

Vietnam

Fabulous Phantom Down **Cam Ranh Bay Air Base, SVN** **1969-1970**

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Unit Civil Engineer Squadron, "A" Shift Crash Rescue January 2, 1969 to January 6 1970

... the whole plane was engulfed in a monstrous explosion.

Fabulous Phantom Down

January 27th, 1969: I had been in-country Cam Ranh Bay Air Base, Vietnam, for all of twenty-five days. I was a 57150 (MOS) – translated: a crash rescue crewman assigned to "A" shift at the south station.

Cam Ranh Bay Air Base flew around the clock. Crash rescue had one purpose: to provide rescue service for the Air Force and Navy Planes, and Army helicopters that flew in the area.

Photo: Sgt Larry Eley 'Surfer', recently arrived Cam Ranh Bay, 1969.



In addition, CamRanh was an incoming port for almost everyone who came to Vietnam: troop transports arrived daily with a hundred and sixty fresh troops on every plane. It was one of the largest, if not the largest, facilities in Vietnam: Army, Navy, Air Force and Korean Marines. It also had one of the finest deep water ports in the world.

To be in crash rescue, you had to be strong, agile and willing to risk your life if necessary to rescue crew members from crashed aircraft. You also had to know about every aircraft in the inventory of all four branches and their

weapons. I had trained for two years at George Air Force Base in California's Mojave Desert. In the summer of 1968, I was notified I was to be promoted to E-4. This meant that, with my 57150 level, I was ready to be a crew chief.

For a year, I had tried, unsuccessfully, to volunteer to go to Pleiku up in the central highlands of Vietnam. I had joined for the purpose of serving my country and I felt I was slacking stateside. Each time I submitted the paperwork; the squadron first sergeant would look at me and, through his remaining sixteen teeth, would say something like, "Son, are you crazy ... why you wanna leave a cushy base like this? I tell you what I'm gonna give you: a three day pass ... go to L.A. and find yourself one of those free lovin' hippy girls, you shack up, then come back and talk to me about Pleiku."

I knew the sergeant real well because I was crash rescue's representative to the squadron

council, so I answered, "No ... but will ya submit the papers for me?" He would agree to do so, and would I leave his office. Nothing came of it, so I waited and began to think the way people get out of going to Vietnam was to keep volunteering to go. That night I ate supper in the crash rescue chow hall with my two buddies, Harold Nobles and Matteo Guiliano. Harold was a Carolina boy and Matteo was from the heart of New York City.

"Guys I gotta get out of here," I said. "I've been trying for a year now with no results."

Harold looked at me and said, "Eli I have been trying to fix you up with every available girl in the entire Mojave Desert and you're running out on me, *boy your nuts.*" Then he told me that Sgt Waling said you could write to the commander of Eighth Air Force and volunteer. Matteo just looked at me and said, "*Mug your nuts.*"

Later that night on *scat* patrol, Matteo and I were on a *run-up* and in between having our ears blown out by an F-4 Phantom at full throttle, I told him I was going to write to the commanding general of Eighth Air Force and volunteer for Vietnam. I did write and within a month I had orders to go to Cam Ranh Bay Air Base.

I'd not enlisted in the Air Force to avoid the draft or the Army, but because at age eighteen I believed a lazy uncle of mine who told me most guys in the Army wind up as clerks or cooks. Well, I was dumber than a fence-post so I believed him ... and I also believed the Air Force recruiter who told me I'd probably be a pilot.

Toward the end of basic training, eighty of us were marched to an auditorium and told we were about to receive our assignments. I watched as some Airmen were given orders for jet mechanic school, others received orders to electronics school to work on complicated systems in high-tech aircraft, and still others were sent to SP school. Finally there were about twenty of us left and the Master sergeant in charge said that we had mechanical and general assignments left, and that they would post a description of the jobs available on the screen. If you liked it, you would raise your hand. The first job had to do with packing parachutes.

