

## **LOW LEVEL FLIGHT**

### **The Good, The Bad and The Ugly.**

The CatKiller SOP was pretty specific on this subject: Thou shalt NOT perform low level flight. Our flight minimums as they related to weather dictated that we would have basic VFR flight conditions or not fly; except when we had “troops in contact” and then it was up to the discretion of the pilot. That meant that we were to stay a 1000 ft. above the ground unless the actual situation warranted flying lower. I tried to comply with the rules but often found myself flying somewhere between 800 and 1000 ft. AGL. If I was really trying to spot something on the ground, I might be at 800 feet. If I was running fixed wing or adjusting artillery, then I had already found the target and I would climb to 1000 feet, or higher. The bottom line though, come home with a bunch of bullet holes in your aircraft and your platoon leader would want to know where you had been and exactly what you had been doing.

Actually, the minimum altitude rule was a pretty good one. Flying at 1000 ft. AGL would put you just out of range of accurate AK-47 fire and if you frequently threw in some turns and a bit of uncoordinated flight, it would generally keep you from getting hit by machine gun fire as well. Of course once the bad guys *knew* that you had them spotted and you began shooting artillery or running fixed wing on them, all bets were off.

Supporting “troops in contact” put everything in a special context if you were a CatKiller. I’m not saying that pilots in other Army Bird Dog units wouldn’t fly low to help their brothers on the ground when the situation warranted, I’m just saying that I never knew or heard of an occasion that a CatKiller wouldn’t fly his Bird Dog right up an NVA soldier’s ass if that was what he needed to do to get the heat off a Marine on the ground.

Sometimes flying low worked out well and lives were saved, sometimes it didn’t and sometimes it would just get you in trouble.

---

The sun was setting in the west on the DMZ. My AO and I were flying near the dirt road that ran south from Con Tien on the west side of Leatherneck Square right near the foothills. The shadows from the hills to the west of the road were getting long and we were heading back to Dong Ha for the night. Suddenly we heard a voice whispering to us on our FM radio.

“CatKiller, CatKiller, this is Lion Cage, over.”

I figured that it was a recon team because they *always* whispered. Usually they just wanted to check in to have us help them verify their location. They would have one of the team members lying on his back in the brush popping a red panel. We would fly over and then fly off a ways (they tended to get REAL nervous if we circled them) while we located their position on our 1:50,000 maps. We would then use the sophisticated code, “First and third on the side of the bird” to tell them where they were. By using the first and third words painted on the side of our aircraft, UNITED STATES ARMY, which has exactly ten letters, none of them repeating, we could give them the digits of the coordinates. For example, the grid coordinates YD 990543 would become Mike, Mike, Yankee, Echo, Tango, India. They would already know that they were in grid YD; all they needed were the numbers. Primitive? Yes. Could the bad guys figure it out? Maybe. But because we did not have current security codes, it was the best we had and it did seem to work. We didn’t use it very often, just when the recon guys needed to know exactly where they were. This time, however, the recon team knew where they were, they just needed help... and fast!

“Lion Cage, this is CatKiller 42, read you lima charlie.”

“Ah, roger CatKiller 42, we are at your three o’clock in a bomb crater and need an immediate extraction.”

“Roger Lion Cage, we think we see where you are. What is your situation?”

“We are completely surrounded by at least a platoon of NVA, and if we can’t get out of here pretty soon, we’re not going to make it through the night.”

*That* got my attention. I dialed up the DASC on UHF and asked him to scramble a couple of flights of fixed-wing and some helicopters for an emergency extraction. In the meantime, my AO, Southern Oscar, was getting the specifics from Lion Cage as to where all of his people were, exactly where the NVA were, what kind of weapons the NVA had and how much longer Lion Cage felt they could hold on.

Under these circumstances, it was definitely OK to circle the recon team and as we did, we could see they were all lying in a 1000 pound bomb crater facing outward in a 360 degree circle. We could also see that lots of men in pale green shorts and shirts had the good guys nearly surrounded and were closing in fast. Knowing that it was going to be a while before the jets coming off the hot pad at Chu Lai could come to the rescue, it was decision time.

