

Excerpts from Chapter One

"We've crossed the *fence*, lights out. We'll be in Steel Tiger East in fifteen minutes," Chris Andrews broadcasted over the intercom as the AC-130A Gunship crossed the *Mekong River* along the Thai-Laotian border.

"What are we playing tonight, Chris?" asked Major Marks, while he donned his flak helmet.

"Tonight's request is brought to you from the I.O. gentlemen." Chris Andrews inserted the 'Sam & Dave' tape into the mission tape recorder, channeling *Give me Some Lovin'* into the aircraft intercom system. Willie Santiago, the I.O., and the Spectre flight crew became aroused, driven in concert by the rhythmic beat as they headed toward another major supply route on the eastern border of *Laos*. Booth sensor operators impatiently searched for benign targets on the ground to boresight the 40-mm and 20-mm guns in preparation for another night stalking operation.

"Three Wolfpacks on station at 15,000 feet at our six," the navigator interrupted the rhythmic moment for a mission update.

Major Stuart Marks, the aircraft commander, was attuned to the needs of his fourteen man crew so that they functioned flawlessly, centering their skills and training during the arduous five hour missions. Who gives a shit about regulations, and how the mission recorder was used before a mission, he thought. He wanted his men pumped-up and on the edge, ready to waste the motherfuckers on the trail. If music got their adrenalin pumped to kick *North Vietnamese* ass, so be it, he thought.

Ralph Aguilar, The flight engineer, extinguished the interior lights of the AC-130A from his control panel, illuminating the crew cabin and cargo compartment with an eerie, low-intensity red light. The gunners and the illuminator operator were accustomed to the low-light levels and could easily maneuver around the crowded compartment without bumping into each other or into the munition racks filled with 40-mm and 20-mm shells. A small trailer-type compartment, known as the booth, was manned by three officers that operated and housed sophisticated high-tech electronic equipment that literally was the eyes and ears of Spectre. The sensor operators thought they were hot-shit, often claiming that they could distinguish between warm elephant shit and farts from the NVA. They were good, but they also had lots of U.S. technology behind them. A computerized fire-control system linked the guns and sensors that made Spectre extremely deadly. A Forward-Looking Infrared sensor enabled the Spectre to detect heat from vehicles even after they had turned off their engines. Its sensitivity could even pick up heat emissions from a cigarette at ten thousand feet. And the Low-level light TV could see in the dark by amplifying moon and star light. Then there was the Black Crow, an impressive ignition detection system device that could hone-in on moving vehicles along the trail then relay the data to the other sensors for target acquisition. The digital fire control system then integrated inputs from the three sensors providing position and attitude data to the pilot, allowing him to place the aircraft in a search or attack orbit. Input from the fire control system drove a bead in the pilot's gunsight, which represented the target. When the fixed reticle in the gunsight was aligned with the bead, the pilot was then ready to shoot at its quarry.

The Forward Looking Infrared, Black Crow, and Low-Light-Level-Television operators began calibrating their equipment in preparation for the evening hunt, while the navigator made

sure that the videotape recorder was functional and ready to confirm the evening's kills for the Intelligence assholes who questioned every kill during the mandatory debriefs once they returned to *Ubon*. The electronic warfare officer made final checks and adjustments, and made sure that all was ready and operational in the event of a surface-to-air missile, better known as a flying telephone pole, was launched at them. Chaff tubes which hung under the wings were armed and ready to jam enemy radar.

Marks and his crew had a reputation throughout the base as a hard-nosed bunch. And it was usually an individual without much intelligence or who was inherently stupid that would dare question Marks' crews' sense of manhood or lack of balls without getting their face smashed in, even by an officer. They were never known to go about their business the easy way, like letting the F-4 fighter escorts take out the triple-A batteries when they were under attack. They preferred, and mostly enjoyed, doing it themselves.

