

The Last Year of the Vietnam War.

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In 2008, I retired from all work and decided to write a novel partially based upon my experiences in the United States Air Force. I served from January 1968 until June 1980. From February 1972 to February 1973, I served in the 16th Special Operations Squadron as a Fire Control Officer (FCO) assigned to fly the AC-130A Gunship. During that year I flew over 170 combat sorties. I was in-theatre when the armistice was signed in Paris on January 27, 1973. Unlike those men who fought on the ground, my aircraft covered virtually all the areas of combat throughout Southeast Asia. In addition, I was the flight examiner FCO, and so I was privy to classified briefings from several CIA representatives.

In doing research for the book and later on when I went on a speaking tour, I found a great deal of misinformation regarding the last year of the war. In one speaking engagement, a high school student came up to me and stated that Vietnam was an "unwinnable" war. What she thought was factual was anything but. I was not angry at her because she only parroted what she was taught. Somebody needed to set the record straight, and that's what I intend to do with this essay.

Before I arrived in theater, the enemy used ambush tactics in order to fight American forces and their allies. They did this because getting close to Allied forces vastly reduced the role of our air power as the aircraft we employed did not have the accuracy to discern friend from foe. Two times the enemy attempted to take us on using more direct tactics. The first time was the battle of the Ia Drang Valley (1965) which resulted in a resounding defeat for the enemy as the battle lines were clearly drawn which allowed airpower to be used effectively in obtaining a positive result.

The second occurrence was the Tet Offensive in the first half of 1968. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the Vietcong orchestrated an all-out attack on all our forces throughout South Vietnam. The result was simultaneously both a military disaster and political triumph for the enemy. As a result of that offensive, the Vietcong was destroyed as an effective fighting force. A vast number of their fighters had to be replaced by NVA regulars. In the first six months of 1968 the enemy's losses were estimated somewhere between 150,000 and 200,000 men. We lost 4000 men in the same time span. However, the American political scene was in turmoil as the Tet Offensive made it impossible for President Johnson to run for a second term. That made it a political victory for the North Vietnamese. In the second half of 1968, the enemy reverted back to ambush campaigns and managed to kill 12,000 American soldiers. Those numbers, by itself, was testimony to the effectiveness of their tactics.

In the spring of 1972, the United States was involved with the process of electing a new president. The leading Democrat was Sen. George McGovern from North Dakota who campaigned on the promise to immediately end all combat operations in Southeast Asia. The Republican incumbent, President Richard Nixon, took a hawkish stance by promising to continue the war until reaching its natural conclusion. Four years earlier, the Vietcong successfully conducted the first Tet Offensive in order to embarrass and politically damage Pres. Johnson which forced him out of the race for reelection in 1968. Four years later, with Pres. Nixon facing reelection, the North Vietnamese tried the same strategy and instigated a second Tet (or Spring) Offensive because it was in the North Vietnamese political and strategic interests to elect Sen. McGovern to replace Pres. Nixon.

Unlike the first Tet Offensive which started in January 1968, this second major offensive thrust started in late March 1972. The reason that it was delayed was threefold. First was the weather. March through September is the wet season in Southeast Asia. During this time the monsoons regularly drive through this area causing low clouds and continuous precipitation. This reduced visibility created difficult flying conditions which hampered any effort to aid our friendly ground forces using air power. The second reason was a scheduled refit of the H-model gunships which included the following: upgraded engines; the aft 40mm cannon was replaced by a 105mm Howitzer which went from a fixed position to being placed upon a movable mount which would allow this particular weapon to be "slaved" to the sensor that was made primary by the Fire Control Officer (FCO); and finally, the analog fire control computer was replaced by a digital computer which freed the pilot from the necessity of flying a precise circle around the target in order to fire accurately. This digital computer would immediately correct for deviations in flight parameters, i.e., angle of bank, airspeed and altitude. This refit was scheduled for this time of year because of the aforementioned weather. The third reason was due to manning levels. While all the H-models were down because of a scheduled refit, the A-model crews were only half manned because most of the new incoming FCOs were assigned to the more advanced H-model system. As a result, the H-model crews were fully manned but their aircraft were not flyable and the A-models, who could fly, had only half the crews fully manned. We had 26 A-model crews and only 13 FCOs to man them. In essence, my squadron was only 25% manned until the H-models could come back on line.

