how do you read?"

"Loud and clear," Bannister yelled into his dangling mask. From here on he needed his right hand on the control stick, his left on the throttle.

"Ramrod Four One, you need not acknowledge further transmissions. Steer right Two Six Five degrees and start your descent...now."

The controller frequently released his mike button for an instant in case Ramrod Four One had to make a transmission that his emergency was worsening.

Bannister concentrated on his heading, but did not start the standard 600 feet per minute rate of descent that would give him a smooth 3 degree descent angle to the runway. He needed to hold his altitude until the last minute in case his engine quit from fuel starvation. Then he would decide if he was close enough to glide in or if he would be forced to eject. He rapidly blinked his eyes as he scanned his instruments every few seconds while simultaneously searching forward for the runway. His right eye cleared. When he finally spotted the white concrete landing strip he started to breathe more rapidly as he estimated altitude and distance to the point of touchdown. His airspeed gauge indicated two hundred knots. He was flying into a five knot headwind giving him a speed over the ground of 230 miles per hour or 338 feet per second. In 23 seconds he would be on the ground, one way or another.

The controller's voice faded for Bannister as he concentrated on aligning his craft and deciding when to start his last minute descent. If he was too late, his steep descent angle would cause him to overshoot the runway which would force him to bailout or crash, since he did not have enough fuel to go-around and try again. If he started too soon and the engine quit, he would also have to bail out or crash short of the runway.

One mile from the runway Bannister decided it looked right and started an abnormally high rate of descent. He could see the crash crew lined up along the side of the runway; red foam trucks, a yellow wrecker, and a blue ambulance. At 800 feet above the ground and 4000 feet from the end of the runway his engine sucked up the last drops of JP-4 jet fuel and quickly unwound.

"Flameout," Bannister yelled into his mask.

The big plane wanted to quit flying but Bannister held his speed by shoving the control stick forward which forced the nose down more. His rate of descent increased to 1000 feet per minute. Airspeed had to be high to spin the RAT and give him hydraulic pressure to work the flight controls. He would need a lot of control response to break the glide and flare for touchdown. Though Bannister's heart rate went up another notch, he felt confident he could make it. All the numbers were right. He calculated he had enough altitude to trade for airspeed to make the touchdown point where his hook would grab the cable. The camouflaged airplane plunged closer to the jungle, barely topped the palm trees, streaked across the half-mile clearing before the concrete, then flared smoothly as Bannister applied enough back pressure on the control stick to

break the rapid descent but still make a firm touchdown so the hook wouldn't bounce over the barrier.

It all worked. The hook snatched the cable with the immense force generated by 17 tons of mass in motion at 300 feet per second. The four-foot brake drums on each side of the runway feeding out cable screamed and smoked, absorbing kinetic energy as they decelerated the big fighter. The jet slewed sharply left, then, at 100 knots, the right main gear collapsed, slamming the right wing to the ground and starting a cartwheel.

Bannister's head banged against the canopy as the wing hit the ground. He grunted as he pushed without results on the now frozen control stick and rudder pedal to counter the violent movement that would end in a fireball. Of the three remaining forces acting on the plane, forward momentum, right roll, and hook deceleration, the hold-back by the hook was the most powerful and won out. The left wing rose ten feet off the ground, the plane pivoted thirty degrees on the crushed right wing tip, the hook held and slammed the flat-bottomed airplane back onto the concrete runway. Bannister's seat survival pack absorbed most of the impact for him but his head, weighted by the three-pound helmet, thudded down on his chest harness so hard the metal snap gashed his chin. The violent impact dazed him. For an instant he was on the edge of consciousness.

The fire trucks and crash crew surrounded the wreck almost before it settled. They shot great streams of sticky white foam over and under the plane, around the hot engine and aft section. Without fuel there was little chance of a fire. Four firemen in aluminum suits, looking like bulky astronauts, ran to the airplane, two to each side. One jerked the external lanyard blowing the canopy off while the others positioned a ladder and ran up to get Bannister, who was rapidly coming around and able to undo his own helmet, harness, G-suit, and oxygen connections. The years of programming himself to instinctively perform all the ground emergency egress actions were paying off.

The fireman at the top of the ladder on the right side thought so much blood in the cockpit was unusual. Usually a guy hit this bad wouldn't make it back. He passed Bannister's helmet to another fireman, who, facing aft toward the open cockpit, was straddling the nose of the aircraft like a horseback rider. "Are you okay, Sir?" the closest fireman asked through his helmet faceplate.