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A hard rain began to fall as *Le Thanh* sat stoically beside his camouflaged 57-mm antiaircraft weapon. His pith helmet made of pressed cardboard covered with a thin cloth was hardly a shield against the dense sheets of rain that slowly advanced through *Binh Tram 37* in eastern *Laos*. *Thanh* would occasionally look skyward, intently listening for the RF-4's that regularly patrolled the northwestern sector of Route 12 and 15 of the *Mu Gia* mountain pass that ran south into *Laos* from *North Vietnam*. The steep mountainous jungle terrain surrounding the *Mu Gia Pass* provided excellent cover for the rapidly moving supply convoys under the protective triple jungle canopy. Its deep mountain caverns and limestone karsts' caves were a superb natural camouflage for antiaircraft batteries and for storing large quantities of supplies for the planned 1972 spring offensive. B-52's were unable to destroy or dislodge them from the caves after many years of carpet bombing, while resourceful *North Vietnamese* road repair teams cleverly used the massive craters for storing supplies, then camouflaging them.

Thanh had taken note that unarmed photo reconnaissance flights had recently intensified. What he didn't know, was that the flights were precipitated by the emitting signals of seismic and acoustic sensors that were implanted over hundreds of miles along the enemy's logistical transportation routes. Tree branch-like sensors would relay data to a ground station at *Nakhon Phanom*, a Royal Thai Air Force Base in eastern *Thailand* by two specially equipped EC-121's that continuously orbited the enemy's infiltration routes. Two IBM mainframe computers in air conditioned trailers at NKP worked 24-hours a day deciphering the information, trying to get a fix on the enemy's location and movements. It wasn't long before intelligence agencies began receiving signals from various locations at the start of the dry season as the roads and passes had been cleared by NVA road teams for the convoys. *North Vietnam* was escalating their logistical supply flow through the *Ho Chi Minh* trails in mid-December in their attempt to supply their forces in the South.

Thanh grinned. He knew that the increase in traffic meant they would soon be visited by more ominous night-flying aircraft to interdict their convoys at critical choke points once a positive identification and location of the vehicles had been made.

"Spectre will be out tonight," he thought out loud, while sixty Russian built ZIL 157 trucks idled under the jungle canopy waiting to be fueled and continue their trek through the narrow pass into *Laos*, then into *South Vietnam*. Zil's were Spectre's favorite prey. AC-130 gunships had been specifically developed and deployed by the Air Force in 1968 to deter the

transportation of munitions and supplies during the start of every dry season. ZIL's were an incredibly reliable and durable vehicle. Each six-wheel drive transport carried five tons at 40 mph over the most prohibitive roads in Southeast Asia. It could inflate or deflate its tires while moving, literally adjusting to the various terrain changes and road surfaces. *Le Thanh* felt a slight measure of apprehension as his stomach muscles tightened, slightly from hunger but mostly from anxiety in anticipation of the pending battles soon to come. No fight was ever like another, *Thanh* thought pensively. Each was unique in drama and climax. He sensed the butterflies in the pit of his stomach begin to stir before a battle. With the torrid monsoon rainy season over, the skies would be clear and movement on the ground would be much easier to detect by enemy aircraft. With an average of one-thousand trucks out on the trail every evening, there was a good probability that some of them may have been detected approaching the fuel depot that was well hidden under the jungle canopy.

The RF-4's had indeed spotted the convoy, and reported the sighting to the ABCCC, the Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center. Code named Moonbeam, the modified C-130 assigned and directed combat aircraft throughout the theater of operation. Two opposing forces would soon engage in a violent exchange of flesh-ripping steel.

