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"Down There Amongst Them"

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BYRON HUKEE

A Spad pilot's story

The red-orange tracers arced lazily up from the right to a point not too far in front of me. I wasn't sure whether their apparent lack of speed was the result of the survival fright reaction that makes time stand still or the angle from which I viewed them. I could tell that they would not find me, and the gunner who fired them was not the first to be fooled by the slow speed of the Skyraider. But I also knew that those rounds were meant for me, as I was the only Skyraider in this piece of South Vietnamese sky west of Da Nang. I glanced down to the right in time to see more rounds leaving the muzzle of the 23mm AAA weapon. The gun was just about a mile to the south at my 3 o'clock position on the floor of Ashau Valley.

I reached down to position the "station select" switch to stations six and seven; each carried one LAU-3 rocket pod filled with 19, 2.75-inch, high-explosive rockets, and I wheeled the heavy A-1H Skyraider into a tight, descending, 270-degree turn to the left to create some time and space for my attack. (Lest you conjure up images of a vision-blurring 6- or 7G turn, realize that the Skyraider we flew on Sandy missions had a gross

takeoff weight of around 22,500 pounds and that, even at a "fast" cruise of about 160KIAS in a combat area, the G available for such a turn was less than 3.) This could very likely have been the AAA site that, just over an hour earlier, had hammered Sandy 07, forcing him to extract from his burning A-1 over Ashau Valley. Capt. Larry Highfill was down there on the ground somewhere; I just had to locate him.



This photo was taken on October 1, 1972, on my 140th and final combat mission in the Skyraider. From front to back: Capt. Buck Buchanan in A-1J 142-058; 1st Lt. Tex Brown in A-1J 142-028 and Capt. Willy P. Kramer in A-1H 135-257. It was also the final Spad flight for Buchanan and Brown.



A crew chief scrambles up the wing of A-1E 132-643 to assist the pilot after a combat mission. I was eventually assigned to this aircraft and dubbed it "Minnesota Fats."

As the nose of my Skyraider tracked through the final part of the turn, I turned on the master arm switch and armed up the SUU-11 minigun that I would use as an aid to aim the rockets. I briefly tracked the pipper up to the target then eased forward on the stick. The 7.62mm rounds buzzed out of the minigun at the rate of 4,000 rounds per minute, or nearly seven rounds per second. After a short, two- to three-second burst, I moved my right thumb from the upper button to the lower button and held it down. In less than two seconds, all 38 rockets were on their way to the AAA site. I wondered if "time was standing still" for the AAA gun crew.

The date was June 20, 1972, and, as Sandy 04, I had launched from Nahkon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB) about an hour and a half earlier. My flight lead, Joe Seitz, was also a first lieutenant in the 1st Special Operations Squadron—the last operational A-1 Skyraider squadron in Southeast Asia. We were flying under his call sign of Sandy 03. Earlier in the day, a Navy

F-8 pilot off the carrier USS *Hancock*, call sign Nickel 102, had been downed in the north end of Ashau Valley. Other Sandys were working the Nickel 102 search-and-rescue (SAR), and there was no telling whether Joe and I would be needed. We were also escorting to the scene a pair of HH-3E Super Jolly Green Giant rescue helicopters from the 40th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron.

Throughout the war in Southeast Asia, the A-1 Skyraider had performed admirably in various roles related to close air support. The aircraft was a perfect match for that mission in that threatening environment. It carried tons of ordnance and external fuel on 15

external stations and was equipped with four internal 20mm cannons. It could take hits and keep on fighting or at least get the pilot away from the target area to where he could be rescued. The A-1 was equipped with enough radios to communicate and coordinate with virtually anyone in the theater—a UHF, VHF/AM, VHF/FM and ADF (automatic direction finding) on UHF. In addition, the E model had HF-SSB (single-side band).

The Skyraider's most important asset for the close air-support role was its lack of speed. There is simply no substitute for tracking time during a weapons-delivery pass, and at times, we had more than we wanted. In the Skyraider, we were "down there amongst them," and that is why it was the best close air-support aircraft of both the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Of course, this operating environment also took its toll on men and machines alike.