"Yeah, Chief, fine, thanks. How about fire? We got any fire?" Bannister, thinking the plane would blow up, was struggling to get out.

"No, no fire. No sweat, Sir, just hang on a minute." The firemen gently placed his gloved hand on Bannister's shoulder. He held the groggy pilot down until the Flight Surgeon from the ambulance could climb up the ladder and check his condition.

"Hey Court, how ya doing? Where ya hit?" Major Conrad Russell, MD, asked as he leaned over Bannister to wipe away blood and assess damage. He saw the facial rips and tears where the blood had already clotted. He thumbed up Bannister's right eyelid and noted that the eyeball looked intact and functional. The nick in the chin was barely oozing.

"No place. I'm not hit. Just some junk in my face. Is my right eye okay?" Bannister asked. He looked up at Russell, squinting his gray-blue eyes as much from the residual blood as from the sun behind Russell's back. Bannister's brown hair, released from the confines of his helmet, soaked with sweat and plastered against his head, was trimmed almost to crew-cut length. His close-shaved sideburns ended at mid-ear. His face was square, his jaw line strong. Bannister was six foot two and normally trimmed out at 190. Vietnam heat and O' Club food had dropped him to a dehydrated 170. He was 30 and had been a USAF fighter pilot for ten years. This was his

first crash.

Major Russell, his preliminary check complete, said, "Come on, let's get out of here. We gotta clear the runway. Other guys want to land too, you know. Your eye will be fine." He tugged at Bannister to get up and climb down the ladder.

The Flight Surgeon started to smile and hum as he moved his bulky figure down the ladder, accepting the helping hand of a nearby fireman. Doc Russell was doing what he loved best. He wore standard Shade 45 USAF blue two-piece fatigues which were now smelly and stained badly by the foam. His name, rank, and Flight Surgeon wings were embossed on a piece of leather stitched to his left breast. Russell was overweight, rotund in fact. His round, young-looking face vaguely resembled that of Baby Huey, the cartoon character. The fighter pilots at Bien Hoa, particularly those of the 531st, the squadron he was responsible for, quickly gave him that nickname. Russell, a 34 year old major, would have been a pilot were it not for optic problems so bad that his eyes tended to cross whenever he was tired.

He walked Bannister to the ambulance. The letters and devices on the leather nametag on the pilot's left breast stated he was Courtland EdM. Bannister, Capt., USAF. A star above his pilot's wings indicated he had flown at least seven years and had amassed 2000 flying hours and was rated a senior pilot. Below his pilot's wings were the parachutist's wings he had been awarded after training with the Special Forces in Germany. Bannister still wore his G-suit and survival vest, and carried an olive-green bag stuffed with his helmet, kneeboard, and maps. On his feet he wore Army issue jungle boots which were perfectly suited for tropical wear but would provide no ankle support in a parachute landing.

Standing next to the squadron jeep edged up to the blue USAF ambulance, watching them approach, was Ramrod Two, Major Harold Rawson, five-ten, black hair combed straight back, a pencil-thin mustache over his thin upper lip. He looked the type who missed the days of puttees and riding britches. He wore, instead, the standard K-2B cotton one-piece green flight suit with the standard thirteen zippers. On his head was a regulation USAF blue flight cap with silver officer piping on the rim and the gold oak leaves of a major pinned front right. Rawson was the operations officer of the 531st Tactical Fighter Squadron, second in command to the squadron commander and responsible for day-to-day fighter operation. The commander, Lieutenant Colonel Peter Warton, was back in the States on emergency furlough leaving Rawson in charge. He felt burdened with the unexpected responsibility.

Rawson watched Bannister and Russell approach, barely resisting the temptation to run up to Bannister crying "What in hell did you do?" Instead he waited until the two men drew closer.

"Where's Four Zero?" he asked. Then, unable to contain himself, "How could you lose your leader?"

Before Bannister could answer, Russell shoved him toward the ambulance and said to Rawson, "Look, Harry, I've got to check this guy out before you or anybody from Intel gets to talk to him. Now back off."

Bannister's face colored. He seriously considered slamming his fist into Rawson's small, turned down mouth which seemed to perpetually sneer whenever its owner spoke.

"I didn't *lose* anybody, Goddammit. Austin got hit and went straight in," Bannister said in a tight voice over his shoulder as he climbed into the back of the ambulance. As the double doors swung shut he turned to see Rawson struggling with only limited success to control himself.

