

Chapter Four

It was 1:40 in the afternoon when the lumbering C-141 gently touched down at *Ubon* RTAFB. *Ubon* had been a sleepy agricultural province of 25,000 people, until the U.S. Air Force arrived in 1962. The base was strategically located in the eastern plateau of *Thailand*, too far for the *Viet Cong* or *North Vietnamese* army to antagonize, but ideal for the U.S. Air Force to launch punishing raids against *North Vietnamese* supply lines. The base strength had grown to 5,000 strong by 1971. When the bombing of *North Vietnam* was halted in 1968, the Wing's mission had turned to interdiction against the flow of supplies along the *Ho Chi Minh Trail*. But more importantly, to buy time for a hasty U.S. withdrawal since the United States would no longer politically support or bleed for South Vietnam any longer.

It was already a hot and humid day at *Ubon* Royal Thai Air Force Base. There wasn't a cloud in the sky when Ray Vaquero stepped off the rear of the cargo aircraft with a hundred new arrivals. The base was bustling with activity as his lungs filled with exhaust fumes as F-4's roared on the runway. Accustomed to the humidity of Asia, he didn't think twice about the perspiration that was already soaking through his flight suit. Scents long forgotten resurfaced in the warm, damp, Asian breeze. He shifted the duffel bag strap as it began to dig into his shoulder, while he slowly walked toward the main terminal. Ray instantly spotted the AC-130 gunships a short distance away. The left wings hung a bit lower to the ground due to the seven-thousand pounds of armor plating along the left side of the fuselage. They looked ominous covered in black-green camouflage as they rested, waiting patiently in their revetments as maintenance and munition crews readied them for the missions that began at dusk. *Thor*, the mystical god of war and thunder, was painted between the pilot's window and crew entrance door. A menacing figure grasping a 20-mm Vulcan Gatling gun with a half crescent moon in the background.

At the terminal entrance was a large welcome sign with the logo of the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing, better known as the *Wolfpack*. The Wing had four F-4D Phantom tactical fighters squadrons and other specialized detachments that were critical to the Wing's mission. Tactical air support along with weather and rescue units were essential to the total

mission. Also assigned to the Wing was the 16th Special Operations Squadron that flew the AC-130 gunships.

"Yes, sir, this is Sgt. Raymond Vaquero. I just arrived, can I get a ride to the barracks?" Vaquero asked the duty officer.

"Sure, Vaquero, welcome to the 16th," the duty officer responded. "I'll have Walters drive by and pick you up. He should be there in a few minutes."

Within minutes a beat-up old jeep appeared. The driver, slammed on the brakes inches from Vaquero. James Brown music blared from the radio. "Hey man, you Vaquero?" The driver had a broad friendly smile.

"Yeah, that's me," Ray said, grinning back at the driver who was unfazed that he almost ran over Vaquero.

"Mike Walters, nice to meet you man," Walters extended his hand. "Just throw your shit in the back. I'm supposed to take you over to the barracks. Welcome to the Third World my man," the black buck-Sgt. said jokingly. Vaquero quickly threw his bag in the back of the open jeep and jumped in next to Walters. As the vehicle started to move forward, Walters spit a huge wad of tobacco juice toward the sidewalk that splashed onto a Thai MP's spit-shined boots. Ray looked back to see whether he would come after them, but he just stood there in total shock and amazement. Walters just grinned as he maneuvered around the narrow road toward the barracks.

"You just in from the P.I. man?" Walters asked.

"Yeah, spent a week in Jungle Survival School. Pretty mild shit compared to Basic Survival School," Ray said, pondering the mental stress he went through during basic survival school in Spokane, Washington, learning how to survive in the event he became a P.O.W.

"No shit." Walters blurted in agreement.

"You'll like your quarters," Walters commented. "The Illuminator Operators and Flight Engineers live in the same barracks, I.O.'s downstairs, flight engineers upstairs." Walters still had that wall to wall grin on his face. "I'm flying tonight, so I'll just be dropping you off. I need to get back for preflight and mission briefing. I might see you later this evening since I'm on the first flight out at 1700 hours. It's a great fuckin' job, Vaquero. The guys are great and so are most of the crews," he said happily.

