

Here there be Dragons..."

I flew my first mission over Laos on a cool, hazy night in January, 1968. I flew my last mission there on February 22, 1973, crossing the border into Thailand just seconds before the official end of U.S.A.F. air operations in Laos at 1200 hours local time. I will never forget either of those two missions, nor any of the ones I flew over that portion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail extending from the Cambodian border to the demilitarized zone separating the two Vietnams – an area the Air Force had designated as Tigerhound.

The area consisted of scenic valleys and beautiful mountains. For over a thousand years the dirt trails and roads in Tigerhound had been used by traders, smugglers and soldiers. By 1967, it was mostly soldiers.

Our group arrived on the scene late that year, prowling over the terrain in search of the soldiers and supplies heading south along the Trail. The airborne command post directing strikes along the Trail within Tigerhound during the night was using the call sign Alleycat. Modified cargo planes that spotted targets, then dropped illumination flares for attack aircraft had call signs such as Moonbeam and Blindbat. Others were fitted with cannons and even 105 mm howitzers. They were known as Shadows and Specters. The attack aircraft included Zorros, Nimrods, Redbirds, Yellowbirds and Owls. We were known as Dragons. Somehow, it all fit.

Years later, it became very clear to me that someone must tell the tale of a tiny band of brothers who bravely flew the Air Force's smallest fighter over the Trail. This is only one of the stories of that tale.

The mission portrayed in the following pages actually took place. It wasn't ranked in the top ten of all the ones our group flew as Dragons, but it certainly ranked high in my personal logbook.

After hanging up my G-suit for good in 1984, my wife and I moved to a quiet little town in Florida's panhandle. I was up in the loft and had just begun unpacking the memorabilia you accumulate after 4,000 hours in neat jets, three tours in Southeast Asia and a dozen great squadrons. A crusty old cigarette lighter slipped from my fingers and fell to the floor. The thing had been in a box for over fifteen years. There was a faded silver and black logo soldered on one side. On the other side was an inscription – "Movers at 4107".

A mischievous demon grasped my heart, then my soul, its gnarled, hairy fingers exposing repressed emotions and some faded memories. It was dragging me back to another time, another place. I looked back at the lighter and its silver and black emblem. Upon a field of black were five stars above a crescent moon.

The demon chuckled while gleefully continuing to squeeze my heart – my God, it seemed like only yesterday. The room was growing darker and the stars on the emblem began to shrink until they were mere pinpoints of light. The crescent moon was low on the horizon, barely visible through the haze. As I was shutting down an engine to conserve fuel, I could hear a voice calling in the distance...

"Dragon 11, Alleycat."

"Rog, Alleycat, Dragon's still here," I replied.

"Want you to move up toward the 050 radial of channel 72 for 20 miles. Contact Blindbat on 273.2."

Barely able to answer, I finally managed to croak, "Got it, Blindbat. 273.2. Catch you on the way out."

Jeez, I thought, It's 4107 and this is showtime for the Boy Wonder.

4107 was a major crossroads along the Trail – a valley that malevolently combined serene beauty during the day with stark terror at night. Many braggadocios pilots discovered the limits of their bravado at the place, returning to the squadron ready room as merely mortal men. Others came back and excitedly described the intense anti-aircraft fire they'd survived while destroying several trucks. But some pilots never returned at all.

I gulped, because an incident in the squadron ready room just a few hours before had me really up tight.

I was just finishing the detachment's plaque that we planned to put up over the bar at the MACV club. The thing was purely homebrew, a piece of plywood painted flat black with a crescent moon and five silver stars. Across the top was our designation, "604 ACS FTR". Below the logo was our call sign, "Dragons". The door flew open and Bick stumbled in to the ready room...

"Whooooooowee, talk about gettin' hosed!"

Bick was one of the first guys out on the Trail that night. He slumped into a chair and just sat there, totally spent. Billy T., who was cleaning the highly customized M-2 carbine that he normally strapped to his thigh, looked up grinning.

"Who was it that got hosed, you?"

"Yeah, me," Bick came back, "I was just hanging around over the White Cliffs when I got a call from Alleycat. You know, the words you just love to hear, 'Hey Dragon, we got some movers at

4107'. Well, I get up there and set up to get these trucks comin' down outta the hills from the northeast. I start my first pass and then the whole world just opens up on me. I mean, we're talking about a close-up-and-personal, graduate-level, hands-on, compressed course in AAA recognition, evasive maneuvering and just plain, basic self-preservation!"