In the coolness of one of the nested trailers that served as a hospital on the Bien Hoa Air Base, Russell remained silent until he had finished swabbing the cuts on Bannister's face. They

would not require stitching and would heal quickly if kept clean.

"Well," he said straightening up, "all that blood and these cuts are worth a Purple Heart."

Bannister stood up and walked to one of the small sliding windows that looked out. He had taken off his G-suit and dark green net survival vest. The sweat beneath was crusted white with salt and starting to dry on his flight suit. He dug a crushed pack of Luckies from his zippered left sleeve pocket and lit one before he answered. The Zippo he used had a thick rubber band around it. He had learned that trick from his Special Forces buddies at Bien Hoa to both keep the lighter from slipping out of a pocket as well as prevent it from clicking on another metal object.

"Forget it." He inhaled deeply, held it, and blew the smoke out in a long sigh. He could still see the fireball that Major Paul Austin's plane made after it hit the ground.

"Why?" Russell asked after a minute.

"Too piddly."

"Well," Doc Russell said, "I guess I understand that." He stood up. "At any rate, Paul Austin will get one." He was silent for a moment. "Hell of a way to earn it, though."

After another pause he added, "Isn't his dad a general in the Pentagon?" He nodded to himself. "Sure he is, a three-star. So that's why Harry Rawson is so distraught." He looked to Bannister for corroboration.

"That's the one," Bannister said. He hoisted his gear and started for the door. "I've got to go debrief. There's big stuff going on up there near Loc Ninh. We stumbled into something hot and I don't mean just gun barrels."

"Okay," Russell said, nodding. "Keep your dirty mitts off those cuts. Maybe I'll see you tonight at the club."

Bannister walked out the door thinking about the intelligence debriefing session he was about to face in the wing headquarters building. He knew he could convince the lower ranking Intel people that something was up at Loc Ninh, but he wasn't at all sure whether the high level ones at Saigon would agree. They had their own concepts and didn't like input that upset them. That was one problem he could probably deal with. He wasn't so sure about the other.

What weighed on Bannister's mind far more than the Loc Ninh buildup was the lie he planned to tell the Flying Safety Officer about why Paul Austin crashed.

CHAPTER TWO

1630 Hours Local, 17 December 1965 Braniff International Flight B1T4 near Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Republic of Vietnam

As Bannister walked out of Russell's dispensary at Bien Hoa Air Base, Braniff International Flight B1T4, a four-engined Boeing 707, began descending from cruise altitude twenty minutes out of Tan Son Nhut Air Base, the sprawling airfield and U.S. military command complex on the northwest side of Saigon.

Braniff International, out of Los Angeles by way of Norton Air Force Base, California, was one of the half-dozen U.S. airlines flying MAC contract flights to and from Vietnam. American, World, Continental, Braniff, and the others carried G.I.s under a government contract to augment the USAF's Military Airlift Command (MAC), which didn't have enough transport airplanes and crews to ferry troops to and from Vietnam.

At first and subsequent glance, the Braniff airplane was astonishing. What the eye didn't want to believe or adjust to, was the color. From tip to tail, the 150-foot airliner was painted chartreuse. The irreverent called it the Chartreuse Goose. Inside, also under Braniff's new look plan, the girls wore Pucci ensembles of sleeveless blouses and culottes in bright pink and yellow, and flat-heeled multi-colored shoes that replaced calf-high boots worn off the plane. After hearing throaty rumbles, Emilio Pucci had decided not to change the traditional uniforms of the cockpit crew.

The plane banked left over the azure water of the South China Sea, preparing for its run up to the base. To avoid ground fire, it would not descend below 4500 feet until the last minute before landing approach, and then it would descend very quickly, more quickly than any civilian passenger would have understood, or put up with. It crossed high over the beach at Vung Tau where the sand was so white it looked like a band of purest flour.

On board the Boeing 707 were three cockpit crew members, five cabin attendants, and 165 military passengers crammed into seats better suited for small tourists on short flights.

The G.I.s, all in uniform, previously talkative and alert, became silent and glum as they stared out the window ports watching verdant jungle, peaceful looking as Hawaii, slide beneath the wings.

Oblivious to the first view of a nation where his fellow countrymen were dying, First Lieutenant Toby G. Parker, United States Air Force, blond hair, oval-shaped blue eyes, good features, good teeth, the quintessential college frat man, more eager to party than to participate in anything that might require mental or moral effort, sat in aisle seat 1C directly facing the forward bulkhead where three stewardesses were strapped into jumpseats facing aft. The configuration was peculiar in that the three girls sat knee-to-knee with the men in the front row, the row in which Parker had maneuvered to be seated.