"Just make sure you find the right crew and you'll be all right. There's no other high like it!"

Walters suddenly slammed on the brakes again in front of a fairly modest looking two story building. He kept his hand on the horn until the occupants from the barracks finally came outside to see what all commotion was all about. "If you need a bunk, there's an extra in mine, room number two, last door on the right. You're welcome to bunk in with me. Just make yourself at home, Vaquero. You don't have to worry about doin' your laundry or shoes here either. We have a house boy named *Bai* that takes care of all that shit for 100 *baht* a week. That's five bucks my man, and it's worth every penny, especially if the head *Mamasan* throws in a little pussy." Walters cackled and spat another large brown wad on the grass as he got out of the jeep to help Vaquero with his duffle bag.

"Hi, I'm Scotty Wilson, but you can call me Scumbag." Walters laughed at Wilson's matter-of-fact introduction, as he poured an ice cold can of Olympia Beer over Vaquero's head.

"It's a pleasure to meet you . . . Scumbag." Ray responded, cringing from the ice cold beer.

"Watch out for that mothafucka, Ray. You'll learn soon enough why they call him Scumbag." Walters cautioned Vaquero, laughing and pointing a menacing finger at Wilson. Scotty Wilson chuckled along with Walters. "And make sure you sleep on your back and lock your door at night too. You never know what shit he's up to," he cautioned as Walters and Scumbag exchanged amusing evil eye stares with each other. Ten other I.O.'s introduced themselves and poured their beer over Vaquero.

"It's a tradition of the 16th that when a new arrival comes in that we take their picture just so after twelve months you can look back and see how much you aged in one year." Heads nodded in agreement throughout the group. "Who's got the fucking camera?" Wilson bellowed, as one of the IO's handed him a Polaroid camera and another positioned Vaquero in front of the barracks entrance. Several flight engineers casually looked in on the proceedings from the top of the staircase on the second floor.

"Smile." Six large pails of water were simultaneously dumped on Vaquero from the roof of the barracks, staircase, and from a fire hose manned by three I.O.'s hidden from Vaquero when he had first arrived. Ray was knocked off his feet from the force of the water.

"Welcome to the 16th SOS Vaquero," Scumbag said with a snorting laugh at the look of surprise still frozen on Vaquero's face. Scumbag placed a Cuban *Cohiba* cigar in Vaquero's mouth. "You know what bunk you have?" Scumbag asked. Ray nodded in the affirmative. "In two or three days after you're done with your administrative bullshit, get your flight gear together ASAP and we'll get you some flight time and hopefully on a crew within two weeks. Maybe sooner. It all depends how soon we can arrange getting your ass shot-off." Scumbag leaned over and lifted Vaquero's duffel bag and headed toward the barracks. "Give Pappy Duncan a call at the Squadron once you're dried off. We all work for Pappy around here."

Vaquero struggled to stay on his feet as he headed down the hall drenched, leaving puddles on the floor after every step. Greetings were extended as he passed by the rooms as others were hastily getting prepared for the evening's hunt. He changed into some dry clothes and unpacked his things into his metal closet. Vaquero walked back down to the middle of the barracks where there was a lounge with a bar, TV, and a couple of very worn-out beer-stained tables that appeared to be frequently used for some very serious card games.

"Sixteenth SOS, Chief Master Sgt. Pappy Duncan, may I help you sir?"

"Yes sir, this is Sgt. Raymond Vaquero, I just got in today. Uh, Scotty Wilson thought I should give you a call." Ray was a little nervous, not knowing what to expect.

"Hey Ray, welcome to the 16th," Duncan responded cordially. "Aren't you a little early? We weren't expecting you for another week."

"I decided to come over a little earlier than planned, plus I was anxious to get over here." Ray hoped that didn't appear odd to Duncan.