I learned from a CIA briefing that the second Tet Offensive would be centered around the city of An Loc which was located on State Route Seven between Saigon to the south and Cambodia to the north. The CIA agents told us that if the North Vietnamese were successful in capturing the city, then An Loc would be named the provisional capital of the "People's Republic of South Vietnam". That would have created a huge political embarrassment for Pres. Nixon and made it harder for him to win reelection in November of that year.

Frankly, this plan would have worked a year earlier, but not in the spring of 1972. What the enemy did not know and what was a carefully guarded secret by our forces was that the AADS-6 Infrared System was replaced by the AADS-7 Infrared System in November 1971. This top-secret upgrade made it possible to see through a great deal of moisture as well as triple canopy jungle. The AADS-6 was primitive in its design and lacked effectiveness. The AADS-7 upgrade was a massive leap in technology. Weather was still a factor... but not the factor it would've been a year earlier. The AADS-7 allowed us to see the ground in almost all cases and be determinative in locating various forces even though the weather was dismal.

At that time, I was an A-model FCO. I flew two to three sorties a day starting at the end of March until the end of April 1972. Those combined combat missions lasted approximately 9 to 15 hours of flying time which translated to 15 to 19 hours of crew duty-day. What eventually helped was the fact that the Air Force recognized the need to speed up the refit of the H-models which they did. By the end of the third week of April, the newly refitted H-models were coming on line and were able to enter the fray. On or about April 29th, my crew was assigned to work the southern part of the city and assist a US Army Ranger and forward air controller (FAC) whose call sign was Tunnel Ten Alpha. On that particular night, the wind at altitude was so strong that most of our A-model pilots would not have been able to get into the proper firing geometry. One of those exceptions was my aircraft commander, Maj. Conrad Story who was a superb pilot. Tunnel Ten Alpha led a band of several hundred South Vietnamese Rangers. The friendlies and an overwhelming enemy force were facing each other with a road separating the two opposing sides. Tunnel Ten Alpha estimated the enemy force between 1100 to 1500 NVA. We opened fire and inside of eight minutes, we "Winchestered" the aircraft (fired every available round of ammunition). Tunnel Ten Alpha reported that the entire enemy force was destroyed... No survivors!

During the same time we were operating just south of An Loc, a newly refitted H-model, working north of the city along Route Seven, found a column of 25 T-54 Russian battle tanks moving from the Cambodian border southward to join up with the forces facing Tunnel Ten Alpha and his men. This H-model gunship fired 26 rounds of 105mm shells at those tanks. The first shot gave the FCO the gun line error. He placed the correction in the brand new digital computer and they opened up on the tanks. Each of the next 25 shots found its mark which resulted in 25 destroyed tanks. This happened precisely at the same time that my crew was killing between 1100 to 1500 NVA regulars south of the city. In that less than 10 minute timespan, the enemy lost two major forces **without causing a single friendly casualty!**

The breaking of the siege of An Loc in reality ended that offensive thrust. In fact from May 1972 to the end of the war (27 JAN 1973) the enemy never again gathered in large numbers in South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese learned a hard lesson at An Loc. They knew from that moment on that they could no longer come together in a large

offensive force as it would be a large target and liability rather than a military capability.
Gunships made that option a nonstarter!

The next turning point was in December 1972. Approximately seven weeks after Pres. Nixon was overwhelmingly reelected he ordered Linebacker II. This operation was an all-out strategic assault on virtually every enemy military asset throughout North and South Vietnam. For the nine weeks of its duration Pres. Nixon changed the rules of engagement which in turn, gave the North Vietnamese basically nine weeks of World War II rules. Permission to fire on targets in populated areas which was an absolute “no-no” before Linebacker II became an everyday event. Our B-52s decimated all targets of strategic value in North Vietnam. The new infrared technology combined with smart bombs allowed us to take out all the bridges which connected North Vietnam to China thereby eliminating the main source of resupply of their diminished military assets. For the nine weeks of Linebacker II, it was nonstop destruction of their forces and infrastructure... Not unlike the bombing that Germany endured in the last year of World War II.