Figuring he would see enough of Vietnam during his upcoming year-long tour, he concentrated on the stewardess he had been bird-dogging during the entire flight from Clark Air Base in the Philippines. As regulations required when their aircraft was landing, she was now buckled into the crew seat facing Parker. He had been trying for her attention since takeoff, hours earlier. She finally was settled in one place.

"Hey, really," he said, leaning toward her, "what's your name? Can I write you? Do you have a layover here or are you on a turn-around?"

Parker was proud of the lingo he had learned from dating so many stews in LA, where he had been posted to the big USAF unit, SAMSO (Space and Missile Systems Operation), in El Segundo. What he should have known was that even the newest MAC contract girl could spot a stew bum from forty seats away.

The girl, short cropped brown hair slightly awry, looked over. She read his name from the blue plastic tag over the right pocket of his tailored 1505 khaki shirt.

"Hey, really' yourself, Parker. Behave." Her amber eyes looked tired but faintly amused at this guy trying so hard to get her attention. *Cute but boyish*, she thought, as she smiled at him.

Encouraged, Toby made what he considered the best move he could under the circumstances. He reached over to take her hand and by his warmth impress her with tons of sincerity. *Might even turn her on*, he thought, *though not too likely under these conditions*. She made a movement he barely saw and suddenly his right hand felt numb from the wrist.

"Ouch. Damn. What did you do?"

"Karate." She smiled sweetly. "Just a mild chop on a nerve. I have a brown belt. I told you to behave." She adjusted her skirt and sat primly as the pilot dove the huge airliner toward touchdown at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Republic of South Vietnam.

The plane vibrated and shook as the slipstream tore at the gear and flaps the pilot lowered in the later part of the descent. This wasn't how it was done in the States, where no one fired at you from the ground, and some G.I.s rolled their eyes at the humming and rocking movements. One, to his mind-numbing disgust, threw up quietly into his hat.

The pilot expertly flared the big craft, the main gear greased onto the runway with contented squeaks, then rumbled as the struts absorbed the unevenness of the concrete surface.

The Transient Alert crew of the 8th Aerial Port drove the service truck with the white steps to the front left of the liner. When the amber-eyed girl and one other unlocked and pushed open the big door, the warm, humid smell of Vietnam rolled through the cabin like swamp gas. The cabin filled with the steamy air smelling of fresh palms and fetid underbrush, of steamy jungle and rotting garbage, of perfume and formaldehyde. Over it all hung the odor of burnt jet fuel smelling like stale bus fumes. At first sniff it was sickening. It became worse with each inhale. It was an odor one wasn't likely to forget. Each G.I., as he breathed in, instinctively knew that this was a one-time moment in his life. Some, the more sensitive, shivered.

Parker was oblivious to all of this. Vietnam for him was just another adventure before he quit the Air Force. He intended to make the most of the year tour, for which he had volunteered, starting right now.

He hung back to be the last out so he could have more time to hustle the amber-eyed girl. She was busy with the others; stacking trays, opening galley hatches, letting the Vietnamese cleaning crews in the galley doors so they could watch them to be sure they cleaned and did not plant bombs in out-of-the-way places. Parker was finally urged off the plane by a G.I. greeting official, a harassed Army captain, who said to get his ass down the stairs and into the terminal or he'd kick it there. *Military officers didn't talk that way in the States*, Parker thought, as he grabbed his blue AWOL bag and deplaned. At the foot of the steps, Parker dug out his folded flight cap and crammed it on his head at just the right angle. The airliner's captain and navigator had already left the ship to file a flight plan for the return leg, carrying back to the States G.I.s who had finished their tour of duty in Vietnam. The co-pilot remained behind to supervise refueling.

The 707 was parked on the civilian ramp in line with Air France and Air Cambodge Caravels, a Pan American 707, and an Air Vietnam DC-4. Parker could see military aircraft on a far ramp in several new parking revetments of corrugated steel and sandbags. Other revetments

were under construction from one end of the two-mile flight line to the other. There was an aura of bustle and sweat about the field. Nothing moved slowly. Blue USAF maintenance vans and dirty white French-built civilian trucks bearing airline logos raced up and down the ramp, meeting airplanes, carrying parts, or transporting harassed contractors and workers.