"Well, that's shit-hot Vaquero, we'll just start your training earlier that's all. We could always use the extra

help." Duncan replied, eager to have the additional help to carry the load. There was always someone grounded with either an ear block or a severe cold. "There's an orientation briefing scheduled for tomorrow at 0800 hours at the Squadron Operations briefing room. Have one of the guys point you in the right direction in the morning. After you're done, stop by my office. We'll talk for a while and I'll see what I can do to get you squared away." Vaquero got a good feeling about Duncan. "And by the way, you can call me Pappy. I'll see you after your orientation Vaquero." Ray smiled as he hung up the phone.

Hunger pangs rumbled in his stomach. "Excuse me, can one of you tell me how to get to the chow hall?" Ray asked three individuals who were on the edge of their seat intensely watching an old 'Twelve O' Clock High' rerun.

"Hi, I'm Bob DeSena. How are ya? I'm going over there. Hold on a second, let me get my wallet." DeSena was a muscular individual, and stood about six feet tall with thick jet-black hair. "The chow hall is about a quarter of a mile from here, but would you be interested in going into town and getting some *Thai* food?" Bob asked, looking toward something more exotic than the daily ration of meat and potatoes.

"Sounds good to me," Vaquero replied, eager to savor some *Thai* cuisine again. "I'm game, let's go." *Ubon* looked no different from any other foreign U.S. installation that Ray had toured. At the gate were the impoverished selling anything to willing Americans. And those that had no commodities to sell made sure you took note of their deformity as they approached you with an extended hand. Vaquero and DeSena pushed through the crowd of humanity and quickly jumped into the waiting cab.

"*Thai Palace*," Tony DeSena instructed the cab driver as he tried to ignore the merchants and beggars attempting to get their attention, with outstretched arms reaching through the open window. The cab driver shouted some obscenities to the crowd as he made a U-turn leaving a trail of chocking red dust as the cab headed down the main road into *Ubon*. Within five minutes they were at the *Thai Palace*, an upscale *Thai* restaurant that catered primarily to the U.S. serviceman and well-to-do merchants of *Ubon*. Bob received a special greeting from the hostess; it was obvious he was a frequent patron of the restaurant. She was

extremely striking, with large black piercing, almost round shaped eyes, dressed in traditional *Thai* attire. She stood about 5'7, tall for a Thai, and graceful as she made indirect eye contact with Ray Vaquero.

"Well, I already know what I want Bob," Ray said with eager anticipation.

"What might that be?" DeSena asked, not yet getting an opportunity to look at the menu.

"*Yum Nuah* and a big bottle of *Thai* beer." Ray was famished.

"What the fuck is *Yum Nuah*?" Replied DeSena. "I don't even see it on the menu, Ray. It better not be monkey meat or I'm going to get extremely pissed-off," DeSena cautioned Vaquero.

"Trust me." Ray smiled at DeSena, and turned to the hostess who was patiently waiting for the two patrons to order. "Two *Yum Nuah*'s and we'll each have a bottle, make that two large bottles of *Thai* beer." The hostess gazed at Vaquero when he was not looking then lowered her eyes when he looked back at her. Her stares had not gone unnoticed.

"Hey Bob, stop complaining, I'll pay if you don't like it OK? I'll even buy you another dinner if that makes you happy, alright?" Ray retorted confidently. "Fair?"

"Fair," remarked DeSena.

"How long have you been with the 16th," Ray asked. The waitress arrived with what appeared to be quart size bottles of beer. She intentionally poured them slowly into the glass so that it wouldn't create a large head of froth. Bob DeSena waited until the waitress left before continuing the conversation.