“They are in some real deep shit Ray,” my AO said over the intercom. “How long before the fixed-wing are going to show up?”

“The DASC told me about twenty minutes, maybe thirty.”

“That’s too long; we need to do something to get the gomers off their backs.”

**I thought for a few seconds about our options and said, “Well, we can always go down and try to distract them by shooting out of our windows. You up for that?”**

**“It’s all we’ve got, let’s do it,” came the reply, so down we went. Both of us were firing our rifles out the open side windows and buzzing over the NVA soldiers as close as I dared to go. Every time we made a low pass, the bad guys would start scrambling around and that was taking the heat off the recon team in the bomb crater. This went on for a while, just how long I’m not sure, but it seemed like an eternity.**

***Come on jets...we need you NOW!***

**I must have fired nearly all of my bullets that I carried in a canvas bag by my right foot and my AO shot everything he was carrying.....the last couple of passes we were shooting our .45 caliber pistols. I’m not sure we hit anything, but we were making lots of noise and annoying the hell out of the NVA. They must have thought we were nuts! Good. We were. Fortunately, before we ran completely out of bullets, the DASC called to tell us that our jets had arrived.**

**“CatKiller 42, Plutocrat One, I’ve scrambled the extraction helos. It will be a Chatterbox Flight. I’ll have them contact you on the tactical freq when they get close. I’ve got two flights of A-4s inbound to you at this time. Hellborne Two-Zero-Three Flight and a Hellborne Two-Zero-Five Flight right behind. You can work them on Button Yellow, contact them now.”**

**“Roger Plutocrat, CatKiller 42 copies, Button Yellow, switching.”**

**I reached up to my right and switched my UHF radio to tactical frequency Yellow and listened to the two Hellborne flights check in with each other.**

**“Two’s up.”**

**“Roger Two... CatKiller, Hellborne 203 flight of two A-4s coming to you inbound to channel 109 on the 170 at 15, angels two zero zero, descending.”**

**“Roger Hellborne 203, CatKiller 42 has you lima charlie. Standby. Break. Hellborne 205 flight, you up?”**

**“Roger CatKiller, Hellborne 205, flight of two A-4’s, we’re about two zero nautical behind 203 inbound to Channel 109.”**

**“Hellborne 205 flight, pick up an orbit over Channel 109 and I’ll get to you right after I run Hellborne 203. You copy?”**

**“CatKiller 42, Hellborne 205 copies. Two, you copy?”**

**“Roger One, Two copies.”**

**“Hellborne 203, CatKiller 42, I’m on the 310 at zero eight off Channel 109. Go ahead with your lineup.”**

**“CatKiller 42, Hellborne 203, we each have six Delta One-Alphas, two Delta Sevens and Pistols.”**

**“OK Hellborne 203, here’s what we’ve got. A recon team is hunkered down in a 1000 pound bomb crater just to the west of the dirt road that runs due south out of Con Tien. They are completely surrounded by NVA that are within 50 meters of them. Your drops will be danger close. Target elevation is 400 feet with rising terrain to the west. I want you to make your runs from south to north on a 360 heading parallel to the dirt road with a right hand pull. I’ll be over the friendlies in a right hand orbit at 800 feet. Nearest friendlies are in the bomb crater. So far, they are reporting only small arms fire. We have been making low passes on the NVA to keep them busy and we have not taken any hits that we know of. Let’s start with your Delta Sevens, just one at a time so we don’t get any on the friendlies. I say again, we are danger close. All of the friendlies are in the bomb crater and they are keeping their heads down. We’ll use the Delta One-Alphas next and then the Pistols if we need them.”**

**“Roger copy CatKiller....danger close, Delta Sevens first, one at a time. Dash One has you in sight CatKiller, go ahead and mark the target.”**

**During this conversation, my AO had been briefing Lion Cage on what we were going to do and insuring that they were OK with what was about to happen. Dropping any ordinance that close, especially napalm, fell into the category of *“Last Ditch Effort”* and required the full concurrence of the folks on the ground. They understood the danger, but they also understood that was the only way we could get them out alive.**