In 1977, I was going through a refresher course in survival training in the state of Washington. On my last day there, while waiting for my return flight, I met an AF Colonel who in 1973 was assigned as an intelligence officer. One aspect of his job was debriefing our returning POWs. Because of his rank, he was selected to interview a full colonel B-52 pilot who was shot down in the second or third day of Linebacker II. The following is the story that was related to me by the Colonel assigned to intelligence:

The B-52 pilot was captured almost immediately upon parachuting to the ground after being shot down by a surface-to-air missile. He was placed in one of the “Hanoi Hiltons” where he was interrogated on a daily basis. Every day for the next eight weeks or so he was brought to a room with three or four men who would take turns beating him. Finally one day after they brought him into the room for his daily beating and interrogation, something different happened. Before they got started, the door opened and a wizened old man with his own entourage entered the room. The interrogator and all the guards immediately “popped” to attention. The POW colonel noticed how nervous they were and realized that this old man was probably a member of the North Vietnamese Politburo.

The old man sat down and then asked the POW colonel, “How long does he think President Nixon will continue the bombing?” His question was immediately translated by the interrogator.

The Colonel pointed his finger at the interrogator and told him to tell this elderly gentleman exactly what he said and not to soften the meaning of his words. The interpreter nodded his agreement nervously and then the colonel looking directly at the wizened old man replied, “Pres. Nixon will continue the bombing until there are not two bricks left stuck together in this f---ing country!”

The interrogator, with much trepidation, translated the colonel's response. The old man's eyes bulged momentarily, and then he nodded that he understood. He said something to the interrogator in Vietnamese and immediately left with his retinue. Our POW was returned to his cell without his daily beating and his treatment was immediately improved until he was freed. More importantly is what happened the very next day. The North Vietnamese decided to accept our terms for an armistice. **That** is how the war ended.

How and why did we lose the peace? In August 1974, Pres. Nixon resigned rather than face an impeachment trial in the Senate. The Congress feeling that they were now the superior branch of government defunded all aid to South Vietnam, our allies in Cambodia and the Hmong tribesmen in Laos. What was even more egregious, was the directed Congressional defunding of all gunship operations in Southeast Asia. The last AC-130 Gunship left Thailand on 15 December 1974. Four months later (15 APR 75), Saigon fell. Eliminating the gunships from theatre operations was like removing all law enforcement from the Wild West. What followed was a slaughter of our indigenous allies. Upwards of 3 million people who chose to tie their fate to the West were killed by various Communist forces in the three countries. As long as the gunships were there, the indigenous friendly forces were safe. Removing the gunships allowed our enemies to gather in force and overwhelm those friendly governments and other allied groups. Once the Communists achieved power, they went on a killing spree of Holocaust proportions.

That war was won by our brave men who fought all of those battles for more than 10 years. The hard part was done. The ensuing peace was lost because our Congress would not make the minimum investment needed to aid our allies and allow gunship operations to continue to protect the friendly indigenous forces. In essence, Congress eviscerated the sacrifice of over 58,000 men whose names are now etched on a black wall in Washington because they would not see our commitment through to fruition...One of the darkest periods of our history.

The misinformation and the downright lies that have become the "accepted history" of the Vietnam War are in contrast to the true facts. I was there and I know what I saw. I am reminded of the old saying, "Those who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it". And repeat it we did. In this case, it was Iraq and the politicians who voided the sacrifice of over 4000 men and women who fought to stabilize that country because they (the politicians) would not see it through to its fruition. **In both cases, the military won the war-- only to have the politician surrender the peace.**

How many times must we repeat the same mistake before we learn?