"Whaddya expect?" asked Billy, "It's the last clear shot the gomers got into II Corps. And if it was you and me on the ground out there, we'd have the place loaded with all the guns we could scrounge."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Bick muttered, "but at least the Redbirds and Yellowbirds have funny bombs to fight back with. All we got are measly CBU-25 pods, our tiny pistol and maybe a coupla MK-82 five-hundred pounders."

Billy took issue, "Hey, we do pretty damn good with that CBU. In fact, we have one of the highest truck kill rates of anybody out there - right up with the B-26 Nimrods. Who, I might add, carry funny bombs."

"I know, I know, but at least all the guns quit shooting as soon as the first funny bomb hits. When we drop our stuff, the gunners just get mad and shoot a lot more!"

Billy tried to change the tone of the exchange, smiling again. "Well, ya gonna tell us how many ya got, or just sit there and whimper?"

Bick sheepishly answered in a low voice, "Oh, I did O.K. I got three movers and one of those damn guns."

"Well then, what are ya sittin' there complainin' about?"

"I don't know, Billy, it just ... I mean, the place just scares the hell outta me."

Major William Turner abandoned his cavalier attitude, and in a most serious voice replied, "Hey, we all know what you mean, kid. If anybody ever tells you that it's the same as any other place in Tigerhound, they're either dumb, inexperienced or have a death wish."

The moon was disappearing below the horizon as I changed radio frequencies and dialed in 050 on the CDI. The demon was chuckling.

Gotta earn your combat pay sooner or later, I thought. No kidding, after Bick's confession, I was **seriously** concerned about my health and well-being at 4107. Finally, I started to calm down and face the task at hand.

For some reason the demon began to giggle. The CDI was set to 050 degrees, and I was planning my last ditch maneuvers to get away from those guns that Bick talked about. Then it hit me, and the demon snickered. I was going to 050 for 20 off of channel 72. 4107 was 020 for 50! Shoot, I wasn't going to 4107, I was going to Chavanne!

My heart was descending back to its proper location, and my pulse was approaching normal as I checked in with Blindbat, "Blindbat 03, Dragon 11".

"Gothcha five by five Dragon. Hold at base altitude plus five on the 090 radial of channel 72 within ten miles. We're working a Yellowbird now, but we'll get you on target in about five minutes. What's your state?".

"Dragon 11 has about fifteen minutes of play time, two Mk-82 slicks and four pods of CBU-25," I answered.

"All right, Dragon, we'll get you in pronto. The Yellowbird's on his last pass now."

I couldn't hear Blindbat talking to the Yellowbird. Must have been on another frequency. A ZPU was hosing away at somebody a few miles to the northeast. Suddenly, a few sparkles appeared one or two thousand feet above the valley being illuminated by Blindbat's million candlepower flares. Four or five seconds later the valley floor was crawling with giant, incandescent worms! The B-57's funny bombs were incinerating the valley. Whew! I wished we could carry those things.

Caught up watching the inferno below, Blindbat's call startled me, "Dragon 11, if you have that last funny bomb pattern in sight, we have four or five movers about one burn pattern to the north and right at the western edge of all the fire. They're heading east down into a valley from the plateau."

"Copy that. Understand I'm cleared in, Blindbat?"

"You got it, Dragon. Targets are at 1200 feet MSL, altimeter is 30.12, highest terrain is to the north at around 2300 feet, best bailout heading is 270 degrees. We'd like a west to east pass with a pulloff to the south. You're cleared in from the west and we got some more flares coming out now."

I rolled in and dropped my two 500 hundred pounders. I knew they probably wouldn't do anything, but I could use them to get a better reference from the funny bomb burn pattern.

"O.K., Dragon, you hit about 100 meters south of 'em," Blindbat observed.

Hell, I was glad the damned things even hit the country of Laos! I selected two of my CBU pods and started back for my first serious pass just as the latest group of Blindbat's flares lit up the terrain below.

Just as I began to pickle off a few tubes of CBU, I saw the road. I was too far to the right, to the south. But I saw the most beautiful thing I could hope for – four or five dark rectangles on a white, sandy road that snaked down from the plateau into the valley to the east.