"You can never tell who's listening," DeSena said calmly. "She's got a great body doesn't she? Her name is *Toi Dasananda*." Vaquero nodded affirmatively as they both licked the foam from their lips and watched *Toi* bend over to pick up some silverware that had fallen on the floor and thought how appropriate her name was. "You always have to be aware who might be listening or asking probing questions about the 16th and its mission. It sounds paranoid I know, but, you just never know." Vaquero listened attentively. "The NVA can't strike at us in force but you can bet they

have their agents here picking up tidbits about the AC-130 capabilities and our mission. Little things that may seem harmless, like flying altitudes, munitions, number of crew on board, sensors. That kind of information might just be enough to give them the edge they need to shoot your ass out of the sky." DeSena glanced around the room to see whether anyone was paying any special attention to them. "I have a simple philosophy about this place Ray," DeSena said, looking intensely into Vaquero's eyes. "First and foremost, trust your instincts, it'll keep you alive." Sharp instincts and quick reflexes were far superior to conscious thought in war if one was to survive. DeSena momentarily remembered when Willie Santiago had shared the same words of wisdom with him. He guzzled his quart of beer in record time, then waved to *Toi*, pointing to his glass expressing that he needed a refill.

"You asked me how long I've been here, didn't you?" DeSena lit a cigarette and seized a long drag from his Marlboro. Scratching his forehead, there was a long introspective pause. "I just extended for a second tour." DeSena grinned. "I believe in what we're doing over here though it's for a lost cause. If we weren't out there every night slowing the supplies and challenging the NVA at every pass, the South would have been lost a lot sooner." DeSena was absorbed in thought and grappling with the reality that the U.S. military's hands were constantly tied with political restrictions, and not given a chance to win. "Another reason why I extended is that *I love to fight*," DeSena said in a subdued tone and half smile as he glared back at Vaquero, gauging his reaction.

Toi finally arrived with their dinner. *Yum Nuah* was prepared with strips of beef marinated in a delectable Thai sauce that included garlic, celantro and hot chili peppers on a bed of fresh lettuce and tomatoes. Although DeSena shed a few tears over his meal due to the hot chili peppers, he grudgingly agreed with Vaquero that it wasn't bad. In the morning Bob DeSena would give his initial assessment of the new arrival to Pappy Duncan and figure out what crew Vaquero would be assigned to and determine whether he might be a liability. DeSena was good at assessing a man's character under casual settings. He could immediately spot the ones with major insecurities or the dangerously overconfident, young, dumb, and full of come types. Can't have a swelled head or appear that you know all the fucking answers. DeSena thought about Willie

Santiago again, and how his life had come to a sudden end. Nobody had their shit as tightly wrapped as Willie. But no one was invincible in Vietnam, not even Willie Santiago. Everyone falters sometime along the way, DeSena thought as he reflected momentarily about the price one pays for failure, both in life and in war. In any event, Bob DeSena truly relished the opportunity to kill *North Vietnamese*.

"When the Viet Cong got the living shit kicked out them during Tet in 68', it forced the North to send NVA regulars down south to replace their losses and establish hardcore defenses over some of the more critical passages that needed to stay open at any cost. They had brought lots of their favorite toys with them to just to let us know that they planned to stay in business and keep their supply routes open." DeSena stopped talking long enough to consume some of his dinner. "Rumor has it that they are planning a major offensive in the Spring that would include an attempt to go for Saigon in the process. They're not planning on making the same mistakes they made in 68, you know." The student listened attentively, clinging to every word.

Vaquero and DeSena's stomachs were about to explode after almost two quarts of beer and lots of spicy food. "My treat," Vaquero asserted, as he waved to *Toi* to come over in order to pay for the dinner.

"Fucking chili pepper seed is stuck between my teeth," DeSena exclaimed, as they laughed at his attempt to dislodge it. *Toi* began to laugh while DeSena struggled to dislodge the burning demon seed nestled between his gums and teeth. Vaquero and *Toi* gazed at one another for several seconds as DeSena was finally able to pry it loose. Her smile was infectious and warm.

"Please come back and visit us again sir," *Toi* remarked in a gracious tone.

"I promise, I'll be back," Vaquero said as she escorted them to the door.