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The 1980 Iranian Disastrous Rescue Attempt

In the third week of February 1980, my HC-130H Rescue crew was activated off of alert in order to fly to Keflavik Iceland. We spent a month there on continuous rescue alert. By the end of March, we were sent to Mendenhall Air Base in England where we sat active rescue alert for the next month. Finally on 23 April 1980, my crew was ordered to depart for a makeshift airbase in eastern Turkey. We arrived on 24 April 1980. The next day we sat aircraft alert (which means we stay on the aircraft until activated or relieved). Around 10 o'clock in the morning our crew was ordered to depart eastern Turkey as soon as possible. We left less than two hours later for an airfield in Sicily. My crew arrived back in the United States during the first week of May. We had no idea what happened during this interlude from the time we left Eglin Air Force Base until we returned. About a month later, my entire squadron was ordered into a large briefing room in order to receive a top-secret briefing from the number two man in the entire United States Air Force. He was there to explain what happened and why it happened. This is my absolute best recollection of what he said to us during that briefing which he gave in the first week of June, 1980.

General James A. Hill was a large man with an impeccably tailored uniform. I judged that he was in his late 50s or early 60's and physically fit. His dark hair had turned mostly gray, and his countenance was very serious. He looked around the room and seeing that all the security preparations were in place, said, "Seats!" All of us in the audience immediately sat down. We were extremely curious as to why a four-star general wanted to address our rescue squadron. We soon found out. The general took a few moments and looked around the room. He tried to make eye contact with every individual member of my squadron.

The general then spoke: "I am here to offer both an apology and an explanation. I know, based upon thirty-eight years of serving in uniform that sometimes you are ordered to do things that you do not understand. Most of the time, no one offers you an explanation of what might seem inexplicable orders. Normally, I would not take the time to do this, but I have personally witnessed incompetence on a scale which defies human imagination and borders on criminality. It cannot be ignored. It must be exposed for what it is.

"By this time, you all know about the colossal failure of our attempt to free the fifty-three hostages held by the Iranian government. Eight good men lost their lives needlessly. Your squadron was part of that mission, and you deserve to know why it failed and the mistakes that were made. You also deserve an apology for those of you who were put in harm's way and who had to endure three months of displacement.

"All the mistakes that were made and the colossal incompetence starts and ends with the President of the United States. I am going to explain to you why this is true. His first mistake occurred just after President Carter took office. One of his first acts as president was not replacing the H-53 helicopters. All the services have the Super Jollys in their inventory. Virtually every chief of their respective service implored the president to spend \$4.5 billion to replace these Vietnam era helicopters. When we brought these helicopters into active service in the mid-60s, the Sikorsky Company, who manufactured the Super Jolly, told the Defense Department that the shelf life of such a large helicopter with so much power would only be ten to fifteen

years at most. The stress of such a large rotary wing moving at speeds in excess of Mach 2 at the tips would cause vibrations that over time would weaken the structural integrity and would damage the instrumentation and transmission of these helicopters. The president ignored the advice of every chief of staff of their respective service and decided to spend \$1.5 billion to refit all the Super Jollys. So, instead of replacing the H-53 with the new H-60 Sikorsky helicopter, he did save the taxpayers about \$3 billion. When it came time to use them, the Super Jollys were not reliable enough to do the mission. Virtually every one of them, except Marine One, suffered battle damage in Vietnam. The normal reliability rate of the Super Jolly was less than 15% of all those that still remained in service. The mission called for six of the ten Super Jollys employed to be on station and operational over our embassy at the time of the raid. We actually had five able to go which was three times greater than the normal reliability rate for that particular weapon system.

“The second reason why the mission failed goes back again to the President of the United States. His goal over what he hoped would be two terms in office was to unite all the services and combine them into one military. He wanted to eliminate service rivalries, so he insisted that helicopters be used from every service. Unfortunately, the only in-flight refueling capable H-53 helicopter was operated by the United States Air Force. All four chiefs told the president that only the Air Force HH-53 choppers should be used, as they could be refueled in the air. He personally denied this request, so we were forced to plan a land-based refueling event in the mission sequence. That one decision led to the death of eight good men. I'll talk more to that point later.

