

**To Die Alone,**  
"In the Pursuit of Justice"  
by Jackie R. Kays,  
Barnes & Noble

A Book Review by  
Don Poss,  
VSPA Webmaster, LM 37, and  
Communications Director

*To Die Alone* can be purchased at: [Barnes & Noble](#) and/or any other on-line bookstore. It can also, be ordered at any in-line bookstore, by using the title and/or ISBN # 978-1-84728-161-0.

★★★★ I have just finished reading Jackie Kay's "To Die Alone," and I have to tell you it is a MUST read action packed story of United States Air Force law enforcement, and Air Police combat in Vietnam. The following is my book review for your consideration:

"To Die Alone, In the Pursuit of Justice," by Jackie R. Kays, Barnes & Noble."

– Đà Nẵng Air Base was a dangerous place in 1965-1966. Mortars were like raindrops, and official documents reported only the major storms and not the countless squalls of mortars and rockets. Stateside's security *silly-games* fell quickly by the wayside, as going home in a box with your name on it was a real possibility. At Rocket City Đà Nẵng Air Base, storms were frequent and squalls within earshot a daily fact of life and death: like the heat and the stench. Mortars, rockets, aircraft and raindrops regularly fell from the sky. Battle damaged aircraft landings were routine, as was that newborn Sunday monsoon-morn at 0130 hours, 21 November 1965.

SSgt Jackie Kays knew well anything could happen at Đà Nẵng, but never suspected the mortally wounded Flare Kicker C-123, on short final landing in hurricane winds and rain, was on its last Candlestick-flight -- *its last flight ever* -- the pilot fighting desperately to make the runway. Jackie was moments away from *willingly* running through the densely packed minefield of the base perimeter, and climbing through wreckage in search of survivors.

Background: "Death Valley" in Vietnam is a familiar name, but few realize it was only 20 miles south of Đà Nẵng Air Base. The Special Forces base camp set up at Hiep Duc Valley, in 1965, was much like the fated French base at Điện Biên Phủ, 1953, or undefeated US Khe Sanh, 1968. A small hamlet and a Special Forces camp, situated about 5 miles inland from the beach. Like a hallway, the SF camp was on the floor with 2,000 foot walls of jungle-hills running the entire distance. The US did not know it in 1965, but the hallway was considered a natural corridor of the Hồ Chí Minh Trail for supplies and troops--and they were not about to give it up.

The VC and NVA took to the hilltops, and regularly shot at, mortared, rocketed the SF camp. They also noticed flare ships often flew the corridor from the beach, and set up a deadly surprise -- several quad .50 cal anti-aircraft guns.

On November 21, 1965, a C-123 took flight from Đà Nẵng Air Base with a makeshift crew of volunteers, in a raging monsoon storm. I know--I was there patrolling along the runway with my sentry dog, Blackie. The Hiep Duc SF camp was in imminent danger of being overrun, with rescue forces on the ground being mauled. The remaining rescue force said they would be forced to turn back unless the Air Force Candlestick flare ship remained overhead.

The C-123 flew the corridor hallway westbound from the beach, at altitude below hilltops on both sides, skipping in and out of the fierce clouds. Hurricane-like winds swept rain horizontally,

like pellets. The C-123 fought the enemy, monsoon, and turbulent winds churning and roiling through the canyons like a tsunami of boulders.

The flare kicker would fire a string of flares only to have them swept violently away by the storm. A 360 degree turn was nearly impossible: hilltops obscured by the blackest of night and severest weather, but Americans were dying and wounded, and their survival meant a figure-eight pattern would have to be maintained as long as possible.

The C-123 was using fuel at a phenomenal rate, and staying on station until another flare ship arrived was a decision the pilot called upon all crewmembers to vote on. One more round was their fateful unanimous vote. Into that hourglass pattern they flew once more, over flying the SF camp and the desperate fight for life below, and directly over the neck of the hourglass into the cross-hairs of enemy quad .50s on both sides of the hills.

The Viet Cong/NVA quad .50s' crews could not see the flare ship, nor hear it, due to the storm. All they could see were evidence of its passing: meteor-like flares streaking through illuminated clouds, then wind-swept far away. Experience told them where the aircraft *should be*, but with the raging winds it was impossible to know for sure. Nevertheless, for the first time, the anti-aircraft guns fired into the night in search of a firefly.

The C-123 pilot suddenly noticed they were losing fuel. Had they been hit? A run for Đà Nẵng was imperative. Fighting a crosswind, he struggled with controls, air turbulence tossing the two-engine aircraft give or take 200 feet up or down. The pilot could see the Air Base strobe lights, but he knew that Đà Nẵng only had the one active runway, with the second still under construction.