The cab driver that had taken them to the *Thai Palace* was still parked outside the restaurant. "Back to base my man," DeSena commanded the taxi driver as they jumped in. He nodded and made one of his kamikaze U-turns in the mist

of oncoming speeding traffic from both directions. Vaquero and DeSena howled in excitement at the maneuver and cowered at the moment they had crossed the main intersection expecting to be hit head on. The frenzied car maneuvers caused DeSena to belch and fart and fill the cab with the pungent odor of regurgitated beer mixed with Thai spices. The driver began to dry-heave as he fought back the desire to vomit due to the stench and was obviously cursing and pissed-off as he struggled to keep his head out the window and clear the vehicle of the foul odor that had consumed them. Vaquero had lowered his window, laughing uncontrollably while hanging halfway outside of the cab himself.

"What's wrong with you two?" DeSena said innocently. When they reached the base DeSena offered to pay for the cab and threw in a little extra tip for the unexpected accident. Vaquero and DeSena struggled again through the masses of humanity clustered around the gate at *Ubon*, as another Spectre was taking off and heading east across the *fence*.

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"Good morning gentlemen, my name is Captain Carl Peterson, operations and mission planning officer for the squadron. Welcome to the 16th Special Operations Squadron, Royal Thai Air Force Base, *Ubon*." Peterson was a tall, lean fellow with glistening light brown hair and he reminded Vaquero of Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense.

"As part of your initial orientation this morning, I will be covering a brief overview on the mission of the 16th Special Operations Squadron and the unit history. Major Stuart Marks will cover operational objectives as well as anticipated enemy offensive this Spring. I understand that some of you just arrived last night, so please bear with us and we will try to complete the briefing as soon as possible and let you go back to the barracks and settle in." Peterson turned several pages in his briefing package until he found the page he wanted.

"On October 5, 1967, the 16th Special Operations Squadron came into existence with five aircraft. The 16th SOS was then put under the command of the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing at *Ubon*." A fairly large map hung in the background, covered with various color coded tape outlining

enemy major supply routes, depots, staging areas and their defenses.

"One of the early challenges of the air war in Southeast Asia was to adapt existing aircraft in the American arsenal to the unique needs of this war. Since the early days of the conflict, the United States has possessed total air superiority in Southeast Asia. That has presented an opportunity to apply these advantages to support ground combat operations and to disrupt the *North Vietnamese* supply and troop movements into *South Vietnam*." Peterson walked over to a large map already on the stage, pointing to the myriad of enemy logistical supply routes. "The Air Force high command had long been looking for an aircraft that could saturate the ground with fire power for interdicting enemy movements along the many roads and passes along the *Ho Chi Minh Trail*. Gunship theory was a simple one, gentlemen. As most of you learned at Hurlburt Field, by flying an aircraft in a banked left-hand turn to aim side-mounted guns at a fixed target on the ground provides you with the capability of keeping your side-firing weapons continuously pointed at the target. Swivel-mounted machine guns on World War I airplanes fired laterally at air and ground targets. Our initial needs' assessments determined that the aircraft had to be able to hit small moving targets in dense terrain, and through the thick Asian jungle canopies. Another important aspect of the development of the gunship was that it had to be survivable because it had to loiter for long periods of time over targets. But more importantly, it had to possess great firepower. Due to the nature of the *Vietnam* conflict, and dense tropical terrain, current Air Force combat aircraft have difficulty finding enemy targets at night or are obstructed by the dense jungle canopy, unable to use their enormous fire power at hand. Compounding the situation, the enemy often uses the cover of darkness and the difficult topography to mask their supply movements. After much research and development at the Air Force laboratories and testing at Eglin Air Force Base, the C-130 cargo transport had been selected for modification for combat duty, to eventually replace the Spooky AC-47's and Stinger AC-119 gunship and assigned the primary role of interdicting enemy supply movements from the north into *South Vietnam* during the hours of darkness. Of the three kinds of gunships the Air Force uses, the AC-130 has become the preeminent truck-killer of the war." Peterson paused

for a moment, drank a glass of water, and asked, "Any questions?" No one raised their hand.