Approximately 274 Skyraiders were lost owing to various causes during the Vietnam War. Of these, 210 were Air Force

My journal entry for 17 June 1972: *Hobo 43 wingie. Doz for a downed CH-53 north of Khong Sedone with Zeke as lead [This was not a SAR situation, as the crew had previously been recovered.] We replaced other Hobos who were working the area prior to our arrival We orbited over the CH-53 crash site while a team landed to check the feasibility of lifting it out We worked the Doz about 2 hours. Our plan was to get a quick strike, recover at Ubon to refuel and RTB [return to base]. Weather in the target area was about 6,500 broken. We worked a target east of the river near Khong Sedone. We did not observe any ground fire and were working from about a 6,000-foot roll in altitude. On Zeke's second rocket pass, he got hit as he was firing his rockets. I saw the heavy smoke*

THE DAY WE LOST "ZEKE"

DATE: 17 JUNE 1972

SORTIE #: 91

SORTIE LENGTH: 5.4

COMBAT TIME: 270.5

AIRCRAFT: A-1E-5 135-215

trailing from his aircraft. He said nothing. The FAC asked, "Are you all right?" The only thing I could say was, "Are you all right, pull out." He went in with the plane. There was a large fireball. I went back to the Doz frequency and told the other Hobos what had happened. Jim Harding was leading that flight and he came down about 15 clicks to the south to run any possible SAR. I had to RTB because of fuel and started heading for Ubon but saw that I had enough fuel to make it home. I met the Sandys on my way home and told them there was no survivor. I was met in the de-arm area and was taken to the TUOC. I concluded that Zeke must have been hit in the cockpit and incapacitated. Airbursts would have been hidden above the clouds.

Obviously, this mission stands out in my mind today as much as any of those I flew 26 years ago. Sometimes I can't remember where I put my glasses five minutes ago, but this mission is as clear as if it happened yesterday. The first part of the mission was simply orbiting over the downed CH-53 and waiting,

waiting, waiting. After what seemed like hours (because it was!), we were released to contact a Raven FAC as the next Hobos checked in on freq. We were about three and a half hours into the mission at this time. The FAC said he had a target near Khong Sedone. I had worked this area the day before.

Zeke contacted the FAC, and he gave us the standard target brief to include the possibility of up to 23mm AAA in the area. Now, 26 years later, I do not recall whether the FAC had reported any active AAA positions, but I don't believe he had.

We had each made about five passes

A-1H 139-738 on takeoff roll from NKP. This is the Skyraider that Lt. Col. William A. Jones III flew on his Medal of Honor mission of September 1, 1968. Sadly, it was also the last U.S. A-1 Skyraider lost in combat in Southeast Asia when it was shot down on September 19, 1972.

losses and 64 were Navy. A total of 144 aviators with both services lost their lives while flying the Skyraider. The first Skyraider pilot to be lost was U.S. Air Force Col. Tom Hergert on March 8, 1964, and the last was U.S. Air Force Maj. Esequiel "Zeke" M. Encinas on June 17, 1972. I was Zeke's wingman for the mission on which he died (see "The Day We Lost Zeke").

The A-1 Skyraider was very much a throwback to former times. Its conventional gear, radial-engine configuration reminded many of the way aviation used to be—hence, the moniker, "Spad." But the Skyraider was not old technology. Even in 1971 when I began flying it, the airframes were not yet 20 years old, and the newest A-1Js, sent to the Air Force via the Navy, were but 15 years old.

As we neared the SAR area, we were monitoring the SAR communications on UHF and heard that the SAR force for Nickel 102 was withdrawing to Da Nang owing to deteriorating weather. Suddenly, we heard excited voices saying that someone had been hit and was on fire. I quickly recognized the guys in trouble as Larry Highfill and Tim Brady—the Sandys who were working the Nickel 102 SAR. Sandy 07 had been hit by ground fire and was desperately trying to keep the aircraft under control and get out of the area. I heard Larry report that the fire was getting hotter and that he was leaving the aircraft.

After a short silence, I heard Sandy 08, Larry's wingman, calling "Mayday, mayday; Sandy 07 is down!" Now Sandy 07 was also down in Ashau Valley. Since we were but 20 minutes from



the scene, we proceeded directly to the SAR location, which meant a more risky Ho Chi Minh trail crossing point. But the weather was on our side and would provide some cover for our crossing. We "towed" the Jolly Greens to the other side of the trail and then handed them off to another pair of Sandys.