There were villages and hamlets below, but the black earth merged with the black storm without distinction. The Air Base looked like an aircraft carrier bobbing in a black churning cauldron--sea ready to reach up and smite them, or fall away into an abyss.

On short final approach, the monsoon lifted the C-123 like an autumn leaf in a hurricane, and flung it violently off course for landing. Only 400 pounds of fuel remaining, but they had no choice but to go around for landing--*We're not going to make it*, the pilot feared.

Precious minutes passed, until once more they aligned for landing from south toward north. Their aircraft felt like an eight ball with giants violently rocking the billiard table, as they approached the runway. The pilot, begged, pleaded, prayed, willed the aircraft to stay airborne another half mile, another twenty seconds to safety, when suddenly--both engines quit. The crew to a man knew they were going down in an area the VC loved to snipe at landing aircraft, and if they crashed short of the runway—into the world's heaviest no-man-zone minefield.

The shot up C-123 slammed into the clay earth so hard its wheels ripped off, the engines tore away careening across the minefield like flat rocks on a lake of fire. The fuselage broke in to five large chunks of jagged-twisted metal, each plowing deep furrows through exploding land mines and trip flares. How anyone could live through such total devastation was a true miracle! Wounded crew were tossed helter-skelter in a large section of the twisted broken fuselage. Broken men and live million-candlepower Mark 185 parachute flares lay partially submerged in JP-4 fuel. The pounding rain muffled their screams of agony.

Jackie realized death was imminent by fire, snipers, sappers, or exploding mines in the scarred wake of debris. No one would fault him for waiting arrival of the crash trucks. His *gut churning fear* was not for self, but being able to pull the crew from the mangled aircraft in time -- *if only he could make it through the minefield*.

*Surreal* was the tragic scene as Jackie looked back across the mine field at arriving crash trucks, a hundred yards away. The runway's blue lights danced reflections in his muddy boot prints, and rotating red lights strobed the interior of the aircraft, like a Halloween fun night. Rain pelted the side of the twisted fuselage like hail, as he called out to the crew.

Such was Đà Nẵng, where the absurd was normal and the macabre a daily event....

Without giving the story away, Jackie Kays was medevaced, medically discharged, and began a long law enforcement career in California. He didn't know it then, but *in the pursuit of justice*, his combat days were just beginning, and a known murderer was out to kill him.

**To Die Alone: Read it when you are ready to lose sleep!**

Footnote: Hiep Duc Valley proved to be a Valley of Death for both sides for the duration of the war.

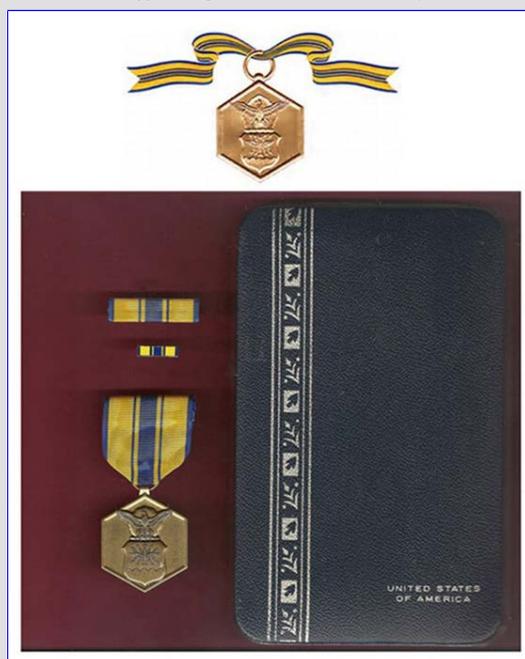
*A privilege I have had these many years is knowing Jackie Kays, and reading his Vietnam war poetry and books.*

*We served together at Đà Nẵng Air Base, Vietnam, in 1965. I remember him well as a no nonsense takes care of the troops Staff Sergeant, awaiting promotion to Tech Sergeant. One of the good guys. If you've ever seen the pickup trucks driving around town with those big brass ones swinging from the trailer-hitch, then know that Jackie had the genuine original pair.*

*Don Poss,  
VSPA Webmaster*

*In December of 2015, just pass the Fiftieth Year anniversary of Jackie Kays Heroic, life-saving, and military career-ending Actions, Jackie wrote that his door bell rang and a Congressional Representative presented him a letter from Congressman Sam Graves, and the Air Force Commendation Medal.*

*Air Force Commendation Medal  
Has Been Awarded To  
Staff Sergeant Jackie R. Kays*



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