“The third reason that the mission failed was when it was scheduled. Again, all the chiefs recommended a December timeframe. The perfect time was December 21, the winter solstice, which gave the raiders the maximum amount of night time and reduced the amount of daylight available to the defenders. During that time, the Iranian weather system is controlled by the Siberian high which would allow you to fly in cold stable air and would greatly reduce the potential wind and dust damage caused by greater surface winds. It took him months to make a decision. President Carter finally decided to go in April when the area is dominated by Coriolis storms. At this time of the year, the sun crosses the equator. That solar movement creates large atmospheric pressure changes which result in vast areas of excessive wind. That, in turn, causes both sand and dust storms in the very area that we had to fly. Three, possibly four, of the five helicopters unable to complete the mission were made inoperative by these excessive sand storms.

“The last reason was the most egregious of all. I am referring to command-and-control errors. The President of the United States insisted that he, and he alone, would control the mission from the White House. Special satellite and HF links were put in place to allow him to make changes in the plan in order to compensate for any unseen and unplanned problems. The events that occurred are the perfect example of Murphy's Law: If it can go wrong, it will! Virtually every military doctrine that I know dictates that operational and tactical decisions be made at the lowest possible level. The President of the United States, an academy graduate of Annapolis, who learned this doctrine as a midshipman, chose to ignore it. The same Coriolis storms which took down our helicopters also created gaps in his ability to communicate with the forces in theater. One helicopter pilot needed a special clearance to continue the mission, and since he was

unable to reach command-and-control, he aborted his part of the mission. The only one authorized to grant him such a clearance was the President and at that point, he was unable to communicate with this vital portion of the mission.

“Compare our attempt at rescue to the Israeli raid to free the Entebbe hostages. The Israeli high command presented a plan to Prime Minister Golda Meir. She approved it at once and turned over all operational control to the on-scene commander, Lt. Col. Netanyahu. He practiced for two or three days and then executed the mission. The only casualty was Lt. Col. Netanyahu. All the hostages were returned safely. Mrs. Meir might not have graduated from the academy, but she's a much better military leader than our president. She found someone she could trust and turned over the mission to him. That's real leadership.

“Now, about the loss of life. What I am about to tell you is our best conjecture of what happened during the early morning hours of April 25 in the Iranian desert. As I told you before, we could not use the Air Force HH-53's because the president wanted helicopters from every service to be used to complete the mission. So, in order to refuel, each Super Jolly had to be directed to a position besides the C-130 which was the on-scene tanker. Each chopper took its turn to refuel while the others waited. It was pitch black out there. An airman was placed on the ground facing the choppers lined up to be refueled. Because we had to keep secret our presence in the Iranian desert, the use of any kind of illumination could not be allowed as it would be seen for many miles giving away our position. The only light used was done by a loadmaster facing the front of the Jollys. This airman used dimmed, red-tinted flashlights to direct the helicopters in order to enable each Jolly to get close enough to be refueled. *We think* that a sand insect bit this airman's neck. He went to flick the insect off his neck, forgetting for the moment that the signal light was in his hand. The helicopter pilot saw the light move to his right and followed it right into the Hercules. Because of radio silence procedures, the airman had to watch in horror, as there was no way to warn the helicopter pilot of the mistake that was made. Eight men died in the ensuing explosion. That airman, who was a loadmaster, was one of those casualties. If we had used the Air Force HH-53s, we would have refueled in the air, and those men would still be alive.

“Finally, I want all of you to know that I am resigning my commission and retiring after I finish going to every unit that was involved in this tragic mission and give them the same briefing you are hearing today. I will not serve under a President that I do not respect and personally loathe. Retirement is the only honorable path left to me. I want you all to know that having served with and commanded men such as yourselves for the past thirty-eight years has been the highlight of my life. I wish you all, Godspeed. That is all!”

To paraphrase the late and great Paul Harvey, “Now you know the rest of the story!”