A surge of joy and pride flowed through *Le Thanh*, sensing the war had been already won when the Americans had chosen to fight a prolonged war of attrition instead of attacking its center of gravity in Hanoi with its superior weaponry. For *Thanh*, the Americans were already defeated, lacking the moral conviction to inflict the horrors that were usually required to *win* wars and force the will of one over the other, the real objective of war, he reasoned. And their defeat had already been set into motion when their political objective was not to *win* but to prevent the South from being overtaken by the North. Little did the Americans know that they were being manipulated by the North, drawn into fighting a revolutionary war, frustrating them by denying them the ability to fight with all of their strength. Unknowingly, the protesters in the United States had been instrumental in forestalling an all out attack on their sanctuaries in *Cambodia* and *Laos*. When the Americans finally decided to go after the sanctuaries, the *Viet Cong* and *North Vietnamese* had already established other locations and transportation corridors to hide from their pursuers.

Hanoi was quick to respond to the Christmas bombing halt announcement by redeploying its Russian-built 57-mm antiaircraft weapons with gun laying radar along the *Mu Gia Pass*, as they prepared for another major offensive to win the war militarily in 1972. *Le Thanh* knew that the slow moving converted C-130 aircraft was vulnerable to antiaircraft fire. The 57-mm was a deadly weapon when employed properly. It had an effective slant range of 13,000 feet with optical sighting and its effectiveness increased to 20,000 feet with radar. *Le Thanh* affectionately stroked the cold 57's barrel, assured that it would find its mark when Spectre was in its sight. But nearly two thousand trucks had been destroyed in his sector during the last dry season. It was pure carnage. Spectre would somehow find its prey through the thick jungle canopy and attack unmercifully at the defenseless supply vehicles and troops traveling south. Tonight, the rules of engagement would be changed with the radar capability, *Le Thanh* thought confidently, though in awe that Spectres could detect the heat emission of their vehicles.

He shrugged his shoulders as if to brush away the fear that would easily overwhelm a soldier in the field; never knowing if he would ever go home again. *Le Thanh* no longer reflected on death, or his future. For *Thanh*, death would just be an abrupt inconvenience from completing

his mission. *Thanh* had spent the last three years in the jungle as part of a *Binh Tram*, a subordinate unit to the 559th Transportation Group that controlled a portion of the NVA's logistic network in *Laos* and *Vietnam*. There were a multitude of *Binh Tram*'s throughout the NVA's logistical lines of transportation, whose prime responsibility was to make sure the trucks and supplies kept rolling. Defense of the trail was divided among the 37th Antiaircraft Battalion in the north and the 45th in the south. *Le Thanh* was responsible for the defense of his quadrant and parts of the 37th. The whole Trail was managed by the 559th Transportation Group with its rear headquarters in the *Ha Tinh* Province, *North Vietnam*, and forward headquarters in *Laos*, west of the *A Shau Valley*. U.S. intelligence agencies had estimated that there were nearly thirty-thousand personnel assigned to the group to keep the Trails open and passable. Critical *Binh Tram* stations were known to have between two to four-thousand personnel, which included engineering battalions and a couple of bulldozer companies, and many men and women using shovels to clear the trails. *BT37* was suspected to have two infantry battalions, four engineering battalions and one artillery battalion.

Thanh longed for a cigarette as he contemplated revenge and his first Spectre gunship as he scanned the night sky in search of his prey. He turned his back to the sky and cupped his hands tightly to conceal the illumination of the match. Years of war and suffering had slowly hardened him, learning at a young age to exist and fight on meager subsistence levels and a steady diet of worn-out cow dung Party slogans. *Thanh* despised the incompetent Party elitist bureaucrats along with the stinking foul breath Russian advisors who'd never spent a night in the jungle or had to hunt for another starving animal for their next meal. The bureaucrats were conscientious only in assuring that they had an adequate supply of ammunition but never concerned with providing a decent meal. Their speeches were jaded words that often employed blundering, ill-conceived military plans that only led his people to slaughter. Ten thousand of his comrades had already been killed in defense of the trails. *Thanh* rested his head on his arm while he leaned on his weapon.