**“I’ve briefed Lion Cage on what we’re going to do and they’re good with it. They said that they will keep their heads down and hope we don’t screw up,” my AO said over the intercom.**

**“Roger that,” I said as I yanked our Bird Dog around, activated the arming switches and carefully set up to put a Willie Pete EXACTLY where I wanted Hellborne 203 to put his first nape.**

***Please God let this be the most accurate rocket I’ve ever fired.***

**We didn’t really have a sighting system for firing our target marking rockets. Under normal circumstances, putting a rocket within fifty meters of where we wanted the fixed-wing to drop their ordinance was called good. We would then tell**

**the jet pilots to adjust their aim point a direction and distance using the clock system. (From my smoke, 50 meters at nine o'clock.) In this instance, close wasn't good enough, my white phosphorous marking rocket had to be perfect. I was pretty low so I simply pulled the throttle closed, let the nose drop and squeezed the trigger on the control stick then banked sharply away as the rocket impacted about 50 meters to the right of the bomb crater.....YES!**

**"Hellborne 203, CatKiller 42, put your first Delta Seven right on my smoke. I have you in sight and you are cleared hot."**

**"Roger CatKiller, I have your smoke. One's in hot," came the reply. Now it was all up to the accuracy of the A-4 jock. The napalm canister impacted just to the right of the billowing white smoke of my Willie Pete rocket, exploding in a cascade of intense flame and certain death to anything in its path.**

**"Perfect, CatKiller. That really nailed them. Keep it coming," I heard Lion Cage shout on the FM radio, no longer bothering to whisper.**

**"Hellborne, Lion Cage says you are right on the money with your drop. Dash Two, I want you to put your first nape 100 meters at nine o'clock from Dash One's drop. That will put it on the opposite side of the bomb crater the friendlies are in."**

**"Roger CatKiller, 100 meters at nine o'clock. I have the bomb crater and you in sight. Dash Two's in hot."**

**"You're in sight and cleared hot, Dash Two. Dash One, put your next nape 20 meters at nine o'clock from your first drop."**

**"Roger CatKiller, Dash One 20 meters nine o'clock from my last drop. Dash One is in hot."**

**"Dash Two, that was perfect...Dash One, you are cleared hot," I transmitted as I turned back to see Dash One's silver wings glinting in the light of the rapidly setting sun when he turned from base to final on his bombing run.**

**Marine A-4s were incredibly accurate with their ordinance drops under normal conditions, but this time they out-did themselves. The A-4s could not carry the amount of ordinance that the F-4s could and unlike the F-4s they were not supersonic, but when Marines on the ground were in dire straits and we needed absolute perfection, a Marine pilot in a Marine A-4 was always just what the doctor ordered.**

**Hellborne 203 Flight made repeated passes dropping their ordinance danger close to Lion Cage in the bomb crater. After the napalm came the Delta One-Alphas, or Snake Eyes. The 250 pound high-drag Snake Eyes are bombs specifically designed for close air support of ground troops. Upon release from the aircraft, they have**

fins that pop out reducing the speed with which the bomb drops. This allows the aircraft to release the bomb at a lower altitude than a bomb without fins, thus improving accuracy as well as allowing the aircraft to be well past the target and out of range of shrapnel when the bomb explodes. Accuracy is good when dropping bombs near friendlies. Not getting hit by fragments from the bomb you just dropped is even better.

Then I heard a radio transmission that no FAC *ever* wants to hear.

“CatKiller, CatKiller, Lion Cage...you’re too close! We’re taking shrapnel!”

*OH GOD NO!*

“Hellborne Flight, CatKiller 42, go high and dry, we’re hitting the friendlies,” I nearly shouted into my mic. My AO immediately started talking to Lion Cage to determine what had happened and the extent of injuries to members of the recon team.

“Lion Cage, Southern Oscar, we are holding the fixed wing high and dry. Do you have injuries?”

“Southern Oscar, Lion Cage, standby,” came the response. Then after a few very tense moments, Lion Cage came back up on his radio and in a rather contrite tone said, “Ah...Southern Oscar, this is Lion Cage, the drops were perfect. One of my people was standing up taking pictures and he got nicked by some flying shrapnel. Sorry about that. They’ll keep their heads down. Go ahead with your drops.”

