

VIETNAM

ONE NIGHT ON LINE STANDBY

Cam Ranh Bay Air Base, SVN

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"Crash 2 Crash 2, we have an emergency, we have an F-4 coming in with battle damage. Right gear not down--not sure about the nose gear--three hung 750's. She's wearing a pistol (Vulcan Cannon)."

One Night on Line Standby

In Late November of 1969, I had about forty-one days left on my tour of Vietnam. I was stationed at Cam Ranh Bay AB, along the central coast of Vietnam, and was a 57150 crew chief on a crash rescue crew.

At Cam Ranh Bay AB, we provided *Rescue* for Air Force and Navy planes, and Army helicopters in our area. The last three months I had been at North Station. There was another station we simply called South Station a mile away. It was larger and had more men and equipment.

I was senior crew chief at both stations due to my time in country; I was also second in command at North station which meant I had the responsibility of assigning someone to burn the latrine waste with diesel fuel every day. The best part about the job was pulling two separate shifts of 6 hour line standby alert for first response on the runway.

I had come a long way in the ten and a half months I had been here. I recently had been called in to be notified I was to be promoted to Staff Sgt. In a moment of 21 year old stupid brilliance I turned it down.

I did it for two reasons, (1) I wasn't going to stay in the service, (2) you didn't have to pull line if you were an E-5. I was determined to see my tour through to the end, provided I wasn't killed or wounded in a mortar and rocket attack, or killed or injured in a rescue attempt.

I had pulled midnight line our last several duty days so I was happy that night to see Sgt Elliot's crew had midnight shift. I was sitting out by my beloved Crash 2 rescue truck listening to the sound of a droning C-130 taxiing out. The alarm horn went off and the radio announced we had a B-52 coming in on emergency. Warning lights were going off in the cockpit and they didn't want to try for Guam where they were stationed.

B-52's were not kept in country because of the danger to them so I figure this must be serious. We responded and the Big Ugly Fellow landed with no problem. We followed it to a secluded place and it shut its 8 big Pratt and Whitney's down.

Almost instantly it was surrounded by a caravan of blue maintenance and flight line vehicles, including a small group of Air /Security Police. Among the S.P.'s there I saw one of my basic training roommates. He acknowledged me by tipping the barrel of his M-16 up, and then went on with positioning his troops around our guest.

I stayed for a while marveling at the big plane. Why anyone would call them BUFF or [big] ugly [fat fellows] was a mystery to me. It was beautiful. Everyone there knew the V.C. would probably have a go at her with mortars or rockets tonight. The rumor was they got a ten thousand Piaster reward if they could damage or destroy it.

We T.A.C. boys didn't get to see a 52 very often, and this had only happened once before in my tour and there had been a mortar attack.

Back at north station Scat four had just got back from the army chow hall with food. The army had just lately started feeding us and because of this we were eating much better than our Station 1 cohorts who were eating Air force chow.

After some SOS, powdered eggs and something called a fritter, I decided to sack out. Even though I did not have line, a night seldom went by when we did not have emergency responses. I laid down on a couple of boxes and pulled my poncho over myself.

Within fifteen minutes I heard, "Come on *Ellery* get up--your crew's got midnight line tonight."

'Come on Sarge--it ain't me--it's *Elliot*."

"No it's not *Ellery*--*Elliot* went on sick call--you got line!" he replied.

From where I was lying on some crates I tried to focus on the short, fat little Sergeant. My name for him was *Sgt Third Trimester* because he looked like he was pregnant. He was not a bad guy, but he could not remember my name even though I was second in command and senior crew chief of both stations.

In spite of that, I liked him, and though he had only recently arrived he tried to act fatherly to all of us, and was a career Staff Sergeant. He only had two more years till he had his twenty in, and then on to retirement.

Just that day he had given me the *reenlistment talk*. "*Ellery*, in two years I will be fishin' and fooling around--you my boy will be working your hind-end off somewhere." Then he said, "*Ellery*, I heard you turned Staff down--tell me it's not true son."