I set on my hands and wondered when they would come and get me to go to pilot school. I had grown up watching Twelve O'clock High and honestly believed the Air Force of 1966 was like it was two decades earlier. One airman basic near me told the sergeants that he too had signed up to be a pilot and asked when was he going to get that job. The three NCOs' in the room laughed and said, "Did you really believe your recruiter?"

The next photo was of a crash rescue crew attempting a rescue on a crashed C-124. The sergeant said for those of us with balls, this was a good job and you'd be out with the aircraft and action every day. Well, I raised my hand, no one else did, and they came and took my name and told me I was to report to George Air Force Base in the Mojave Desert for my training. The guy next to me laughed, poked me in the ribs and said, "Kiss your behind good-bye - you're dead."

The next picture was a huge stateside dining hall. The staff sergeant who was running the

projector said that all of those who were left would be going to food service. I turned to my tormentor, smiled and said, "Way to go." That's how I became a crash rescue crewman.

As I set on the ground at Cam Ranh Bay's Station-1 outside the little chow hall that night, I was eating a big slice of Spam that I had cut out of a can of camouflaged Spam. I had cut it with my survival knife (no cooties in Vietnam) and watched as a flight of F4-Cs took off.

The first week had been orientation and more shots, movies about how not to catch the clap, how to avoid getting killed in the frequent mortar and rocket attacks and how to treat our Vietnamese friends. I also did maintenance on the buildings because I had told someone my dad was a carpenter. So that made me one, I guess.

The second week, I was assigned to Staff Sergeant Koor's truck as a driver. Sgt Koor was a *lifer*: he had been in the service fourteen years. He was also a *red neck*. Because I had blond hair and a good tan from being in the desert, he decided I was a California hippy surfer, which I wasn't, and he began calling me "surfer." Sgt Koor looked like Stan Laurel, so I secretly called him *Laurel and Hardy*. The other guys called me FNG.

Koor kept saying, "He's a surfer, like his brother Napper. That's all we need is another lazy surfer." For that and some other unknown reason, no one wanted to have anything to do with me.

Sergeant Ed Thomas, who had picked me up from transient, would speak to me, but just barely. He was the crew chief on Crash-3, the big O-11 B rescue unit. His driver was Ray Kastner from Milwaukee, and he never spoke to me and made it a point to look away if I said anything to him.

Photo: Sgt Larry Eley (1st row, 2nd from right) 'Surfer', North Station, night of Line Standby with Vietnamese Militia. November 1969.



When the duty roster for the night was put up I walked over to the board with the others. Big Ed said, "Shhhiettt, Kastner ... twelve to six again. We better get some sleep." Big Ed laughed when he said it. Nothing seemed to bother him.

I looked for my name, *Sgt Eley, scat patrol eleven p.m. to five* in the morning. That was all I seemed to have ever done – provide first rescue response to the aircraft on the flight line that were being readied for tomorrow.

“Oh, look, FNG’s got scat again ... don’t get scared out there, surfer boy.” It was Bobby Brown, a slick-sleeved airman who had lost his rank for trying to go AWOL and being drunk. He was not allowed to be a crew man, and only did maintenance and chores for the senior NCO’S.

As I put my gear in Scat 1, Bobby followed me and was singing, “*Ride, Ride, Ride the Wild Surf.*” He walked away singing, “*Little Surfer Girl*” and seemed proud of himself. I walked up to the front of our headquarters, used my P-38 and opened a pound cake c-ration.

Big Ed found me and said, “Hey, surfer, wanna see a picture of my wife?” As I looked up at his six-foot three, two-hundred and thirty pound frame I said a silent prayer asking that she would look like *Tami Terrell* or *Diana Ross*. He smiled and pulled out a picture.

I said, “She looks like *Florence Larue* from the *Fifth Dimension*; she’s a fox, sure enough”. Ed looked at me and said, smiling,

“You know soul?”

“I know the Tempting Temps.”

“Bull, white boy. Name one of ‘em!”

“David, Eddie, Melvin, Otis, and Paul Melvin’s my man.”