We immediately called for Sandy 07 on the radio, but there was a great deal of confusion, since Nickel 102 was still up on the radio. Several flights of Navy aircraft were calling for Nickel 102 on "guard," blocking all attempts to communicate with either survivor. The standard rule for SAR was that you normally went after the guys who had been on the ground the shortest time. Nickel 102 would have to wait while attention shifted to Sandy 07.

Weather in the area was a bit of a problem because of towering cumulus clouds with tops above our maximum altitude capability of around 10,000 feet. It was a bit like flying through canyons of clouds as we weaved through them as if on an

and had just switched to rockets. No ground fire had been observed by any of us. We were in a left-hand wheel and were generally rolling in from the northeast through the northwest. As Zeke was on his rocket pass, all looked normal. The smoke started coming out of the rear of the pod at about the altitude I expected, indicating that he was firing his rockets. The next thing I saw was much darker, heavier smoke coming from what appeared to be the same location as the rocket smoke. From the time I saw this until Zeke's Skyraider impacted the ground, it was probably fewer than five seconds. We were firing our rockets at around 3,500 to 4,000 feet and bottoming out at about 2,000 feet. I watched his plane the entire way down to the ground, so I knew there was no extraction. This is not to say there was no attempt, but there was definitely no extraction. I immediately thought a hundred things at once—none of them particularly logical. I

wanted the FAC to tell me where the gun was so I could roll in on it and kill it. The FAC saw no gun—only the result of its work. After about two minutes, I realized fully what had just occurred and began to act more rationally. I called the other Hobos and waited until they arrived on the scene. I briefed them on the situation and turned for Ubon. I passed on my black assessment of the possibility of Zeke's surviving the crash; I was that sure. We didn't need any more A-1s downed while making low passes over a crash site that was not survivable.

I had never in my life felt such a sheer and utter sense of despair. Mostly, I felt a great deal of helplessness. It was not easy to concentrate on flying the plane during these moments. I realized there was no need to land at Ubon, as I had enough fuel to make it back to NKP. The 45 minutes it took to get back seemed an eternity. I met the Sandys en route to the possible SAR

and again gave them my negative assessment. Was I wrong in doing so? To this day, I believe my decision was correct. There was no hope of survival.

I had heard the phrase "Golden BB" in reference to the round that has your name on it. This situation fit that to a "T." The round had to have hit the plane for this to happen. Had it missed, the airburst would have been well above it and would have exploded harmlessly.

Much later, a ground team located the crash site and recovered Zeke's remains. Shrapnel damage to items in the cockpit indicated that Zeke had been incapacitated when a round of high-explosive AAA detonated very near the cockpit. Maj. Encinas was the final American A-1 pilot to die in SEA. The name of Maj. Esequiel M. Encinas on the Vietnam Memorial Wall is on panel 01W, line 043, reference number 148. God bless you, Zeke.



The author with A-1H 139-791. This photo gives an appreciation of the size of the Skyraider. The oil dripping on the 300-gallon centerline tank shows the pilot that this Spad is "alive" and ready to go.

obstacle course from hell. Joe and I were not having much success raising Larry on the radio. At times, his voice was clear, and then it would just disappear. I suspected we weren't too close to his position, as he reported that he did not hear us at all.

Then Sandy 03 started having problems with a rough-running engine. Joe decided to take it back to Da Nang, which was only about 35 nautical miles to the southeast. He joined the Da Nang Sandys who were orbiting feet wet (over the water) east of the SAR area, and they escorted him to Da Nang without incident. We talked over the situation and decided that I would continue the search, even though darkness was approaching. I thought Sandy 07 might be on the east side of the valley, as we had been searching on the west side up until this point. It was when I had turned east through a hole in the weather across the north end of Ashau Valley that I encountered the AAA gun.

Capt. O'Dean "Stretch" Ballmes, an A-1 combat veteran and my A-1 instructor at Hurlburt Field, Florida, told me two things as I was preparing to leave the States for Southeast Asia: "There is nothing over there worth dying for; and never duel with a gun." The wisdom of the former was debatable at best, but the truth contained within the latter was without challenge. The success rate of pilots who tried to battle it out with AAA weapons was not good. But I felt that I had to acknowledge their presence with a greeting of my own—if only on one short pass.

As I broke off the rocket pass without waiting to see the impacts, I flicked the "bombs/rockets" switch to the bombs position and hit the bomb button again to dump the empty launchers into the jungle below. Once the frangible nose fairing had been burst by the first rockets out of the pods, the flat "barn door" profile of the launchers served to slow the Skyraider even more, and that was not good.

