

Snapshots and Special Orders

Recently, as I was going through one of those cardboard boxes that everyone has in their favorite storage place, when a couple of familiar looking items caught my eye; two slightly yellowed Special Orders, typed, signed and copied in the days of carbon paper and white out. Loose, between the two documents were a couple of color snapshots that reminded me of why those Special Orders had very special meaning.



The photo was taken the day before our Pacific Port Call in October, 1966. Jimmy Jefferson, Kevin McManus and I on a sunny California beach near San Francisco. Cigarettes, a watermelon laced with something strong and of course, some Budweiser. If there was stress in our faces, it was not captured by that lens. We were ready for adventure, so at some point in the day, we promised to return to this spot, when our war was over, to toast our good fortune and remember those we left behind.

The next day we took off from Travis and headed westbound for DaNang, stopping in Clark for PACAF training, including both survival in the jungle and survival in the officers club, where hordes of battle hardened warriors fresh out of combat were claiming their R&R. There might have been some Recuperation, but Rest was nowhere to be seen. The final leg of our trip required a mandatory layover in Saigon to update personnel and pay records, fill out emergency data forms, and get two arm loads of shots before heading north to DaNang.

Our separate journeys, since starting as Doolies in July 1960, began to get interwoven in 1965 with our assignments from UPT – F4s to the 81st Tactical Fighter Wing in England. But our appointments in Samarra began in the summer of 1966 when we headed for Viet Nam.

In 1965 the AF made the decision to swap the single seat F101 fighter bombers of the 81st with the newest, hottest fighter--the Phantom II. The F4 was configured with two cockpits, similar to the Navy

version, but unlike the Navy with a pool of RIOs, the AF had insufficient navigators to fill the growing numbers of F4s. The solution was to assign new UPT grads to the F4 in the rear cockpit. Clearly we did not get to vote on that decision, but the potential to learn, experience and move up quickly seemed like a good thing. The lush, ambience of the English countryside was a lot more exotic than Victorville, or Alamogordo. The UPT classes 66A and B provided a lot of Lieutenants into this flow and most of us were 64 grads.

When I arrived at Bentwaters in early 1966, I joined 12 classmates in the 92nd Squadron and even more in the 78th Squadron at nearby Woodbridge. So many that we could have a class reunion any time a hat was inadvertently worn in the bar, or whenever the Blab started flowing at Wheelus. Kevin and I were in the 92nd and Jim was in the 78th, but off duty, as bachelors, we all prowled the local clubs and pubs together. In spring of 1966 the three of us moved into the new town houses, next door to the Oclub, on RAF Bentwaters. The work routine of life at Bentwood was defined by two major scheduling events. Primarily, Victor Alert, 3 or 4 day stints, locked into a tightly guarded, wire enclosure, with a dozen or so of your "best" friends, where we were all prepared to fly into East Germany, Poland or even the USSR with a nuke, at 15minute notice. Suspiciously, bachelors seemed to get a higher share of the duty, which quickly grew very tedious. The endless card games, old movies, and English TV kept us out of trouble, but we were missing the swinging, mod sixties in England. The other event was the fair weather training in North Africa. Every wing in Europe had a detachment at Wheelus AB, Libya, requiring a constant rotation of aircraft and crews to fly training missions over the desert, the bombing ranges and air gunnery water range. Fun flying, super beach, an assortment of single school teachers and nurses, and an endless supply of alcohol. Again, the missing ingredient was time to enjoy that beautiful English Countryside, and those pretty girls wearing skirts that, excuse the pun, barely did the job.

The war in Viet Nam was a long way away, but the Stars and Stripes accounts of air combat, SAMs and Close Air Support, coloring the rather dreary flow of intelligence reports, were increasing by the day. We actually felt that the action would be over before we could get the chance to be part of it. Our classmates and colleagues with combat time would always be first in line for good assignments, and at the top of the promotion lists. We didn't want to miss the chance.

When the ominous telephone call from the pyramid alert net directing all aircrews to report to their squadron briefing rooms came in on a hot August '66 day, we had no doubt as to the reason, so we were ready. Slade Nash, our Squadron commander, simply said, "Wing needs to send 12 mission ready crews to Viet Nam asap and in a month or so they'll need 12 more. Do we have any volunteers?" Kevin, Jimmy and I had already decided — our hands couldn't go up fast enough. Among the 27 individuals that stepped forward that day, 9 of us were classmates. While we all had individual orders this Special Order aggregated the entire first group---redacted to show only our classmates.