*Whew!*

Sometimes you just can’t predict what a young Marine is going to do. Here they were almost completely surrounded, fighting for their lives and they felt confident enough in what *we* were doing to expose themselves so they could take pictures! Foolish? Probably.

Confident? Absolutely.

Brave? Beyond measure.

I would also bet that the recon team leader chewed some serious butt down there in that 1000 pound bomb crater.

“Hellborne 203 flight, CatKiller 42, we got the problem straightened out. Your drops were fine, just somebody standing up taking pictures.”

By now the sun had set behind the mountains to the west and the only illumination that existed around Lion Cage was the burning brush from the napalm. I released Hellborne 203 with a 100 over 100 BDA and relayed a grateful “Thanks” from Lion Cage, then set Hellborne 205 Flight up to make their drops about the time that the extraction helicopters showed up.

**“CatKiller, this is Chatterbox 13, flight of two, orbiting just south of your location. We have you in sight. We’re ready to make the extraction when you clear us in.”**

**Over the intercom my AO said, “Lion Cage says that there is an LZ 200 meters due south of their location. They aren’t taking as much fire as they were, so we’re doing some good. They are going to make a break for it as soon as the helos are on final approach. They have a strobe light and will turn it on as they move to the LZ. They’ll stay in the bomb crater until we give them the word to go.”**

**“Sounds good, tell them to get ready to saddle up,” I said and then went back to the helicopters.**

**“Roger Chatterbox, I’m going to have the fixed-wing make a two more drops and then we’ll get you right in. The LZ is 200 meters due south of the bomb crater that the recon team is in. I want you to fly north about two clicks and then turn back south for your final approach.”**

**As Hellborne 205 Flight was making the last drops of their Snake Eyes, I vectored the helicopters into a position just to the north of Lion Cage so they could set up for a straight in approach to the LZ.**

**“Hellborne Flight, CatKiller 42, excellent drops. We are going to move Chatterbox in for the extraction. Stand by high and dry in case we need you.”**

**“Lion Cage, Southern Oscar, the fixed-wing are high and dry. Are you ready to move to the LZ?”**

**“Southern Oscar, Lion Cage, we are moving to the LZ at this time,” came the breathless reply, indicating that they were running.**

**“Chatterbox Flight, CatKiller 42, you are cleared for your approach. Lion Cage is on the move. They have a strobe light going, can you see it?”**

**“Roger CatKiller, Chatterbox is inbound lights out. We have the strobe light in sight.”**

**Looking down, all I could see of the two CH-46s were their top red rotating beacons as they passed beneath me and then total darkness as the Chatterbox pilots extinguished even those lights to avoid drawing enemy fire. I watched the blinking strobe light moving toward the LZ and then it went out. Suddenly, the total blackness was lit up with dozens of intense bright flashes of light, right about where the LZ was.**

***They’ve been ambushed!* I was nearly overwhelmed with anguish.**

*So close and we aren't going to get them out, was all that I could think. Then, total darkness again as the bright flashes ceased and then silence...my heart was in my throat. A feeling of total failure went like a spear straight through my chest. God, how can this be? We all worked so hard...and now this?*

Then, out of the darkness, a radio transmission:

**“CatKiller, Chatterbox 13, we've got all of them. We're heading for Dong Ha. Lights are coming back on. Thanks for the good work.”**

An incredible feeling of relief washed over me as I watched the red rotating beacons of the two Chatterbox CH-46s climb up to altitude and turn toward Dong Ha in the distance.

