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ST. ELMO'S FIRE



SNAKE AND NAPE: A-37 MISSION OVER CAMBODIA

Steve Brandt

In late April 1970, President Richard Nixon announced that U.S. forces would make an incursion into Cambodia for a 30-day period. At the time of the announcement, I had been “in country” for 157 days and had completed 110 sorties flying A-37s with the 604th Special Operations Squadron (SOS), nicknamed the “Raps.” We flew close air support for the 25th Infantry Division, the 11th Armored Cavalry Division, and the 1st Cavalry Division. The 604th SOS was part of the 3rd TAC Air Wing at Bien Hoa Air Base, Republic of Vietnam (RVN).

Our first inkling of the incursion was the arrival of a Jolly Green Giant gunship helicopter and A-1Es. In early May the incursion was underway. The mission load increased markedly. After the announced 30-day period, we slowed down for a few days. Then everything changed. We began to fly missions deep into Cambodia. We flew to Phnom Penh, Kompong Cham, Kompong Than, Kratie, and nearly everywhere in between.

The three squadrons of the 3rd were comprised of young officers. We had 1st lieutenants with a half year in country leading two-ship formations with slightly younger wingmen. Two-ship formations were the norm.



The author with his A-37 at England AFB, Louisiana.

A typical load of ordnance was “Snake and Nape,” four 500-pound Mark 82 bombs with “Snake Eye” fins on the lead aircraft and four 500-pound cans of napalm on the second (number 2) aircraft. The advantage of Snake Eyes over slick Mark 82s was that the deployment of the Snake Eye fins would retard the flight path of the bomb as it dropped. If done right, the bomb would be perpendicular to the ground when it hit, sending out a circular frag pattern. Consequently, we could deliver much closer to the ground, and at a nearly flat dive angle, without being fragged by our own shrapnel. When the forward air controller (FAC) cleared us “in hot,” the A-37 lead would deliver a single Mark 82 on the enemy to kill as many as possible just before the second aircraft came in with a single can of napalm to burn whomever was left. Typically, we delivered one weapon per pass to maximize coverage of the enemy.

There were a few pre-planned sorties every day. After approval of a pre-planned strike made its way up and down the chain of both the American and RVN chains of command, it seemed highly unlikely that any of the enemy was left within miles of the strike site. We generally had four, two-ship flights around the clock, positioned and ready on our alert pad: 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.; 4 p.m. to 12 p.m.; and 12 midnight to 8 a.m. Though the call sign of the 604th was “Raps,” off the alert pad, everybody was a “Hawk.” On a normal day, we had Hawks 1 through 8 on the alert pad.

The vast majority of our missions off the alert pad were “troops in contact” (TIC). The opportunity to help our Army counterparts was why we were there. Any day we could help our guys improve their chances of going home safe and sound made the rest of the days tolerable. I suspect every member of the squadron had the experience I had early in country, when we arrived at the site of an ambush and saw body bags laid out and occupied. Somewhere back in the U.S. was a mother, father, brother, sister, wife, daughter, or son who did not yet know that their life had been changed forever.

By mid June the growth in the sorties flown into Cambodia was reflected in the fact that it was not



F-100 dropping a Mark 82 "Snakeye" bomb. Note how the deployed fins cause enough drag to slow the bomb, thereby allowing the low-flying attacking aircraft to avoid damage from the resulting bomb blast.

uncommon to have additional aircraft on alert with the Hawks on the alert pad. Call signs often ran 1 through 14. On Wednesday, June 14, 1970, I was sitting alert in the 604th SOS Squadron building as Hawk 13 with my wingman Hawk 14. We had loads of "Snake and Nape" on our assigned A-37 aircraft.

With us on alert that day were two other pilots. One of them was Steve Mish (lead) and Russ Voris (his wingman). I had a project underway to take black and white pictures of every member of the squadron. I got Mish's picture, but then they were scrambled and I never got Voris's picture.

Shortly thereafter we were scrambled. We ran to the aircraft and started the engines as we put on our parachute, shoulder harness, and seat belt. We called the command post for instructions as to where we would meet the FAC. We were headed north-northwest 80 nautical miles to a place called Snuol in the province of Kratie, Cambodia. As scrambling aircraft we had priority over all other aircraft and soon found ourselves on the runway, running up engines and checking gauges. With our weapons and a full load of fuel, our little birds weighed approximately 12,000 pounds. With this heavy load taking off on a hot humid day, we turned off the air conditioning to ensure we had every bit of thrust our little bird could muster.

We took off singly and headed north-northwest. My wingman joined on me quickly, and after a check of each other's aircraft I fishtailed, the signal for him to drop back in trail formation. As we went through 10,000 feet, we turned our air conditioning back on. We climbed up to

25,000 feet, our maximum altitude since we were not pressurized, and started to fly over a hilly area covered by broken clouds.