Capt. Peterson turned off the lights in the room and began talking from view graphs he had projected onto a screen. Seventh Air Force Operations Order 542-70 spelled out the mission priorities for the AC-130 Gunship, or as it was more commonly known as, 'Spectre.' Due to the variety of engagements for gunships, PACAF wanted Spectre to concentrate their firepower offensively. The orders from the Seventh Air Force delineated a priority mission statement for the Spectres:

- Night interdiction and armed reconnaissance to destroy wheeled and tracked vehicular traffic on roads and sampan waterways.
- Night interdiction of targets that have been bombed and then hit with fire suppression missions.
- Close fire support of U.S. and friendly military installations including forts, outposts, and strategic towns and cities.
- Search and rescue support.
- Offset firing in support of troops in contact by use of aircraft radar and ground beacons.
- Daylight armed escorts of road and offshore convoys.
- Harassment and interdiction.

"That concludes my part of the briefing, gentlemen. If you have any questions, please feel to stop by my office down the hall next to the operations room. Thank you for your attention." Capt. Peterson looked to his left and nodded to a figure whose presence Ray Vaquero had not noticed earlier. Major Stuart Marks was a well-physiqued, red-haired fellow, about forty-five. As he approached the podium, the Major scanned the room carefully for a few moments as if looking for a familiar face or a long lost friend. His slightly weather beaten fair skin features told of multiple tours endured in the hot tropical climate of Southeast Asia. And although Peterson said nothing about the number of missions he had flown, Ray sensed that the major had flown a shit-load. There was just an air about him that exhibited confidence, and a leadership quality that mesmerized Vaquero.

"Gentlemen, good morning. Light them if you have them. Just don't throw the butts on the floor, otherwise Colonel Roberts will have me working overtime tonight." Laughter filled the room as the Major cut the tension in the smoke filled room.

"I want to tell you that I had the honor of flying the original prototype and I'm proud to say that in the initial evaluation the first Spectre destroyed over 2000 vehicles, and an estimated 600 KBA *North Vietnamese* troops on their way to the south. No fighter aircraft can match the kill ratio of this aircraft." The Major exuded confidence and determination in his voice.

"During the monsoon season, we've taken advantage of the down time to upgrade Spectre's sensor, avionics, and armament capabilities and stay one step ahead of the enemy. Our six AC-130E's have been equipped with 105-mm Howitzers which obviously provides a bigger punch but also a higher flying altitude and distance from threatening triple-A. The remaining six AC-130A models have also been upgraded with a digital fire control computer and improved sensors as well. Since the closure of the 1970-71 hunting season campaign, the *North Vietnamese* have been able to expand the *Ho Chi Minh Trail* by three hundred miles. The tempo of the conflict had been intensifying until the seasonal monsoons had come into play last year, and decelerated their logistical push to the south. This intensification is primarily driven by the *North Vietnamese* and Viet Cong requirement of a heavier flow of supplies to *South Vietnam* due to their dire need to supply their force's deep penetration and increased attacks into *South Vietnam*. Supplies are reaching the communist forces in *South Vietnam* over hundreds of roads in the Laotian panhandle." Marks pointed to the key infiltration routes.

"It is through *Laos* that they carry the greatest supply tonnage and troop infiltration. Wherever possible, they also transport cargo by river. The NVA have been busy during the wet season. Much of the road network has been upgraded for year-round use. It appears that due to the length of the monsoons, *North Vietnam* has changed some of their tactics and have made their logistical support work crews stay in the trail area through the wet season keeping the trail in repair year round. It didn't take them long to figure out that we're not able to strike back effectively twenty-four hours a day." The Major paused for a moment,

lit a cigarette with his Spectre Zippo lighter and filled his lungs with nicotine before he continued.

"The NVA are primarily moving supplies during dawn and dusk. They're so cocky right now that we're hearing that they're actually traveling with their lights on. Specialized road repair crews have been restoring the Trail and constructing alternate routes when the main passages have been heavily bombed or impassable. Most of the roadwork and movement of supplies take place at night. You can also expect increased numbers of anti-aircraft weapons defending vulnerable Trail points this year. Intelligence reports show that the *North Vietnamese* have expanded their protection of the trail with more accurate weapons. I'll get into the triple-A threats a bit later. Weather will also be pivotal in the interdiction effort. The Southeast Asian monsoon season generates seasonal periods of bad and good weather for air operations over the Trail. From May to November air operations over Laotian trails are poor due to bad weather but the enemy wasn't going anywhere either. He's been digging in and storing supplies along the way. With the northeast monsoon comes clear dry weather over Laos. November to May is characteristically known as the 'Hunting season' gentlemen."