**“Ah roger Chatterbox, CatKiller 42, I thought you were ambushed back there when the LZ lit up,” I managed to stammer over the UHF radio.**

**“Oh that was just them shooting out of the portholes as we lifted,” was Chatterbox's calm response. Later, I was to discover that it was standard procedure for recon teams to stick their rifles out of the portholes on the sides of the helicopters and fire on full automatic as the helicopter lifted from a “hot” LZ. This hopefully caused any nearby enemy soldiers to keep their heads down while the helicopter was most vulnerable. The bright flashes I had seen were the muzzle flashes of the recon team shooting, not the enemy. The sudden disappearance of the strobe light was the recon team running up the rear ramp and disappearing into the helicopter. I also learned that all of the Plexiglas in portholes on helicopters that supported recon teams was removed. The reason was that when a team boarded the helicopter, they *expected* to be able to fire as the helicopter lifted so would smash out any portholes they found with Plexiglas in them.**

With that, we released Hellborne 203 Flight, gave them a 100 over 100 BDA with a heartfelt “Thanks” for a job well done and headed back to Dong Ha for the night. We had flown low and lives had been saved.

---

A sunny, quite warm afternoon in May brought a different outcome on the DMZ. Just across the river north of Cam Lo and about 400 meters to the east of the dirt road that runs north from Cam Lo to Con Tien, a Marine platoon on a sweep in “Leatherneck Square” contacted me on the FM radio.

**“CatKiller, CatKiller, this is Mad Minute 26 X-Ray, do you read, over?”**

**“Mad Minute 26 X-Ray, this is CatKiller 42, read you loud and clear, over”**



**“CatKiller 42, Mad Minute 26 X-Ray, interrogatory, can you get us a medevac bird in here? We have two routine medevacs at this location.”**

**Looking down, my AO, Southern Charlie and I could see several grunts walking around in the brush near two shelter halves erected together with two pairs of bare feet sticking out of one end. The way they were milling around gave the impression that they were *not* in contact with the enemy and gave us cause to wonder why the two men were lying under the shelter halves, so my AO keyed his mic button and asked.**

**“Ah, Mad Minute 26 X-Ray, Southern Charlie, what is the nature of your injuries?”**

**“Southern Charlie, Mad Minute 26 X-Ray, we have two heat exhaustion cases and we need to get them medevaced so we can continue our mission, over.”**

**“Roger, Mad Minute, I’ll see what we can do for you.” Then to me on intercom, “It looks pretty calm down there, so we probably won’t have a hot LZ. Let’s give the DASC a call and see if we can get something up for them.”**

**“Roger that,” I told him on the intercom.**

**“Plutocrat One, CatKiller 42, request a routine medevac this time at Yankee Delta 139620. We have two heat casualties, negative enemy contact.”**

**“Roger CatKiller, I’ll put in the request,” was the response from the DASC.**

**Mad Minute 26 X-Ray couldn’t hear the exchange with the DASC as they did not have a UHF radio, only an FM radio, so my AO relayed that we had made the request and were standing by. It was a slow afternoon so we decided to hang around for a while to direct any inbound helicopters to Mad Minute’s location. A few minutes later, Mad Minute called us again. This time with a little more concern in his voice.**

**“Southern Charlie, Mad Minute 26 X-Ray, any word on the medevac? We are now requesting it be upgraded to a priority medevac.”**

**“Roger, Mad Minute, we’ll pass the word along.”**

**Marines in the bush in Vietnam not only ran the risk of getting shot, they struggled with the loads they had to carry in the heat and humidity. It typically took a couple of weeks before new replacements became acclimated and in the process, many of them had to suffer through bouts of heat exhaustion. It could put you hard down and the only way to snap someone out of it was to get them out of the sun, cool them down and have them drink lots of water. I called the DASC and passed on the upgrade request. More time went by and still no helicopter.**

**“Southern Charlie, Mad Minute 26 X-Ray, we are now requesting an emergency medevac. They are going into thermal runaway. We need that medevac now!”**

**Hearing that transmission from the ground, I began thinking that maybe there was something I could do to get those two young Marines to safety. Back at Dong Ha, there was a medical station with two large stainless steel tanks, each full of ice cold water with ice cubes actually floating in them. Normal procedure for a heat injury was to strip the patient and actually submerge them in the icy-cold water. This would drive all of the blood that had gone to the body’s extremities in an attempt to mitigate the increased body temperature back to the vital organs where it belonged. Once they had done that, the patient could then be stabilized and would recover in a matter of hours. The key was to get them to the tanks *before* they went beyond the body’s ability to recover. Heat exhaustion can kill you!**