“Well, mother bumper—we got us a Chuck that knows soul. Just roll me up and fry me in butter!”

He laughed at his own joke, so I decided to ask him a question.

*Photo: Practice fire fighting,
George AFB.*



“Ed, why doesn’t anyone here like me?” I had been here for almost a month and had no friends, ate alone, and wasn’t included in any off duty activities. I even went to the airmen’s club alone a few times. And the surfer boy thing was a mystery to me—I couldn’t surf—I didn’t even like to swim that much.

Ed looked at me and shook his head and said. “Surfer you know why! you’re Kurt Napper’s replacement. We got word that you were just like him and you both came from California. We all hated him. He was lazy... mistreated his crew... was a bad dude, and a no good for nothing. One night during a mortar attack, he took a dump in the bunker and two guys

stepped in it.

When Napper saw your name on the incoming list of replacement troops, a few weeks before he rotated back to the states, he told us all that we were getting rid of him but you were worse and you were his best friend back at George AFB."

Photo: Sgt Larry Eley 'Surfer' on Line Standby for the Night Shift, 1969.



Well now things were getting clearer. Napper had lied to make me look bad to these guys, and he had done so because he and I had trouble at George AFB. "Ed, wait a minute. I'm from a small farming community in Ohio, I don't surf, and I hated Napper! Everybody at George AFB hated him. Two summers ago we had a fist-fight on Line-Stand by; I would have killed him if Airman Docker hadn't stopped me."

Big Ed stopped in his tracks and said, "Tell me the story—but it better be good, Chuck, or I'm done with ya!"

So I told Ed the story: We were on line-standby on a hot Mojave Desert August afternoon—it was a hundred and twelve in the shade. It was me, Docker, Sgt. Kendall and Napper and he was the crew chief.

Napper kept passing gas, and every time he did he would say, "There's something for you three to smell—how do you like it?" and "Don't get out of the truck or I'll write you up." He even told the driver, Sgt Kendall, to turn the truck on and turn up the heater and said it would make men out of us.

I couldn't take it anymore. More than the odor, it was his general disrespect for all of us. So I got out and Napper told me to get back in the truck and eat his gas. I said, "Napper, why don't you go behind a Joshua tree and take a dump and spare all of us your bad Mexican meal from last night?"

Out of the truck he flew and punched me on the right side of my face. Napper came in wind-milling at me again, so I stepped to the side, blocked his next punch, grabbed his right arm, spun him around and with a judo-move sat him on his butt—hard. I rolled Napper on his back, grabbed his surfer hair and jumped on him.

Sgt Kendall yelled, "Kill him, Eley ... *he hit you first!* Kill him!" Docker was beside me, shouting, "Don't, Eley, you'll be court martialed! Don't do it." So I drew my fist up to

Napper's nose and said, "Pretty boy, I could smash you like a bug and you couldn't do a thing." I did not want to give up and I thought about pummeling him again. At that point Docker was pulling me off Napper.

Docker had a half a foot and about forty pounds on me. He put his arm around me and walked-me away from Napper, who was still sitting on his butt. "Eley let it go ... Napper has connections; his old man's a big wig in L.A. somewhere. You can't win ... let it go man, he's headed for Nam—let it go." Docker then said, "Oh, and by the way man—you got a huge shiner on your left eye."

"Yeah, but he's on his butt not me, Docker."

Later, I agreed to say I hit my head on the door of the truck, because Napper said he'd leave me alone for the rest of the time he was at George AFB.

When I got back to the station, Harold said to me, "Eli—you didn't get into it with some gal out at the Branding Iron last night, did you?"

Matteo took another view: "Hey Buster Brown who hit ya? I want to know." He was slamming one fist into the other when he said it.

I finished telling Big Ed the entire story, even the part about my friends reactions just to let him know that no one had liked Napper. By now Ed was laughing so hard that he was starting to choke. He would try to talk then he would snort and say, "So Napper's on the ground and you really punch his pretty little face! Haa hooho hee haa ha. Okay surfer, I'll spread the word to the brothers that you ain't like Napper, and I'll tell Kastner to tell the Chucks." Anyone who fought Napper is all right with me!"