The night sky was luminous. A perfect backdrop for a decorated nineteen years old antiaircraft gunner who had shot down three RF-4's and was looking forward to avenging the deaths of those who had fallen victim to Spectre's wrath. A single 37-mm round exploded in the sky five miles from *Le Thanh*'s position, a warning shot that gunships were in the area and heading his way. Without much of a reflex, *Le Thanh* loaded the gun breach and looked for the familiar spiral search patterns of Spectre.

"We have a mover at ten o' clock with his lights on," the FLIR operator eagerly notified the crew as his sensor locked onto the heat emanating from the still vehicle. The other sensors honed-in on the target as well, while the human scanners searched the moonlit night for enemy ground-fire. Chris Andrews abruptly ejected the tape from the recorder and replaced it with the one intended for the mission.

"He must have stalled out and can't get it started," the LLLTV operator added as the three sensors collectively began to feed target data to the fire control system. Major Marks ordered the flight engineer, Aguilar, to arm the 40-mm Bofors since his only intention was to get a little target practice and gun alignment before continuing to the assigned area of operation he had received earlier from Moonbeam. He was more interested in the bigger game five miles away.

"I'm rolling in," announced Marks as he rolled the Spectre into its familiar thirty degree attack pattern, orbiting over the ill-fated truck. Marks quickly aligned the pippin with the fixed reticle in his gunsight and anxiously waited for Moonbeam to give them the clear to fire order.

"How long does it take those assholes to give us clearance?" Marks' was obviously frustrated, but it normally took anywhere between ten and fifteen minutes for approval from the ABCCC.

"Maybe they want us to pull the *pendejo* over and validate his *Ho Chi Minh* driver's license and vehicle registration," Aguilar whispered sardonically into the intercom.

"You're cleared to fire, Major," the navigator responded. Marks quickly tightened the Spectre into its thirty-degree bank attack orbit and prepared to reacquire his target for an easy kill.

The words "*No Fear*" were scrawled in large white letters across Willie Santiago's flak-helmet. Santiago positioned himself several feet out the ramp door, casually scanning the twelve to six o'clock aircraft position through the protective bubble face-shield flak helmet. Known for his perpetual smile, Santiago leaned out a little further to get an unobstructed panoramic view of the Spectre and the threatening terrain below, looking for muzzle flashes and the familiar red tracer signature of 37-mm antiaircraft fire. Santiago's view of the war was through the narrow window of his plastic bubble face shield. Almost dangling above the battles, I.O.'s observed the larger conflict rather than the piecemeal chaos seen by the ground-pounding grunts on the ground. But fundamentally they shared much of the same intense excitement and fear; smoke and gunfire, explosions and rushes of bewilderment and terror. With over two-hundred missions behind him that included two-crash landings as well as parachuting over enemy territory when enemy ground fire blew-off the right wing of his aircraft. Despite the close calls and near death experiences, Santiago remained dauntless and unconcerned about his luck, or thoughts about packing it in and going home. Santiago was fearless, and for that reason alone Marks had recruited him to watch his 'six.'

Marks patiently scanned the darkened landscape searching for a defiant target for his shit-hot crew that knew how to take it to the *North Vietnamese*. They were competent at their craft. And the only difference between his crew and the others was really simple, he thought. We looked for the shit, other crews would just run into it. Major Marks was enamored with his crew and thought about the special bond that existed between men in the midst of adrenaline-stress-filled war. Their closeness was not tied to the usual things you would have expected under the current circumstances, like patriotism or duty. They simply had vowed they would always protect each other's back, since Washington could only find ways to *expose* it.

Willie Santiago was not anticipating any antiaircraft fire since if there was anything of value near the doomed vehicle, antiaircraft batteries would have lit-up the skies immediately. For what must have been less than a fraction of a second, Santiago turned around to draw a gumdrop which he kept on the side of the aircraft fuselage in his flight bag to keep his throat moist during the long arduous missions. As he turned, Santiago caught the reflection of an intense red glow off his flight bag of what appeared to be a bright flash that could have only come from the ground, and outside the aircraft's orbit, its most vulnerable position.