**As I looked around, I decided that I could land on the dirt road just to the west and take them to Dong Ha myself. I lowered flaps and shot an approach to the road as I told my AO what I was thinking.**

**“Tell Mad Minute that if they will just get their people to the road a half click to their west, I’ll get them to Dong Ha.”**

**“Mad Minute 26 X-Ray, Southern Charlie; we’ll push them harder for the helos. In the meantime, we can land on the dirt road that’s less than half a click to your west. If you can get them over there, I’ll get out and my pilot says that he can get them to Alpha Med one at a time in just a matter of minutes.”**

**“Negative Southern Charlie. This is Indian country and we can’t risk an ambush taking them to the road.”**

**That was when I broke in to the conversation. “Mad Minute 26 X-Ray, this is CatKiller 42, I’ll come down and troll for bad guys. You let me know if you hear anyone shooting at me, OK.” And that’s what I did. I lowered flaps and slowly flew around between Mad Minute and the dirt road at about 50 feet above the ground. I was a nice, ripe and *very* desirable target for any NVA soldier in the area. I even tried to shoot an approach to land in the dirt right next to Mad Minute’s location, but quickly realized that the earth was way too soft and so torn up by previous artillery strikes that if I was able land without flipping over on my back, I could not take off again. By now frustration was beginning to get to me. I couldn’t land at Mad Minute’s location, Mad Minute refused to get his two heat casualties to the dirt road and I couldn’t get the Marine Corps to spring just one damn helicopter loose from whatever they were doing long enough to save two dying Marines.**

**“Mad Minute, CatKiller 42, do you hear anyone shooting at me? The answer was “No”, but the ground commander refused to move to the road. Not long after this**

exchange, Mad Minute 26 X-ray called to tell us to cancel the medevac...that they wouldn't need it.

Two young Marines died that day. Not from bullet wounds or enemy activity. They died because nobody tried hard enough to save them. I should have come up on Guard and made a blanket transmission for *any* helicopter that could hear me to come to their rescue. The DASC could possibly have redirected a helicopter on another mission to take a 15 minute detour and pick them up. The Marine commander could have trusted me when I told him that it was safe to take them to the road and then done so. None of that happened. Instead, two mother's sons died in the span of about an hour, lying barefoot beneath two shelter halves in the hot sun less than 5 miles from two stainless steel tanks filled with ice water and salvation. That sad memory haunts me to this day. Sometimes you fly low and it still ends in tragedy.

---

It had been a pretty good two days of flying on the Z. I'd blown some stuff up, run a few flights of fixed wing on three or four excellent targets, helped out some Marines in trouble and adjusted artillery on a bunker complex. Life was good and I was heading back to Phu Bai for a day off. The sun was shining, there was hardly a cloud in the I-Corps sky and the ribbon that was Hwy 1 was beneath my wings and leading me home to a shower, cold beer and clean sheets. Then it happened.

In the distance ahead of me I noticed a lone Huey flying low level parallel to the highway. There he was, a Slick, all by himself in the Street Without Joy area, flying down the *wrong* side of the road. He even had the side cargo doors closed, with no evidence of a door gunner sitting behind an M-60 machine gun on either side of the aircraft. *Nobody* except Dustoff flew unarmed Hueys in Vietnam and they had big red crosses painted on them. *This* Huey didn't have red crosses. I was in a D-Model Bird Dog, faster than a Huey, and the temptation was just too great for someone in as good of a mood as I was. I *had* to pass him.....besides, only a complete idiot would fly a lone Huey in that neck of the woods low level. So, down I went; gradually overtaking the unsuspecting "Rotorhead" in my spiffy, super-fast D-Model Dog, jumping the wireless telephone poles that paralleled the highway on the right side. It wasn't long before I had passed the Huey, a good 200 yards to his right, then climbed back up to 1000 feet and proceeded to Phu Bai. It all seemed like harmless fun to me.

But *not* to Major General John J. Tolson, Commanding General of the United States Army's 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cavalry Division, whose UH-1 Huey Slick helicopter flying low level "solo" I had passed near the Street Without Joy.