Ed looked at me and then asked, "Hey, what's your name, anyway?"

"Larry."

He extended a hand, about the size of Montana, and we shook hands. Then he said, "You got to learn to do a better shake."

At that point Booby Brown reappeared and said, "Hey surfer, top wants you." That meant Sgt Mosley. "Get going surfer—your probably in trouble again so get on your surf board."

It turned out Master Sergeant Mosley wanted to ask me what I knew about the Phantom. When I told him I had been at George AFB he smiled. "You know the Phantom then, right, Sgt Eley?"

"Yes. Sgt Mosley I know it very well."

"Good I haven't had a chance to talk to you much other than the chewing out I gave you a

week ago when we had the mix up on patrol assignments—so Welcome to Vietnam.” He gave me a big grin and went on to say he hoped there were no hard feelings. I said there were no hard feelings, thanked him and then he dismissed me.

For six hours I made the rounds on scat patrol that night, first driving through the rows of Aussie Caribous being readied and loaded for the next day when they would take supplies and troops to outlying bases. Then I went through the three squadrons of F4-Cs. Some were being repaired and some were being loaded with fuel and armament for tomorrow’s bomb runs.

I found myself wishing that my whole shift at George had rotated to Nam like units did in WW2. But in the Nam, most guys came and went individually. I found myself missing my friends Harold and Matteo. Vietnam wasn’t like those old movies where everyone are buddies. I wondered if this was what it was going to be like for the next year. But Big Ed had said he would spread the word, so I guess I’d just wait it out.

Still making rounds, and last, but not least, I went down to the alert pad where six Phantoms set waiting for instant deployment to help infantry troops in need of air cover. There were two F-4’s loaded with napalm, two with cluster bombs and sidewinder missiles, and two with a load of seven-fifties. Some had Vulcan cannons underneath, as the C model did not have the inboard Gatling gun.

I cruised slowly around the pad and started out toward the crash tower. The reason I had to go down there was to keep the tower aware of the armament on the alert aircraft. We did this in case of emergencies so we knew what they were loaded with. A crashed aircraft is dangerous enough, but different armaments present different problems.

A staff sergeant waived me to a halt. “Are you *new* in country?”

“Yes, sergeant.” He wearily took his helmet off and said, “Stay out from the front of the aircraft, okay? Those two right there are ready to go at five minute notice ... and we don’t have time to scrape an FNG out from under a Phantom.”

“Okay, sarge sorry,” I replied. I felt stupid; I had been around the Phantom for two years at George, and I had just made a newbie’s mistake.

“Hey, wait a minute.” The sergeant said as he reached into a box and brought out a cold Coke, which he handed to me. “We chill them with CO2 fire extinguishers,” he laughed and waved me off.

On my way back to the Caribous, I went along the barbed wire perimeter and saw white flares coming down from the sky. I had been told that “White is all right—*red, you’re dead.*” All along the perimeter, I could see them floating down. Out across the bay, I saw red tracers .. probably from a fifty caliber. I could also see Sampan in the bay.

Finally, at 4:55 am, I went back to the base station to wake up my replacement, Sergeant Black, a soul brother from Detroit. He was hard to wake up, and a week ago I had got him up and he fell back asleep—the result being that no one was on patrol for two hours.

That's when Master Sergeant Mosley called us both in and read me the riot act. Black got up and cursed me, the world, and everyone in general. When I was sure that he was gone, I curled up for an hour's sleep before dawn.

As I started to drift to sleep, I heard two F4's start to take off. About ten seconds passed and then I heard one abort the takeoff, and there was a grinding and squealing high-pitched sound. The alarm went off and tower came on the intercom: "*We got an F-4 crashed on takeoff on the runway—down and on fire. Be aware: loaded with cluster bombs, sidewinders and a Vulcan cannon.*" Everyone sprang into action, and I ran to my assigned vehicle, the 530 B, and started it.