Department of the Air Force
Headquarters, 81st Tactical Fighter Wing (USAFE)
APO New York 09755

Special Order
AB-1132

So much of the following special orders, dates indicated, this hq relating to the reassignment of the follow individuals, organizations indicated, USAFE, this station to Hq 35 Tac Ftr Wg, PACAF, APO SF 96337 with EDSCA: 20 Oct 66 are amended to include item 36 "TDY for PACAF Jungle Survival School at Clark AB P I.....

1STLT GERALD O ALFRED JR, FR78505
1STLT LEE A DOWNER, FR78616
1STLT JAMES M JEFFERSON, FR78733
1STLT RODNEY L MARTIN, FR78788
1STLT KEVIN J MCMANUS, FR78805
1STLT DENNIS S S PAZDAN, FR78847
1STLT DOUGLAS A ROTMAN, FR78886
1STLT DONALD R SPOON, FR78929
1STLT MACK THIES FR78945

Our nine months with the Gunfighters gave us all we imagined and more. Night missions in Route Package I and under the flares on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Day missions in Route Pack V and VI, alternating between boring and terrifying. Alert pad scramble missions with Napalm, Snake Eyes, rockets and guns to provide direct support to our ground bound comrades. Between missions, the DOOM club would have been a better venue than “China Beach” for a TV series—filled with characters, morbid humor, charred steaks and chaos. Rocket and mortar attacks kept us sleeping with one ear tuned for warnings and helmets hanging on our bunks. In the final months Kevin, Jim and I were roommates, constantly comparing our experiences and sharing our hopes. For this tour of duty we were trapped in the back seat, called the pit, hoping for the “Counters” that would get us home to a front seat assignment quicker. We were heavily dependent on the skill, judgment and luck of the guy in front (along with the bad aim of the enemy) to keep us alive.

If you look at the historical statistics from the war, you might see an aircraft attrition rate of less than 1%, but like politics, attrition rate is always very local. Based on those statistics, no one could have predicted what would happen to us over the next 10 months. Of the 27 names on that Special Order, 10 were either KIA, MIA or POWs. Of our classmates on that Order, 4 out of nine met one of those fates. Gerry Alfred, Jim Jefferson, Kevin McManus and Dennis Pazdan went missing or were killed during that tour. Kevin was flying with Ed Mechenbier adding another dimension to the attrition, interlacing our group’s experience with the follow on wave of Class of 64 from the 81st.

Of the three of us on the beach in the picture, I was the only one to return to California after the tour. Kevin (with Ed) was shot down on 12 Apr 1967 and shortly thereafter, reported captured. Jim was shot down one month later, 12 May 1967 and reported missing. His status was changed to Killed in Action in 1978.

The experience affected everyone differently, but even though we individually were sure nothing would happen to us, we knew that others would not get home. Sadly, the Bentwood group was only a fraction of the loss that ‘64 endured. A number of future generals, combat leaders and tacticians were eliminated before the AF and nation could benefit from their contributions. We continue to remember them, honor their memory and salute their sacrifice.

Post script:

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
HEADQUARTERS 366th COMBAT SUPPORT GROUP (PACAF)
APO SAN FRANCISCO 96337

SPECIAL ORDER
M-112

13 May 1967

1st Lt LEE A DOWNER, FR78616, 390th Tac Ftr Sq, PACAF, this station, is appointed Summary Court Officer to settle all claims for and against the estate of 1st LT JAMES M JEFFERSON., FR78733, 390th Tac Ftr Sq, PACAF, this stn, missing in action.

The next day, I met, and passed the sad news to Jim's friend, a Pan Am stewardess. She flew into DaNang expecting him to be there during the short turnaround stop. In November, I traveled to Gainesville Florida to bring some remaining personal effects to his parents. Finally, I wanted to be sure that the Viet Nam memorial was updated when his status was changed. I left a copy of these orders with a pile of other mementos left by families and friends of those that didn't return. It was my first visit to the wall. Even after thirty years it left me misty eyed and sad.

Returning to California by myself in July of 67, less than a year later, it was hard to believe that we could never share that promised toast.