On the other side of the valley, I turned south to resume the com search for Sandy 07. Once more, the traffic on the UHF guard channel (243.0) was so busy that it seemed I could not get a word in edgewise. I moved Larry over to "SAR Delta" 282.8 and immediately had much better success. As I headed south along the eastern shoulder of Ashau Valley, Sandy 07

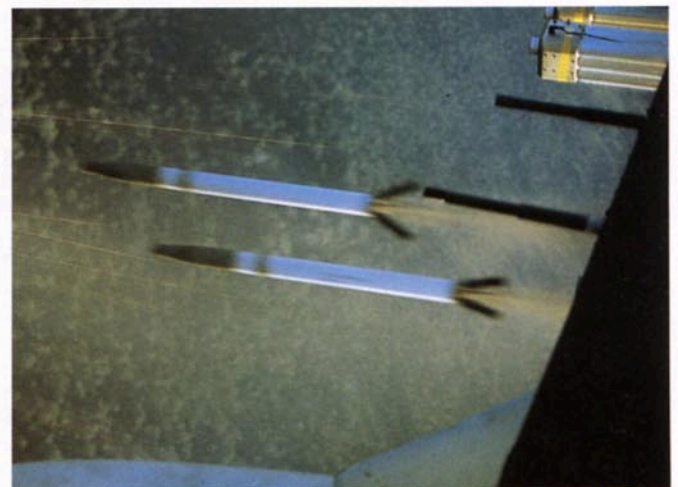
A pair of 2.75-inch folding fin aerial rockets (FFARs) leave the LAU-3 rocket pod that held 19 rockets. The red streaks are the burning exhaust particles of previous rockets.

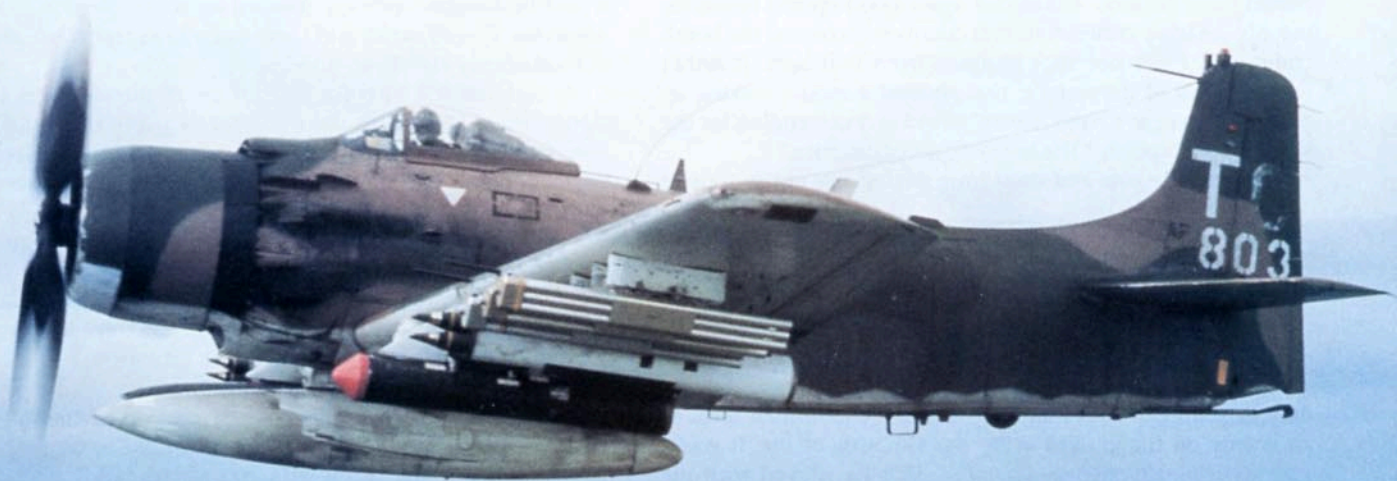
reported that he could hear an aircraft approaching; then he reported that he had me in sight. I looked around to take note of the land features and held my southerly heading. The call of, "You are over my position now" was music to my ears. He appeared to be just off the ridge that formed the eastern side of Ashau Valley, perhaps 200 feet below the ridge elevation. I reported to the other SAR forces that I had located Sandy 07 and checked on the status of the Jolly Greens. We had about an hour of daylight left, and I wanted to know whether a pick-up attempt was even possible. The response was that the Jolly Greens wouldn't be available for a pick-up attempt before dark. But first things first: I had to determine how close the bad guys were to Larry.