Sergeant *Laurel and Hardy* demanded, "Where do you think you're going? We are not assigned to line! Somebody has got to stay here—we *ain't going anywhere.*" I looked at him, and told him that we had to go, that we had a Phantom down.

"Hold on, *surfer boy.* Don't be in a hurry to die." I looked at him with contempt, which he walked away from. He and Bobby Brown were yakking it up near the back of the truck while I climbed in. Bobby was pointing to me and grinning. Then over the radio I heard Sergeant Mosley order all available men and rescue vehicles to the scene. I started the 530 B and rolled at *Laurel and Hardy's* okay.

Out into the dark we rolled. In the distance, I can see the burning F-4. Crash-3 was already fighting the fire, and I could see three men in fire gear walking through flames and broken airplane-parts to try and get to the cockpit and rescue the pilots.

"That's Kastner and big Ed," I said. From the back of the truck I hear Crewman Hall yell, "Hey, surfer! There're bombs all over the ground! We just drove over two, so slow down." The 530 had a high clearance and bombs weren't armed 'till the plane was in the air, so I wasn't worrying too much, although I wasn't sure what would happen if I drove directly over a cluster bomb. I could see the Phantom had lost most of its ordnance.

Laurel and Hardy told me to stop about one hundred feet away. I look at him and he says, "Stop now—*that's an order.*" From where I am, I can feel the heat—and something looks *funny*: there are no canopies on the plane. If the pilot and weapons officer are unconscious in a crashed-plane, then typically the canopies are still on. The three *fire-gear* figures are working their way up towards the cockpit. I am *chomping at the bit* to gear up and join them.

I look behind me and see a white light about a thousand feet away. It goes by us so closely I can feel it, and moving so fast I can't see it clearly. When the plane crashed, it had lost some of its ordnance, including one of the heat-seeking sidewinder missiles, which found a mark—*its own aircraft.*

The three fire fighters go down and one does not climb back up—the whole plane is engulfed in a monstrous explosion. I look at *Laurel and Hardy*, and he tells me to stand fast. Over the radio comes the operations flight officer: "All rescue personnel withdraw ... withdraw... pilots have been found—withdraw—that's an order. Pilots were not in the plane!

Photo: Remains of USAF F-4C, in dump area, 28 Jan 1969.



All the rescue personnel and vehicles group up and withdraw making sure no one was left behind. Back at the base, we stand down. We later came to find out the F-4 plane flamed out on take off and did a pitch roll to the left. The two pilots ejected, the plane in a roll —going into the ground approximately fifty feet below them. Both were pilots were killed.

We lost our squad sergeant due to major injuries fighting the fire, and he was evacuated to Japan.

Time may have claimed the squad sergeant's name, but everyone present will always remember the tribute the men paid him. Our squad Sgt was being sent to Japan badly injured. We all went to see him off on the C141, and they actually held the flight up for us. All crash equipment lined the runway with nozzles up and men outside saluting as the Starlifter roared by on takeoff and soared away. I have no idea what happened to him after he left. No one ever said another thing about him ... the war just carried us onward in the aftermath of Tet 1969.

THOMAS GUY BURGE

CAPT -03 - Air Force - Reserve

Length of service 2 years

His tour began on Mar 21, 1968

Casualty was on Jan 28, 1969

In KHANH HOA, SOUTH VIETNAM

NON-HOSTILE, FIXED WING - PILOT

AIR LOSS, CRASH ON LAND

Body was recovered

Panel 33W - Line 5

JOHN S ANDERSON RICHARD ARANN OWALD BRYAN JACKSON BARNES SAMUEL BOSENBARK
WILLARD CLEMMONS JAMES H DUNN III DUANE K HEISER JOHN C REILLY
RUSSEL E HUPE VAN J JOYCE STEVEN L MARTIN DOUGLAS F MOORE SHARON ANN LANE
EDWIN F SHOLAR DOUGLAS M SMITH WALTER R STACY THEODORE V THOMAN JOHN P WRIGHT
DENNIS J BRAULT THOMAS E CAMPBELL JAMES P CASEY ALFONSO R CASTRO FREDDIE H CHASE
CHUBBY D LOWREY JONATHAN V ROBERT WILLIAMS ANNIE R GRAHAM