"Triple-A, two to six o'clock," reported Santiago calmly. "No threat, hold what you got." The setup had been planned for several weeks. Le Thanh's battery had planned to bait a Spectre into interlocking fire, luring it into a trap with what appeared to be a helpless truck caught in the Spectre's firing orbit. His team ran the engine for several hours, flashing its lights on and off, aware of Spectre's sensors ability to detect engine noise, as well as movement and heat. Spectre 15 was now in the snare. To the surprise of the co-pilot and right scanner, seventy perfectly spread 37-mm red tracer rounds were in pursuit toward Spectre outside its orbit. *Le Thanh* had

flawlessly orchestrated the antiaircraft batteries' assault by layering their fire above and below the gunship, denying it from rolling above or below the flak curtain, closing off any escape routes while pushing it to a predestined location in the darkened sky. *Thanh* knew all too well, if you were going to receive triple-A, it was always preferable from inside the orbit because you had greater maneuverability to avoid the barrage.

Having spotted the triple-A, the Wolfpack escort flight leader was cleared by Marks to suppress the guns with cluster bombs. CBU dispensers were filled with spherical bombs that contained steel buckshot type pellets. When the dispenser was ejected from the aircraft, a timer opened it and the bombs were spread across the jungle floor. Spectre's flight crew took a long deep breath as the pleasant looking but deadly red tracers exploded into bright orange glows narrowly missing the aircraft by less than thirty feet.

"I'm rolling out. Let's get the fuck out of here for a few minutes," fumed Marks, violating communications decorum as he distanced the gunship from the triple-A batteries but further into *Thanh's* ambush. Marks could feel his hands sweating inside his Nomex flight gloves, not from fear but more from the enemy's tactical surprise. The adrenaline surge filled him. Wolfpack delivered the cluster bombs in an even pattern covering about a two-mile area, silencing the 37's.

"I have a radar lock," shouted the Electronics Warfare Officer from the booth, his mouth was suddenly dry from stress and fear.

"What direction Pete?" asked Marks calmly.

"It's from inside the orbit, about two miles, Major," responded the EWO.

"Keep your eye's open, Willie. I'm going to take her down to four thousand feet. I want the 20's online now" ordered Marks. Santiago responded in the affirmative by keying his microphone switch twice, acknowledging receipt of the order. "It's time to get some" the Major articulated in a smooth yet threatening tone.

"The 20's are armed," barked the flight engineer Aguilar as he engaged the toggle switch arming the Vulcan 20 mm cannons that could fire twenty five-hundred rounds of high explosive incendiary shells per minute.

"Clear," broadcasted the front gunner who maintained the 20-mm Gatling guns, as well as the 7.62 miniguns. The 20-mm tracer rounds could literally spew tongues of red steel across the jungle floor with just a minor dip of the left wing. Marks had a sixth sense as to where the gun emplacements and radar vans were hidden and believed he could destroy them by spraying the area with the Vulcans. The tree line was stockpiled with several months' worth of supplies and ammunition intended to make their way south. Marks had a knack, or an instinct, if you will, in finding the exact location of the supply caches and hidden antiaircraft emplacements. He thought of it as a special gift, but now was focused with taking out the 37 mm emplacements and radar vans that were pinpointing his location in the sky for the triple-A batteries. They were Spectre's nemesis, and Marks had a special hard-on for them.

Sensor operators eagerly searched the jungle terrain for hot gun barrels that would pinpoint the location of the gun emplacements. Spectre 15's crew could feel the warming in the cabin temperature as the aircraft descended rapidly to four thousand feet.

Sgt. Willie Santiago suddenly saw a muzzle flash and the bright orange signature of a 57-mm round. They say when one is about to face death it is surprisingly accepted calmly, without as much as a whimper. As the radar guided 57-mm raced toward its prey, Santiago immediately knew that his life was to come to a sudden end and calmly cursed at his misfortune, "Fuck me."