Civilian airliners vied with camouflaged fighters as they lined up along the taxiway waiting to be cleared onto the runway for takeoff. Civilian passengers could look down on helmeted pilots sitting in the cockpits of their bomb-laden fighters waiting for takeoff to fly a combat mission. Military control tower operators of Tan Son Nhut's dual runways were experiencing well over 800 landings and takeoffs a day and were expecting double that in the coming year. At a distance Parker could see two-story wooden watch towers on stilts alternating with brown sandbagged bunkers forming part of the perimeter defense.

Though December was one of the cooler months in the Asian monsoon season, the heat and humidity hit Parker like a fist as his lungs absorbed the steamy air. In minutes, as he walked to the terminal, he felt water starting to roll down his sides as if his body had turned on a small garden soaker. Before he reached the door, his shirt had a wide sweat-soaked Vee down the front and the back, with circular dark patches under each arm.

He shoved open the swinging glass door lettered **For Military Personnel Only**, and lugged his AWOL bag into the MAC side of the terminal. In less than an hour he was processed, his shot record checked, and he had retrieved his one duffel bag and slung it over his shoulder. Lieutenant Parker was on his own now and didn't have to report in until 0800 the following morning at the 6250th Combat Support Group administrative office, where he would take over as assistant to the assistant Administrative Officer or some such inconsequential job. Although he had to volunteer in his primary duty specialty as a code 7024 administrative officer, he had planned all along to seek a more exciting job once in Vietnam. He had heard such things were easy to do in the rapidly expanding wartime atmosphere.

He pushed through the milling crowd of khaki clad G.I.s and went out the door to the front side of the deteriorating French-built terminal. Headed toward the base bus stop, he glanced through the tall windows and saw the stewardesses from his airliner near the small civilian bar at one end of the long, dirty, crowded area that passed for a passenger lounge. The girls were waiting for their airplane to be released by maintenance. They looked tired and wrinkled after their long trip.

Parker entered and elbowed his way up to the end of the bar where the girls stood sipping warm Cokes through straws, talking about the new crew lounge that would be ready by their next trip. They had put on Portland Red wrap-around skirts over their culottes and carried identical beige purses slung over their shoulders. But no one wore the pillbox hat which Pucci had worked such long hours to design. Parker dropped his bags at the end of the bar.

"Hi," he said to the amber-eyed girl. She turned to stare at him. She showed no surprise at his being there.

"You are persistent," she said, finally. "Aren't you due some place? Like a war, maybe?"

"I don't report to the war until eight o'clock tomorrow morning. Have dinner with me to night. There must be an Officers Club here someplace."

"There is and I can't," she said.

"Do you fly back today?" he asked.

"Right now," she said.

Toby had never seen such eyes, the amber and flecks of gold were deep and hypnotic. He was about to tell her exactly that when a dark-haired medium-sized civilian stepped abruptly

between them, grabbed the girl by the arm and tried to pull her off to one side. He wore dark pants and a short-sleeved white shirt. Clipped to his shirt pocket was a red laminated photo ID card.

"Goddammit, Nancy, this time you got to talk to me," he said. His face was pursed in agitation. He exuded a faint odor of whiskey. He released her arm and stood very close, looking down at her from a two-inch height advantage.

Not the least intimidated, she set her jaw as she put her hands on his chest and pushed him back.

"Bubba, go away. There isn't anything to talk about. There never was. Go away."

The place was crowded, hot, and smoky. The other girls didn't quite catch what was going on because Parker was between them and the pair. He did hear one of the stewards answer another's question by saying Bubba was Curtis Bates, the assistant station manager for Alpha Airlines.

Parker, edging closer to Bubba and Nancy, saw him grab her arm, twist and jerk it, while saying something using a lot of swear words. Never one to get involved, Parker surprised himself. Maybe it was the environment. He felt a surge of adrenalin and, without making a conscious decision to do so, reached out, grabbed Bubba's arm and swung him around. Instantly Parker found himself stomach-down on the dirty cement floor looking at ankles and mashed cigarette butts. He rolled over, jumped to his feet, swung at Bubba, missed, and was flattened again.

He got up in time to see Nancy do something with her hands and arms that doubled Bubba up and caused instant sweat to pop out on his forehead.