But for now he was all business: "Go Go GO *Ellery*--get out there and take all your gear--we are expecting some crap tonight because of the 52. GO!"

I muttered under my breath, "*I am going you little pregnant duck*."

"What's that *Ellery*?"

"Uh I am going to the truck."

"Let's go Horton," I said to tall Ed Thornton, my driver. I was glad Ed Thornton was my driver--he was compulsively deliberate but very dependable. When we checked Crash 2 out I told him to roll.

Over the Radio I heard Harpo. "Crash 2 where are you?" He is singing this like the old Car 54 TV song.

"Is that you Harpo?" I asked

Harpo, AKA Kevin Paddock, is a southern California boy. When he first got here he would not talk so we dubbed him Harpo. Now eight months later he is a main-cog in the wheel of guys that hang out together when off duty. He is always smiling and never has a bad word for anyone.

He came back on. "Yeah where are you guys?"

"Are you and Horton running off to be *M. M.M. Married*?" He is now singing this like the Brooklyn Bridge's song about getting married.

Tall Ed looks at me and says, "Why does he call me Horton?"

"My name is *Thornton*--Edward Allen Thornton."

"Cause he likes you, *Duffus*--that's why," I respond.

I key the mike again and say, "Harpo, if I had known it was you I would have brought some SOS. But I don't want to hear any of Manor's Country Carl Music like Porter Wagon Wheel."

'It ain't manor--it's *King*."

"King? King of what--the cowboys?" I asked.

Over the radio came Sgt King. "Eley don't act so *white* you know I ain't no cowboy--I am The King of Soul."

"I thought you were from Texas, King."

We now have some real good night time radio-banter going and both of us are enjoying it. "The only pony I am going to ever ride is a 289 Mustang when I am out of here."

King is a big soul-brother from Dallas. He recently found out his father is ill and it is weighing heavy on

him.

"Eley you owe me a beer the next time we go to the Airmen's Club, and don't stand your skinny white behind in front of the Thailand dancing girls."

Harpo came back on and said. "All we got at south station is some Spam in a big camouflaged can."

"Sounds good, Harpo."

After we positioned ourselves I told crash 4 they were relieved, then I got out and looked up north. Four Hueys were thumping off toward Nha Trang.

I then yelled to Ed, "Hey big guy--I bet if we take mortar or rocket fire tonight Spooky will come down from Nha Trang!"

True to his exacting nature Ed said, "You mean the AC-47 Gun Ship?"

"Yeah Ed--that's what I meant--yeah."

I can see his face and it looks like he has scored a major victory over something or someone.

"Ed, who is in the tower tonight?" I asked.

"It's O'Hara." He told me.

"Good--he will look out for us and he is funny as hell when it gets late at night."

I told Ed to check the radio. "Tower, Crash 2, radio check."

Over the air comes the voice of Kevin O'Hara, an Irishman's Irishman from Pittsfield Massachusetts. He is as good a tower radio-man as you can be. When he is serious, he has a finely-tuned cadence and delivery. When he is goofing-off, he is hilarious. He is also one of the cogs in our group known as "The Rockers" and we are not hippies, we just like *Rock and Roll*.

"Eels--is that you?"

"Yeah, me and big Ed." Ed straightened up at the sound of a better nickname.

"Hey you dumb Leprechaun, what's going on?"

"Nothing--Nothing at all."

"What about the *Strata Fortress* over there Kevin?"

"Your guess as good as mine "

"Hey you guys want to hear some *Radio Saigon*?"

At that time a third voice came on the air. "Proper radio conversation only--*that's an order*."

I respond quickly, "Yes Sgt Mosley." Master Sgt Mosley is our Squad and shift leader.

In a moment the radio keyed again. "Scat 2 to Crash 2--radio check."

"Is that you Lester?"

Lester Rheume came on and said, "10-4 it's me--what's up crash?" Lester is from New Hampshire, he also is in our group of friends. When you got to Nam you are lucky if you can find a group of guys you can trust when your life is on the line. Lester, Kevin, Harpo, Big Ed, Sgt King are these kinds of guys.