I immediately tried to pinpoint Sandy 07's position. Unless I knew exactly where he was, I wouldn't be able to return fire if fired on for fear of endangering the survivor. Larry had only intermittent visual contact with me because of the tall, dense, jungle canopy, so I used a combination of visual and electronic search methods to refine his position. To complicate matters, Larry reported that I was taking ground fire on most low passes. The fire, he reported, seemed to be coming from above his position, to the east.

Larry pressed and held his mike button, which allowed me to home in on his radio signal. I maneuvered to put this bearing on the nose and flew straight until he reported that I was overhead. I was close to being absolutely sure of his position but wanted to remove any doubt. Just north of his position was a slide area that was devoid of any vegetation. I asked him if he could see this area; he replied that he could not. I told him to keep his head down while I put a few rounds of 20mm into the clear area. He heard the impact of the high-explosive 20mm rounds and reported that he was about 20 meters south of that spot.

I turned my attention to the ground fire. On one of my "trolling passes," I saw an area with several bomb craters that was just about 100 meters east of, i.e., above, Larry's position. As





Capt. Buck Buchanan flies A-1H 139-803 over South Vietnam on July 5, 1972. In addition to the usual ordnance load, this Skyraider carries 5-inch Zuni rockets "procured" from the USMC A-4 Skyhawk squadron (also flying out of Bien Hoa) and 2.75-inch rockets with 17-pound warheads "borrowed" from the U.S. Army Air Cavalry unit at Bien Hoa.

BAILOUT FROM A BLAZING SKYRAIDER

For Larry Highfill, leaving the burning Skyraider was as easy as reaching for and grasping the extraction handle mounted on the seat between his legs and pulling it sharply. Barring malfunction, the Yankee Extraction System, designed by Stanley Aviation expressly for the Skyraider, was able to provide a "zero/zero" extraction capability. That is to say, escape at zero altitude and zero airspeed. But leaving a crippled Skyraider was not always so "automatic." The Yankee Extraction System was not installed in the Skyraider until 1968. By that time, only the USAF was equipped with the Skyraider in Southeast Asia.

On October 19, 1965, Capt. Melvin C. Elliott of the 1st Air Commando Squadron was flying an A-1E at night while supporting the besieged Plei-Me Special Forces camp in South Vietnam. During one of his weapons-delivery passes, Elliott was hit by enemy ground fire. Elliott writes:

As I pulled off the target, I noticed that things were quite bright. I looked at the left wing and it was ablaze. At this time, I called my wingman and notified him that I was on fire. The wingman

requested that I turn on my lights so he could see me. My thoughts at that point were, if he couldn't see me with the fire that was burning, he for sure wouldn't see the lights of the aircraft. At that point, I planned to maneuver over the compound and bail out. Before getting into position over the compound, the flares went out and it was impossible to see the ground. I continued in the orbit, at approximately 800 feet altitude awaiting the illumination of flares so I could see the ground. Before this happened, the controls of the aircraft failed and I notified all concerned that I was bailing out at that point.

As I was attempting to bail out of the aircraft, I became stuck against the rear part of the left canopy. My helmet was blown off immediately when I stuck my head out of the cockpit. At this point, the aircraft was out of control and was rolling due to the fire burning through the left wing. After freeing myself from the aircraft, I reached for the D-Ring, which was not in the retainer pocket on the parachute harness. However, I found the cable and followed it to the ring and pulled it. The chute opened and, shortly

after flares lit, I could see that I was going to land in the trees in the area.

If bailout could not be accomplished by a certain altitude in a descending Skyraider, the only options were a forced landing or ditching, if over water. U.S. Navy Lt. j.g. Tom Nelson had just such an experience. Following an engine failure at night while flying an AD-5 Skyraider, he ordered his two crew members to bail out; one did so in a short time, but the other balked when faced with a bailout over water at night. Nelson relates:

I experienced one night-ditching at sea, after engine failure. I survived, though I landed in the water without seatbelt or shoulder harness, which I had removed in preparation to jump—only to give that up and hold a panicky crewman in the plane after we were too low to jump. I did this on the gauges while flying with my left hand. I hopped out, amazed to still be alive, only to observe my crewman struggling to get free of the sinking plane. I abandoned my life raft, swam to him and helped him get untangled. A destroyer found us and picked us up.