"Let's see, have I missed anything?" Major Marks grimaced, going over in his head what he had briefed and assessing if he left anything critical out. "We are also supporting road watch teams who work with the indigenous supporters of the south. They look for the hidden trails, and determine main traffic routes that the NVA is using that we can't detect from the air. You will occasionally be in contact with them if they need close air support." Manny and Cano thought Vaquero, and the prospect of engaging the enemy with his friends.

"During the 1971-72 hunting season campaign we expect to concentrate our efforts in Barrel Roll, a northern Laos region, and Steel Tiger East, the eastern Laos panhandle which has the most important routes running from three major mountain passes. You'll get to know them as the *Mu Gia*, *Ban Karai*, and *Ban Raving*. We are also considering supporting the *Cambodian* theatre due to the enemy's increased efforts in utilizing the Mekong River as another avenue of transporting supplies into *South Vietnam*. *Khmer Rouge* insurgents have been attacking convoys traveling up the Delta. Seventh Air Force is evaluating that situation

and considering Spectre support in escorting the convoys destined to *Phnom Penh*. Phase one of our strategy is to attack the enemy at key interdiction, or choke points at specific road segments where it would be difficult for them to detour when blocked or divert them to predictable alternative roads. B-52's will attack main interdiction boxes to setup choke points and channel the traffic to predictable locations." The objective was simple; force the trucks to travel over longer exposed distances.

"Tactical aircraft will also be used to pound critical mountain passes with laser-guided bombs. Phase two blocking belts will consist of aerial mines and sensors implanted across narrow road areas. Acoustics and seismic sensors will also be embedded over alternate bypass routes. Hopefully, the folks with their computers at NKP will be monitoring the enemy's movement and their attempts to avoid the mine fields and blocking belts. At that time Spectres will be directed to attack and destroy the traffic jams behind the blocking belts." Marks took a moment to light another cigarette.

"The plan is phased to the expected pattern of the NVA logistic efforts which entails heavy movement of supplies and troops through the *Mu Gia*, *Ban Karai*, and *Ban Raving* passes early in the dry season. Supplies have been stored at key route points known as *Binh Trams*. At these junctures, supplies would then be shuttled to other *Binh Trams* in *Laos*, *Cambodia*, then into *South Vietnam*. Abnormally low rainfall in August and September has accelerated an early start of truck movement along these passes. As you are well aware, you will be supported by flak-suppression 'Wolfpack' F-4D escorts to attack triple-A sites and vehicles along the main transportation corridors and along alternative routes. This will be your primary mission in life, men. Secondary missions will be seeking out truck parks and supply caches, fuel depots, and lastly to seek out and destroy whenever possible antiaircraft artillery.

Intelligence reports suggest that more than 10,000 trucks moved through the main corridor last month with an estimated 5,000 tons of supplies to prepare for the Spring offensive. They are planning something big this year, men. What they don't know is Spectre will be waiting for them."

"Operational channels for mission assignments come from the 7th Air Force through the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing to the 16th Special Operations Squadron. The 7th Air

Force tactical air control center exercises battlefield direction through the airborne command and control center, known as Moonbeam for the Steel Tiger region, Alleycat for Barrel Roll, and with on location assistance of Forward Air Controllers and Road Watch Teams. In the final analysis men, we believe that the Communists are amassing men and supplies for a major offensive this Spring. We expect that it is to be carried out by a large conventional force. To impede this force, interdiction of these forces and their supplies has become a high priority mission for the 16th SOS." Marks paused again to drink some water.