I respond, "Nothing Lester, just waiting to see what *Victor Charles* is going to do about the big ugly fellow spending the night with us."

He then asked if I meant Ed.

After I laughed I told him I meant the "52."

"Hey Lester--why don't you fix Ed up Tomorrow night at the Airmen's Club?"

Once again Sgt Mosley comes on the radio and tells us to only use the radio for military purposes.

At about 2:15 I pick up the radio and say, "41." It is a way to express your time in days left in country. Immediately it sets off: "22--Lifer!" "4--Lifer!"

All kinds of radio-gibberish starts now. One guy says he is being surrounded by Red Cross *Donut Dolly's* and is being dragged of into the bush. Another claims *Raquel Welch* is in the bunker with him.

I decide to make small talk with Ed. "Hey Ed."

"Yeah."

"You don't have to sit there at attention."

"I don't mind."

I reach into a rucksack behind me and pull out two candy bars and offer him one.

"Thanks Sgt Eley."

"Hey Ed--you got a girl back home?"

I can see him get red faced.

"Uh Yeah. I am writing to a girl who was a sophomore when I was a senior in High school."

"Great Ed.' At that time two F4's come out of the alert Pad and get ready to take off. When they go by us they have their afterburners lit and are lifting off.

Ed says "Someone's in a hurry."

"Sgt Eley."

"Yes Ed."

"Do you think when you rotate home in six weeks that I will be the crew chief of Crash 2? I am sewing on the third stripe on January 1."

"Congratulations Ed, but no, you won't be crew chief because I am taking Crash 2 home with me in a C-124."

Ed looks at me and says, "No you're not--don't BS me," then he laughs.

I like Ed. He is very serious but knows the truck and the rescue procedure and will make a fine crew chief.

At 3:15 Sgt Mosley comes on the radio and very quietly asks me how many aircraft have taken off in the last hour. I know he is trying to catch me sleeping.

"Ah two flights of F-4's, three C-130's, a Navy P-2, and a flying Boxcar," I respond.

Ed adds quickly--"*And a partridge in a pear tree.*"

Mosley comes back on immediately, "Don't mess with me, *Eley*--I mean it."

To try and stay awake I am daydreaming about the strawberry blonde flight nurse I saw today helping wounded board a C-141. She actually smiled. Then for some reason I think about Mrs. Cowsill of *The Singing Cowsills* ([Monday Monday](#)). I saw her in "Stars and Stripes" She actually looked good. I shake my head and mutter, "*Man I been here too long.*"

At 3:51 I call O'Hara for a time check. "O'Hara, tower time check, this is 2."

There is no answer, instead a full minute of *Credence Clearwater* ([Bad Moon Rising](#), [Woodstock 1969](#)) plays on the radio.

Then a a reply: "3:52, are you awake? What could we do to make your stay in Vietnam Better?"

It is raining now, *when is it not raining on Nam?*

"Ah, cheerleaders would help; cause "Date with Diane" ain't getting it anymore."

He comes back on trying not to laugh and says, "Hey when we're off duty I know a great little restaurant back on base...it's called, *Che Resturante La Chow hall* and I hear it serves great cuisine."

In five minutes he comes back on the air. "Crash 2 Crash 2 we have an emergency, we have an F-4 coming in with battle damage. Right gear not down--not sure about the nose gear--three hung 750's. She's wearing a pistol (Vulcan Cannon)." He is in that sing song cadence he uses when he is serious.

Ed has Crash 2 started. I respond with, "10-4 tower, Crash 2 acknowledges."

"Take our approach position Ed."

In two minutes I see landing lights. "That's our girl, Ed."

50,000 plus pounds of fighter jet, depending on ordnance and fuel, goes by at 130 knots I see the determined pilot staring straight ahead--he is about to make the landing of his life. The back-seater, or Weapons Officer, steals a glance sideways at us. They both look amazingly calm. I have my locator light on so they know where I am.

We are rolling and we can't keep up with the F-4's course, but even in the dark I can tell where she is because of the sparks from her two gear landing spotlighting her.