"Do you understand now, Bubba? Do you?" she asked, jerking his arm higher behind his back. Parker noted she had somewhat thick ankles and rounded, muscular calves. Bent over, Curtis "Bubba" Bates nodded his head and mumbled what could be taken for a yes. She released him as two Caucasian civilians pushed through the parting crowd and led Bubba away. They wore identical black trousers and white shirts, and red ID cards. A dozen feet away, Bubba Bates, face so flushed he appeared near a heat stroke, looked back at Parker, nodded to himself, then turned and walked on, slamming fist into palm several times.

Nancy, seeing the look, took Parker's arm, "Oh look, I'm really sorry. But you shouldn't have interfered, you know. Everything was under control, really it was." She reached up, surprisingly tender, to touch Parker's face, then fingered the gathering bruise under his eye. "Damn. You're going to have quite a mouse."

Not at all in control of the situation, Parker stared at her for a second. He thought he could feel his face begin to swell.

"Brown belt, huh," he said.

She nodded. The other girls had gathered around. They pointed in the direction of the airplane and said it was time to board.

Parker could only stare into her eyes. He was totally out of ideas; beginning to suspect he was outclassed. Nancy looked at him for a moment.

"Okay," she said, "write me. Here, take my card."

She dug into her purse, handed him a finely embossed card, shook her head once as if amazed at what she had done, then ran after the other girls.

Parker stood still, watching the girls move off. Nancy didn't look back to wave or to say goodbye. With a sigh he glanced down at the card he held in his hand. "Hey," he half shouted, running after her, "there's no address."

He caught up with them as they went through the **Crew Only** door to the flight line.

"There's no address," he yelled, waving the white card.

"Write me at the airline office in Oakland," she shouted back as the door swung shut.

Parker stopped, looked again at the expensive card in his hand. The Gothic script identified the owner as Mrs. Bradley L. Lewis.

By 2100 hours that night Parker was ready for the bar at the Tan Son Nhut Officers Club. Earlier he had checked into the BOQ and found his tiny room on the second floor. He had showered in the communal ten-head shower that had slimy slippery wooden grates over an even more slippery cement floor. The building was one of six in a row of identical pale green, two-story wooden structures hastily erected to house the lieutenant and captain company grade officers. He felt stiff, abused, tired from two days of travel, and humiliated. His eye, though puffy, was not showing the purple bruise of a mouse.

He had found the clothes-washing facilities in a service area down the hall. The white washers and dryers didn't require coins and were battered and stained from much use. Padding around in thongs and leopard skin briefs, he had sprinkled and ironed a flight suit scrounged from a supply officer friend back in the States. He had never worn a flight suit and wasn't authorized to even own one, but felt things were much different here in Vietnam than at the Space and Missile Systems Office in LA. He carefully smoothed a printed leather tag attached to the left breast that spelled out his name and rank. Non-rated people did not wear flight suits during their off-duty time, much less on duty. Being rated meant having earned a set of wings by completing the appropriate technical school. The graduate was rated as a pilot, navigator, gunner, crew chief, or other aircrew position. At a Stateside air base such an act would be considered pretentious and Parker knew the non-rated wearer would be in for heavy verbal abuse. He figured in a combat zone most personnel flew on all sorts of different missions and his flight suit would be merely one of many. He climbed into the dark green flight suit and zipped it up.

2200 Hours Local, 17 December 1965
Officers Club
Tan Son Nhut Air Base, Republic of Vietnam

Parker found the Officers Club, walked in, hesitated, then walked to the crowd, four-deep at the bar and well on its way to becoming raucous. He elbowed his way to the long wooden bar. A ten-foot, Air Force-issue, spangled MERRY CHRISTMAS banner hung, slightly askew, on the wall above the bottle racks behind the bar. He had to wait several minutes to order a double Scotch and water from one of the three off-duty G.I. bartenders. They were rushing and sweating to keep up with the demands of the fast, hard drinking officer and civilian contractor crowd. Parker sipped his Scotch and decided he should have ordered beer. The place was not like any Officers Club he had ever seen in the States. It was more like a saloon in the Klondike boomtown days. The humid atmosphere was thick with smoke and loud talk. Three ceiling fans pushed and mixed both into a stupefying mélange of sound and smell. Parker looked around.

The crowd wasn't only USAF or Army transients. Tan Son Nhut was where MACV, the command organization trying to prosecute the war in Southeast Asia (SEA), was located.

MACV was an acronym for Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, the 3200-man unified command under the Commander in Chief of the Pacific Command (CINCPAC) based in Hawaii. Air operations were controlled by the 7th Air Force under MACV. Commander U.S. MACV (COMUSMACV) answered directly to CINCPAC who had to answer directly to the Secretary of

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