As Marks rolled the aircraft into its thirty-degree firing pattern, the 57-mm round ripped through the aft fuselage and upper ramp door raining shrapnel throughout the cargo bay and through Willie Santiago's body.

"Mayday! Mayday! This is Spectre 15, we've been hit by triple-A. We're heading west on heading two-zero-five," screamed the navigator into the emergency frequencies as Major Marks struggled to regain control of the gunship out of an uncontrollable climb. Bracing the control column completely forward, Marks ordered the crew members up to the flight deck, hoping to bring the nose of the aircraft back down. Willie Santiago was dying, dangling from the restraining harness out in the slipstream.

As if hell itself had decided to participate in the frenzy, the sky lit-up with hundreds of successive air bursts exploding around the aircraft, pelting it with shrapnel as hungry antiaircraft batteries attempted to complete the task *Le Thanh* had incited. Spectre 15 was hanging together by a thread. Its utility hydraulic system was failing, along with the booster system. The rudder, elevator trim, and autopilot were inoperative as well.

Le Thanh smiled wryly momentarily at the sight and sounds of the crippled Spectre. He knew that the gunship would try and make it back to *Ubon* if it could, or bail-out over the Thai Laotian border. He had hurt them. Spectre would be kept out of his sector for several weeks, *Le Thanh* thought. But it also meant that they would eventually pay dearly for their victory. His sector would most likely be given priority by the Air Force planners which meant constant bombardment . . . Arc light bombings from B-52's.

Spectre 15 limped back to *Ubon*. As they neared the base, Major Marks ordered the nonessential crewmembers to bail-out. As soon the rest of the crew had exited the aircraft near the western Laotian town of *Savannakhet*, Ralph Aguilar manually lowered the landing gear. When he was done, he went to the booth to look at Santiago who had been lowered from his restraining harness by the crew before they had bailed out. Santiago's body was cold and torn to pieces with shrapnel. His life source flowed along the floor of the booth, mixing with the wounded aircraft's crimson hydraulic fluid. Tears of hate flowed from Aguilar as he covered Santiago's body with his flight jacket trying to somehow comfort him.

"We're cleared to land Major," The navigator conveyed looking into his eyes, hoping to draw strength from Marks. As Spectre 15 approached *Ubon*, the Major reduced the aircraft's power as it rapidly plunged toward the 9,000 ft. landing strip. The gunship hit the ground hard and bounced violently as it raced quickly toward the end of the runway. Marks' attempt to reverse the three-bladed Allison T-56 turboprop engines failed to slow the aircraft after two-thousand feet, and it suddenly veered to the right despite Marks efforts in applying additional thrust to number three and four engines. The right wing sheered off as it hit the runway, ripping the polyurethane supported fuel tanks that protected them from exploding if struck by ground fire. JP-4 fuel was now engulfing Spectre 15. Crippled, the Spectre erupted into flames as it came to a violent stop off the runway. Fire trucks and ambulances rushed to the dying aircraft.

"Let's go," ordered the Major in an amazingly tranquil tone, quickly unfastening his seat belt and shoulder harness. But Ralph Aguilar dashed madly to the booth to get Santiago's body. Marks couldn't stop him in time as flames reached the flight deck. Marks, the co-pilot, and the navigator narrowly escaped the aircraft through the flight deck hatch.

Ralph Aguilar and Willie Santiago were lost in the flames and the explosion of burning ammunition. Marks silently wept as emergency crews struggled to extinguish the flames. The rest of Marks crew was recovered on the Thai Laotian border the next morning by a Sikorsky HH-53

Super Jolly Green Search and Rescue team.

Le Thanh prepared himself to sleep his accustomed dreamless night in the cold winter confines of a well-fortified cave as fifty Zil's approached the strategic pass, patiently waiting their turn to refuel and continue their journey south. In his hand, *Le Thanh* clutched a half-faded picture of a farm and family, now a nameless place of features, from another time. *Thanh* had no hope for life; *he was there for the duration*.