"Watch for debris Ed, She may spin, Damn that guy is good."

Then she starts to veer badly to the off side. Sgt Mosley comes on, "Do you see her Eley, do you see her?"

"Yes Sergeant. She is down--still sliding."

"Get to her Crash 2, get to her."

I can hear O'Hara giving instructions to the other trucks that are responding from the south and north. I tell Ed we have good backup coming but till they get here we are on our own.

"Approach her from the side Ed, watch for spilled ordnance, we don't want a repeat of last January."

The Phantom has come to a stop in a low depression type area. Ed positions us perfectly.

Harpo comes on and says. "2--is there fire?"

Amazingly there is no fire with this landing. As we have been rolling I am geared up in fire-fighting gear. From the north I see Crash 6 coming--it's Trimester.

I say to Ed, "Hope he doesn't stop to fish on the way."

I jump out and run toward the plane--immediately Mosley is there in the R-Deuce. The young pilot is fowled in his webbing and it looks like his chute is tangled on something. The weapons officer is trying to untangle him. Sgt Mosley goes and takes care of the pilot. I jump up in the Phantom and *safety* her and begin a check off of issues. Then I look up and Sgt Mosley is there with me, gold teeth shining and saying *good job Eley*.

We are soaked from the rain as we climb down. Sgt Mosley says to make a check underneath for fuel leaks or fluid, or spilled ordnance. EOD arrives along with others.

I see Lester and Manors truck, and Harpo and King--they are ready to *rock and roll* if something happens. The young Captain comes over and thanks Sgt Mosley and nods to me. I look at him and think he can't be 25 years old. "Good landing, Sir," I say.

Trimester runs over and says, "*Ellery* you did that just like I told you to, your going to be a great lifer."

Under my breath I say, "*Thanks Friar Tuck*."

"What Ellery?"

"Ah, weather not fit for a duck Sarge. He beams back at me.

Harpo and Lester have their trucks ready to go. Harpo leans way out and says, "Is this where I place my Order."

I snap a salute off to them and go back to Crash 2. O'Hara is on the radio talking to Mosley telling him

there will be no flying till the runway has been checked for damage and debris. We go back on line anyway as we have not been relieved. Trimester will stay with Airman Mason and Crash 6 on site in case anything happens.

When we are back on line I say to Ed, "Good job Airman Thornton." He sits in his seat and puts his feet up on the dash. I reach in my rucksack and bring out two pound-cakes C-rations and hand him one. We attack them with a P-38 opener..

"Hey Sergeant--you got any Ham and Lima Bean C-rations in there?" Then he smiles and says, "Just kidding."

I pick up the radio and call Harpo and say one word, "Spam."

Ed is playing with his radio listing to some station up in mainland China, and I suggest radio Saigon aka Armed Forces Radio. He turns it on and we hear, "GOOOOOD Morning Vietnam-- here is [Oliver with Good Morning Star Shine.](#)"

Ed says," Well I guess Victor Charles didn't want to deal with Spooky last night--we didn't have any trouble on account of the 52.

I look at him and say, "Spooky, Ed? Don't you mean the AC-47 Gunship?"

He laughs and says, "Naaahh."

I offer, "Maybe Charles didn't want to deal with our SP's. They looked like they meant business last night, and Charles would have had a warm welcome if he had came calling with Satchel Charges."

That was 43 years ago. On the weekend of August 3, 2012, Kevin Paddock, Kevin O'Hara, and Larry Eley reunited for the first time since Nam, at the [Dublin Ohio Irish Festival.](#)

Kevin O'Hara is an author and was a featured guest at the festival. He lives with his wife Belita in Pittsfield Massachusetts.

Kevin Paddock lives with his wife Lori in Colorado He is retired from many years as a Civilian Government Fire Captain.

Larry Eley lives with his wife Vikki on their small farm in Howard Ohio; he is a state Building Inspector.

[Check out Don Poss' Book Review of Larry Eley's new Book](#)

[I Never Learned to Dance](#)



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