As we approached the target area, we were to call the FAC—radio call sign Rash 17—who was flying an OV-10. We made radio contact and established visual contact. He was circling above the clouds near the intended target and gave us a briefing. Our target was an enemy (NVA) position on high ground on a hill that constituted the dead end of a box canyon. They were shooting mortars and large and small arms down the hill at some of our Army troops. I never learned exactly who the Army guys were. Rumor had it that there were a number of "Black Ops" personnel that stayed in Cambodia after the end of the 30-day incursion to harass the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It didn't matter who they were, they were our guys and they were under attack.

Rash 17 explained that while the business end of the canyon was under a solid cloud cover, there was an opening in the clouds approximately three kilometers to the north. We followed the FAC to the opening. He dove down under the overcast. We followed. As he approached the target, he began firing his 7.62mm machine guns. We followed suit in hopes of keeping the enemy's heads down while we surveyed the target site.

After a brief look, we all pulled up through the clouds to the sunshine. Rash 17 asked if we were prepared to attack. I was confident that my wingman could drop his napalm without blowing himself out of the sky, as I might with my bombs. I was less confident that the Snake Eyes would work in this situation. We had to work under a 700- to 800-foot overcast, which was on the low side for dropping my ordnance, as they needed time to arm. I decided to make one pass. I cautioned my wingman about the problem presented by the terrain: often when diving the aircraft, it is easy to get fixated on the target only to find yourself below the tree tops when you drop your load. (I spoke from recent experience, having tried to throw napalm cans into a cave on the side of Nui Ba Dinh [Black Virgin] Mountain near Tay Ninh City.)

We headed north to the entry point. The FAC went in first and asked us to follow when he had reacquired the target and was ready to mark it with a "Willy Pete" (white phosphorus) rocket. We rolled into the hole in the clouds and headed south. We found Rash 17 in a tight circle. He fired his rocket, and told us to hit it and cleared us "in hot." I was first. I skirted the bottom of the clouds



to get as high as possible so the fuse would have as much time as possible to arm. Ground fire started, light and inaccurate. I dropped one Mark 82 and pulled up hard looking for the protection of the clouds. As I cleared the clouds, my wingman reported he was coming up through the clouds. He found me quickly and pulled into trail formation. I reported to Rash 17 that we were headed back down through the opening.

Three more times we went into the hole and turned south. Each time Rash was there in a tight turn, hosing down the bad guys to protect us. We fired our 7.62 mm Gatling gun in hopes it would discourage the bad guys. We were getting secondary explosions, indicating we had found some of the mortars and other explosives the bad guys had brought. On the last pass, we dropped the rest of our ordnance, and Rash 17 followed us back up through the clouds. He contacted the Army guys and reported that it appeared the attack had been broken. Later on we learned the enemy had left and the Army guys were extracted.



A-37 on a mission over Cambodia, hitting sanctuaries.

As we climbed out, we heard a broadcast over the Guard channel about an aircraft down near Kratie. I heard enough of the conversation to know it was a Hawk in trouble, but I didn't know who. I turned in that direction and inquired if we could be of assistance. But my wingman reported that he was near "bingo" fuel—the level at which we were required to return to base—and we were told our help was not needed.

Finally we turned to the southeast to return to Bien

Hoa. We climbed above 25,000 feet and shut down one engine to conserve fuel. We were authorized to take both steps if we were low on fuel but were not required to declare an emergency. The trip back to Bien Hoa was uneventful. We each had somewhere between 300–400 pounds of fuel when we landed. When the A-37 was that light, it did not want to land.

When we returned to the squadron building, we learned that Russ Voris had died—he was the Hawk that went down. He and Mish had been attacking a suspected anti-aircraft gun site approximately 20 nautical miles from where we were operating. Russ was hit on his second pass. He ejected but his chute did not open. The A-37 retained T-37 ejection seats which required 100 feet of altitude and 100 knots of speed. Russ probably had the speed, but not the altitude. His body was recovered by an Army helicopter and flown to Tay Ninh City.

That night I had command post duty. During a break I walked down to the intelligence office. They had pictures of Russ's airplane and him lying on a dusty road near Kratie, Cambodia. I went to my room in the 604th hooch when I got off duty. I made an entry in my diary, sent my love to my wife and daughter, and thanked God that it wasn't my turn. It is a fool's errand to try to fathom how war selects who to injure or kill. It just wasn't my turn. 🌟

Stephen ("Steve") Brandt was graduated from Bowling Green State University in June 1968 and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the USAF. Brandt started pilot training at Laughlin AFB, TX shortly after July 4, 1968. He graduated from pilot training a year later and was assigned to England AFB, LA for transition training in the A-37. After his return from Vietnam, he transitioned to KC-135 tanker aircraft and finished his active duty obligation at Westover

AFB, MA. After leaving active duty, he joined an Air Reserve unit at Youngstown Municipal Airport, OH flying the A-37 again. In the fall of 1973 he began law school at The Ohio State University. He graduated in December 1975 and passed the February 1976 Ohio Bar exam. He has practiced law in Ohio since then. He and Jeanne have a daughter, Gretchen, and two sons, Christian and Wilfred. Steve and Jeanne recently returned from a two-week excursion through Vietnam and Cambodia.

The Air Force awarded Brandt the Distinguished Flying Cross for this mission.