"DOWN THERE AMONGST THEM"

I was pulling off this area following a low pass, I looked down behind me and saw a guy standing up in one of the craters and shooting at me with a rifle. The bomb crater he was in had a fallen tree across it that he was using for cover. I set up the switches and came around to attack with the SUU-11 minigun. As I neared firing position, the soldier again stood up and began firing. My 7.62mm minigun rounds completely covered the bomb crater, and I was not shot at again from that area. It rather reminded me of the cartoon that showed a mouse making an obscene gesture at a hawk, talons spread and descending for the kill, with the caption, "The last great act of defiance."

This was the one and only time during my entire tour of

As I was pulling off this area following a low pass, I looked down behind me and saw a guy standing up in one of the craters and shooting at me with a rifle.

duty in Southeast Asia that I actually saw the human form of an enemy on the ground as he was shooting at me. It was a very sobering experience—an image that has stayed with me to this day.

An important part of the Sandy's role as SAR on-scene commander was to predict the need for additional munitions and fighter support and request the same from King—the HC-130 command-and-control aircraft that not only provided aerial refueling for the HH-3E Super Jolly Green Giant rescue helicopters but was also the link with command headquarters in

Saigon. The Sandy's requests would be passed through this channel and eventually to the command posts of fighter bases throughout the theater.

Prior to leaving the area because of darkness, I briefed Larry on the plan to return the next morning and bring him home. There would be constant airborne forward air controller (FAC) coverage in the area all night, and Larry was told to report any and all signs of enemy activity to them.

As darkness fell, I left the area for the 20-minute flight to Da Nang, where I met with the other Sandy pilots and FACs who were familiar with the enemy's defenses in the area. We considered all options and decided on a plan that would enable us to attempt rescues of both Nickel 102 and Sandy 07 on the same mission. We scheduled a "first light" effort for the following morning.

As I was the only Sandy pilot who had knowledge of Sandy 07's position and the threat surrounding him, I would lead the first portion of the mission. On completion of that phase, the lead would be handed over to Capt. James "Red" Clevenger, one of the Sandy pilots who had worked with Nickel 102 prior to the shooting down of Sandy 07.

Four A-1 Skyraiders and two HH-3E Super Jolly Green Giant rescue helicopters took off from Da Nang AB, South Vietnam, just as dawn was breaking over the South China Sea on June 21, 1972. Fifteen minutes later, we were turning inland just south of Hue en route to Ashau Valley. We selected a location in high

SKYRAIDER PRODUCTION

Designed by Ed Heinemann of the Douglas Aircraft Co. in the mid-1940s, the Skyraider was produced in multiple variants in time to see action during the Korean conflict. There, it was the mainstay of the close air support as flown by both U.S. Marine Corps shore-based squadrons and carrier-based naval attack squadrons.

By the end of the Korean War in mid-1953, a large percentage of the production run of 3,180 Skyraiders had been completed. What remained to be delivered, however, were the 713 A-1H and 72 A-1J Skyraiders, which were to form the backbone of the Navy attack capability through the latter part of the 1960s, when the last Skyraiders were retired from Naval service. The 10 Navy attack squadrons equipped with these versions of the Skyraider during the Vietnam War years flew no fewer than 29 Yankee Station cruises in the Tonkin Gulf, beginning in

October 1963 and ending in April 1968, when VA-25 completed the last carrier deployment for a naval attack squadron equipped with A-1 Skyraiders.

The U.S. Air Force experience with the Skyraider began in mid-1962, when the Navy loaned it two A-1E Skyraiders

Commando Wing. Ultimately, the USAF would equip itself with more than 450 A-1 Skyraiders.

The Air Force's experience with the A-1 Skyraider was at first limited to the two-seat, side-by-side configuration of the A-1E. Beginning in 1967 as the A-1H and A-1J, single-seat models were leaving the naval inventory, these newer Skyraiders found their way into four Air Force squadrons throughout Southeast Asia. During the peak years of 1969 and 1970, more than 100 Skyraiders equipped the 1st, 6th, 22nd and 602nd Special Operations Squadrons in Southeast Asia.