"I want to say something now about triple-A. The *North Vietnamese* anti-aircraft defenses are growing in strength and have improved in accuracy. Surface-to-air missiles are growing in number southward as they are now protecting their main transportation corridors, as I had mentioned earlier. We have estimates that there were about 800 anti-aircraft weapons ranging from 23-mm to 100-mm with increased radar capability in place at the close of the 1970-71 dry season. We expect that anti-aircraft weapons along the critical corridors will have increased by 25 percent by the start of this campaign. The NVA have gone through great pains in camouflaging their gun emplacement and have moved them to preplanned sites to avoid detection. It also appears that the guns and surface to air missiles have not been moved from their sites during the rainy season, and they have greatly fortified their positions." Marks grinned after his last remark.

"Well, there you have it. I also want to inform you that I have been asked to put together a crew for my third tour. I look forward to flying with some of you within the next month. Thank you for your attention, and remember," he said jokingly, "you got away with fucking up at Hurlburt. There were no triple-A threats in the Gulf of Mexico, or SAM missiles to worry about. But here . . . ah shit Peterson, I forgot to show the tape. Go ahead and roll the projector. I think the film will speak for itself." The Major had started to walk off the stage but then turned back quickly. He wanted to punctuate a point and drive a message home. He stepped away from the microphone and stood as close as he possibly could to the edge of the stage to emphasize his point.

"You know, what you're about to see would scare the shit out of most sound men," he said with a broad assuring

smile. "But I want to impress upon all of you that our successes so far are not solely due to superior fire power or tactics, but as a result of teamwork and oneness. Remember, we're all one team on Spectre, one aircraft, one body. By the way, this film will also give you an appreciation for your I.O. who will be leaning outside the aircraft retained only by a restraining harness . . . make sure you take care of the I.O." The pain of Willie Santiago's death still haunted Marks.

"How many I.O.'s are in the room?" the Major asked. Vaquero raised his hand. His was the only one that was raised, and heard someone jokingly whisper "Dumbshit," from the back of the room.

"Take a look at him," Marks barked. "There's no technology around yet that can anticipate the direction of antiaircraft fire better than your I.O. He'll be watching your ass while you're smokin' Charlie on the trail." The briefing room was deadly silent. Vaquero fired the 'bird' in the direction of the snide remark as he lowered his hand.

"Lets get the job done and end this war as soon as we can. Good day gentlemen."

The officers and enlisted men in the room rose to attention as Major Marks left the stage, smiling and waving at everyone, then casually looking in Vaquero's direction before leaving the room. All Vaquero could think of was how he was going to get assigned to Marks' crew and whether he would be given a choice in the matter. He estimated that it would be at least two weeks of training with an instructor before he'd be assigned to a flight crew. But then, there was no way that the Major would be interested in an unexperienced I.O. The room suddenly went black as Capt. Peterson turned on the projector. The film was a documentary on the *North Vietnamese* use of Russian and Chinese weaponry and their application throughout Southeast Asia in defense of their convoys. Ray was fascinated by the orchestrated fire power display. It was common for AC-130 Gunships to encounter multiple 37-mm antiaircraft guns with interlocking fields of fire when engaged on a hot trail in pursuit of a convoy. Trail gunners wouldn't look for a fight unless there was something of significant value for them to protect, Vaquero thought, frantically trying to instantly recall everything he had been taught at Hurlburt.

Trail gunners weren't any different from they were Vaquero reasoned, as he watched the enemy employ its massive arsenal from ground level, a definite 9.5 on the sphincter-tightening scale. The trail gunners were possessed combatants when it came to defending their convoys. They had reason to be fearless. Vaquero was familiar with the stories about gunners that would chain themselves to their weapon or steering wheel of the truck so that they wouldn't run in fear. What balls, he thought, but stupid as well. There are times to fight, and there are times when it is far better to duck and try again another day. The thought of going out at night looking for a fight added to the suspense and the mystery of the hunt, and the knowledge that the antiaircraft gunners would be stalking him as well. It also brought back memories of venturing over the fence with Manny and Cano. Except over here, there wouldn't be enough of you to put in a body-bag after being blown out of the sky. Just enough for a late evening snack for all that squirms and crawls in the dark under the triple canopy jungle abyss.