ROBERT JOHN CAME

MAJ - O4 - Air Force - Regular

Length of service 16 years

His tour began on Apr 5, 1968

Casualty was on Jan 28, 1969

In KHANH HOA, SOUTH VIETNAM

NON-HOSTILE, FIXED WING - CREW

AIR LOSS, CRASH ON LAND

Body was recovered

Panel 33W - Line 6

From: Courtesy of the 12th TFW Association

Read [12th TFW Association Coin Letter](#) to Larry Eley



The accident took place on 27 January 1969 [*casualty database date: 28 Jan 1969*] according to Hobson's book [Chris Hobson's book Vietnam Air Losses, the definitive history on US aircraft losses in Vietnam]. Two F-4 departed at 0630 hours on a fraged mission--still dark outside. The first aircraft on T/O blew a tire, became uncontrollable, struck the runway barrier equipment, ripped off the left landing gear, toppled over and slewed into the sand. Upon initial impact with the barrier housing, the force set off the rear ejection sequence and ejected the GIB while the aircraft was sliding on its left side; he was KIA [LOD] with an undeployed parachute. The pilot's body [LOD] was

found 40 feet from the burning wreckage with parachute pack deployed, but the nylon canopy was still unfurled. Major Robert Cameron and GIB Capt. Thomas G. Burge both listed KIA [LOD].

While firefighters attacked the blaze, the burning inferno cooked-off a Sparrow missile that shot out from beneath the aircraft; a guidance-fin sliced off, by traumatic amputation, the right arm of a firefighter. An HH-43D Pedro retrieved the injured man for 12th Hospital ER delivery, and later air-evaced to Japan. I have his name somewhere.

The takeoff crash closed down the main runway, forcing cancellation of sixteen F-4C fraged missions, not to mention all the C-130 flights and out-country air traffic bringing in troops.

From: [Larry Eley](#)

Don, thank you for this information!. I agree with most of it except the *sparrow* part. The missile came from west-to-east and hit the aircraft I'm sure of that [as] I was in the path of the Sparrow or Sidewinder and in the millionth-of-a-second it took to come down the runway I thought I was s going to die. I was as close to it as it was possible to be without being in its path. I'm not disputing the historian -- believe me, I am in awe of all of this coming back -- but I was there [and] I know. Please tell the historian to send me the name of the crash rescue man, our Sergeant, who was injured. Thanks SO much for what you do. Thank you.
Larry T. Eley

From: [Dave Maltzan](#), LM 592, CRB 1968-1969

Don - I have an entry in my diary on the F-4. Now let me preface this to say that some of the things I have written are not the same as what others have remembered. But enclosed is my entry for January 28, 1969:

"An F4C exploded on take off. Saw the sky turn red then heard the explosion. Went to see if we (the QRT)[this would be Echo team] could find the pilot that ejected out. While looking we suddenly saw a mushroom type cloud of smoke and a boom. I kept thinking of the people that might have been in the area. EOD last night exploded the remaining bombs and armament. Far as I know the pilots are dead."

Don't know if this will give you any more insight into the incident or not.

Welcome Home,
Dave Maltzan, LM 592, CRB 1968-1969

From: [Don Poss](#)

Gents: Thank you all so much for replying to requests for information. With a little luck we will soon have the name of the injured sergeant who was evacuated to Japan. It would be great if Larry Eley and those he is in contact with could discover where he lives and let him know he was not forgotten by them! Don Poss

Cam Ranh Bay Air Base, RVN 28 January 1969
[Report of the crash of Fabulous Phantom Down](#)
Takeoff Tragedy Compiled by Norman Malayney
[12th Tactical fighter Wing Historian]

[Check out Don Poss' Book Review of Larry Eley's new Book](#)
[I Never Learned to Dance](#)