By the time I arrived at Nahkon Phnom RTAFB in October 1971, there were but 28 Skyraiders left in the USAF arsenal in SEA. Through combat attrition, this number had been reduced to 19 by the time I left the squadron one year later.



A-1J 142-028 on Sandy alert at Bien Hoa AB, SVN. That's not oil on the ramp; a rain shower had just passed over.

for evaluation purposes. As a result of this evaluation, an initial batch of 75 A-1E Skyraiders were sent to Vietnam as replacements for the A-26 and T-28 aircraft used by the 1st Air

terrain that was relatively free of roads and left the Jolly Greens and Sandy 03 and 04 to provide protective escort. I proceeded into Sandy 07's area with my wingman, 1st Lt. Tim Brady, and made initial contact. Sandy 07 reported that all was quiet at the time, but that he was ready to get out of there. Tim and I made a few low passes to assess the threat and determined that it would be wise to sprinkle some cluster bomb units (CBUs) in the area where I had taken fire the previous day. With no enemy reaction detected, we decided the time was right to bring in the other Sandys so they would be able to get a feel for the location of the survivor and the potential threat. Tim went out to get the other Sandys and lead them back to Sandy 07.

Still with no perceptible enemy reaction in the immediate area, I determined that the time was right to go for the pick-up. I orchestrated a "fast mover" air strike on the valley floor to divert the enemy's attention and led the Jolly Green toward Sandy 07, who was told to "pop his smoke." Tim scanned the area behind the Jolly Green for ground fire while the other two Sandys laid a smoke screen on either side of it to conceal the Jolly Green from the view of any remaining enemy gunners. Once the Jolly Green had Larry's smoke in sight, the four Sandys pulled up into a circular orbit called a "daisy chain" around the chopper. After what seemed like an eternity—but was actually less than five minutes—the Jolly Green reported that he had Larry on board and was ready to exit. I directed him to egress along the ingress route that had proven safe just minutes earlier. Once safely out of the immediate area, I gave the other Sandy element leader "on-scene command" while my wingman and I assumed the role of helicopter escort for the second pick-up.

Nickel 102 had been monitoring the first portion of the mission, so he was ready to assist in his own rescue. Red and his wingman, 1st Lt. Tex Brown, determined that the threat was minimal so they called for the chopper, just as I had only minutes earlier. Once the chopper was hovering, some light ground fire erupted to the east of the survivor's position. All four Sandys took turns hammering that area with 20mm and CBU-25, and I made my last two passes dry, since I had run out of all ordnance. This engendered a rather helpless feeling, but we had nearly finished with this double rescue. Nickel 102 was picked up, and we exited the area toward the coastline of the South China Sea. Once feet wet, we allowed ourselves to relax, and I had the biggest ear-to-ear grin. We had done it!

With both survivors safely on board the Jolly Greens, we escorted them back to Da Nang. There, we had a mini celebration on the ramp and were reunited with squadron mate and fellow Sandy Larry Highfill. We also met briefly with Lt. Cmdr. Jim Davis, the F-8 pilot who

was Nickel 102, before both survivors were whisked away for medical examinations.

This mission took place in June 1972, about nine months into my one-year combat tour in A-1 Skyraiders. These were my 92nd and 93rd combat sorties. I now had accumulated nearly 350 hours and was feeling very comfortable in the aircraft. By the time my one-year tour of duty was over, I had flown 140 combat missions in Southeast Asia and amassed 400 combat hours in the A-1.

I completed my tour with a mission on October 1, 1972, as flight lead of four Skyraiders on a Sandy SAR orbit in northern Laos. I took several photos on that mission, some of which appear with this article. At the time, I was obviously ready to head home to my family and taste some peacetime flying. It did not take long to realize, however, that my one-year tour in Thailand while flying the A-1 Skyraider was an experience that I would look back on as the most bittersweet of my life. †

Skyraider website

Byron Hukee, aka SpadGuy, has used the electronic media to capture the spirit and convey the atmosphere of the A-1 Skyraider at war. SpadGuy recounts all 140 of his combat missions on his "A-1 Skyraider Combat Journal" website. He operates two websites that deal exclusively with the Spad. Both can be found at <http://skyraider.org>.



Vietnam Veterans



If you're tired of the media and Hollywood's portrayal of America's men and women who served in Vietnam;

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