*HoooooBoy!*

Two days later I was told to report to Major Clark, my commanding officer, for an undisclosed reason. Puzzled, I did as I was told and the outcome wasn't pretty. It seems that *Major General John J. Tolson, Commanding General of the United States Army's 1st Air Cavalry Division*, had been aboard the lone Huey flying low level near the Street Without Joy. *Major General John J. Tolson, Commanding General of the United States Army's 1st Air Cavalry Division* had taken umbrage with my "telephone pole hopping" antics and was demanding that I be severely punished.

"Sir, Captain Caryl reports," I said, coming to attention exactly three steps in front of Major Clark's desk and popping a most excellent hand salute.

Major Clark just looked at me with scorn written all over his face and asked, "Captain Caryl, did you pass a Huey two days ago coming back from Dong Ha, jumping telephone poles as you went by him?"

Oh-Oh..."Yes sir, I did," I answered, a sort of numb feeling creeping up my body.

"Well, *that* Huey belongs to General Tolson and he was in it and he got your tail number. He wants you charged with reckless and dangerous operation of an Army aircraft. I have to do it and I'm NOT very happy about it."

The numb feeling crept higher.

"Here's what I'm going to do. While I figure out whether to court martial you or just give you an Article Fifteen, *you* are going to put on your steel pot, your flak jacket, take your rifle and ride shotgun on a truck in the resupply convoy between here and Hue Citadel. You are grounded! Understand? Now get out of my office!"

I managed to squeak out a "Yes sir," saluted, about faced and I'm certain, stumbled to the door. *Court Martial.....Article Fifteen.....*Oh man, how quickly a seemingly harmless act conducted in a moment of high spirits can turn sour.....especially when a *general* wants a piece of your ass.

For the next three days I remained in a state of depression. I had *really* screwed up. A perfect example of how a whole bunch of "attaboys" can be wiped out by just one "aw-shit." There's an old Army aviation saying that there is a very fine line between an Air Medal and an Article Fifteen.....I had just crossed that line. On the bright side, riding shotgun in a 5 ton truck pulling a flatbed trailer wasn't all that bad. I got to see Vietnam low level without worrying about pissing off some general. Of course, there was always the chance of hitting a mine or getting shot at, but that concern was easily overcome by the little kids who lined the road. They were always smiling; the resilience of children in the worst of conditions never ceases to amaze and for a brief time I felt real compassion for the Vietnamese people and their plight.

There was one little girl that I saw each day who stood out from the rest of the children. She was probably six or seven years old, appeared to have some French in

her ancestry and wasn't as aggressive as the rest of the children in the group. Wearing a tattered dress, barefoot, long black hair, big, dark eyes, high cheek bones and a pretty smile, she really tugged at my heartstrings. I wished that somehow, I could scoop her up and send her home so my folks could clean her up, put nice dresses on her, send her to school and give her an opportunity to live a full life free from danger and want. Children should not have to experience war. I couldn't though, so I tossed her candy and some C-rations as we rumbled by, silently praying that somehow, she would survive this hell she was forced to live in.

While I was grounded, behind the scenes and unknown to me, Major Clark apparently wasn't too excited about having to *really* nail me to the wall as the good general had demanded. Captain John Mulvany, one of the good guys and a pal, had become the company operations officer. John was close to Major Clark and I guess, sort of a confidant. Years later I was to learn that over drinks at the CatKiller O-Club bar, John convinced Major Clark that I was really a darn good pilot, knew my job and did it well when not irritating generals. I think probably the fact that I took the assigned task of riding shotgun without complaint may have been factored in as well. Anyway, after three days on the ground, my name showed up on the mission board and I was back in the sky flying the DMZ. I do not know how Major Clark was able to appease *Major General John J. Tolson, Commanding General of the United States Army's 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cavalry Division*, but not another word was spoken to me regarding the event. I can honestly say that I never flew low level again in a fit of exuberance anywhere near an Army Huey. I had learned my lesson. Low level flight for the pure joy of it was not to be tolerated and can get pretty ugly.

Ray Caryl  
CatKiller 32/42