"Blindbat, Blindbat, I got a visual on the movers," I radioed, trying not to sound too excited.

"Standby, Dragon, we have another Yellowbird checking in. You're cleared for your next pass, and we'd like you to drop everything you have left."

As the Yellowbird began the standard check-in litany, I started down the chute and called, "Dragon's in from the west, last pass."

I had every CBU pod selected and was trying to pick up the road I'd seen on the previous run. The flares were really lighting up the terrain below. Coming in further to the north than on my last pass, I was desperately trying to acquire the road. Then I saw it. A quick correction and I was lined up perfectly. There they were, as plain as day. Right in front of me were a gaggle of trucks.

Pickle, pickle, pickle. Hundreds of CBU-25 bomblets were on their way.

Pulling off, I made sure I was climbing at a healthy angle before looking back to see how I'd done. The most amazing thing greeted my eyes. A trail of exploding bomblets were marching smartly down the road. Boom! A truck exploded. Boom! Another one turned into a fireball. The bomblets continued down the road relentlessly. Boom! Boom! Boom! Oh Lord, I got five of the suckers, and on one pass! Talk about a rush, whew!

Blindbat let out a cheer, "Hot damn, Dragon, that was really something. In fact, I think ya gottem all. Godallmighty, what a beautiful sight!"

Doing the best I could to maintain some semblance of control, I answered in the most professional voice I could muster, "Dragon 11 is off to the south, standing by for BDA."

Blindbat hesitated for a few seconds, then called out, "O.K. Dragon. Coordinates were XT 2356 4095. On target at 2250, off at 2250. Five trucks destroyed, five KBA. Pleasure to do business with you. Contact Alleycat on 253.2."

As I acknowledged the BDA, the Yellowbird that had just checked in wanted to know where to drop. Blindbat coughed, then gave him the bad news.

"Standby, Yellowbird. Think we've got something a few miles to the east at a suspected truck park. Can you hold for a few more minutes?"

The Yellowbird was astounded, "You mean he got'em all?"

"That's about the size of it," Blindbat answered.

The Yellowbird then proceeded to make my day, "By the way, Blindbat, just what the hell kinda airplane was that Dragon?"

I was passing through ten thousand feet, climbing to the south when Blindbat told him that he'd just witnessed one of the new A-37's in action. I couldn't help thinking about an old radio show that always ended with one of the townsfolk asking the sheriff, "By the way, what was the name of that masked man, anyway?" Ha!

Back at Pleiku, everybody was absolutely ecstatic. The Boy Wonder had really done good. The crew chief was already painting the outlines of five tiny trucks on the side of the jet when Billy T. gestured toward the plaque I had been working on before the flight.

"Well, hotshot. Think it's time to go put that thing where it deserves to be?"

"Betch your ass, Major T.," I yelled, and we all piled into the jeeps, raced up to the MACV compound and charged into the bar.

As usual, the place smelled of spilled beer, whiskey and stale smoke. A corny Filipino band was in one corner doing its best to imitate the Rolling Stones while a topless Korean dancer jiggled on a small stage. Firm hands grasped my legs, lifting me up. The hoots of pilots from other units grew in intensity as I climbed up onto the bar, holding our freshly painted emblem in one hand, a hammer in the other and some nails between my teeth. As I drove the last nail into place to secure our logo alongside the others, the boisterous crowd cheered. I looked around the bar from my precarious perch, just taking the whole scene in for a moment.

The Dragons were officially on station and everybody seemed to like it!

As I climbed down, somebody was shoving a beer in my face. It was my wife.

"Thought you might like to take a break from all the unpacking. What were you doing up on the bookcase, anyway?" she asked, holding out a cold one.

"Well, actually, I mean, uh, I was just looking at this old lighter."

"What, you gonna put it up there with your other 'I love me' stuff?"

"Oh no, I just had it in my hand when I, well, when I climbed up here."

"I don't think anybody would notice it up there anyway," she quipped, heading back down the stairs. "And hurry up, I need your help getting the washing machine hooked up."

I gazed at the lighter's silver and black logo for a few seconds, then put it away. The demon retreated for the time being. But I knew he'd be back, because the quote on the other side of the lighter was beginning to haunt me – "Movers at 4107".