

Sleeping on the Job

Have you ever been ‘bone tired’? I mean so tired that not only were your eyes drooping, you felt like your bones were too.

When flying in Southeast Asia (SEA) on 4.5–5.0 hour-long Forward Air Controller (FAC) missions in an OV-10 Bronco, you got tired. When you flew two such missions on the same day (what we called a ‘double-bang’), you would get really tired. When you flew three or four double-bangs over four or five days, you got bone tired!

In the summer of 1973, the Khmer Rouge (Communist forces in Cambodia) were trying to bring about the fall of Phnom Penh, the capitol city of Cambodia; we called it Papa-Papa. If they were successful, it would likely mean the collapse of the government.

To counter this pressure, we FACs of the 23rd Tactical Air Support Squadron (callsigns ‘Nails’ and ‘Rustics’) were flying our Broncos along the Lines of Communication (LOCs) leading into Papa-Papa. The military defines LOCs as “A route, either land, water, and/or air, that connects an operating military force with a base of operations and along which supplies and military forces move.”

We FACs directed airstrikes against enemy emplacements providing protective cover along the LOCs leading to Papa-Papa. This provided safe passage for the convoys that kept the citizens of Papa-Papa and the forces protecting them fed, fueled, and armed.



View from the backseat of an OV-10 looking at a tug minus its barge, cut loose after enemy gunners set it on fire causing the ammo on-board to ‘cook off’. The smaller craft are Patrol Boat, Riverine (PBR) – armed Khmer Navy gunboats escorting convoys along the Mekong River.

As the Khmer Rouge tightened their ‘noose’ around Papa-Papa, we had FACs operating in very close proximity to one another. However, with two FACs working along the same LOC with one controlling fighter aircraft attacking targets on one side of that LOC while, at the same time and only a short distance away, another FAC was controlling additional fighters bombing targets on the opposite side, things could get complicated. For instance, both FACs would have to restrict the attack headings the fighters used as well as the direction in which they pulled off of the target after dropping their bombs. We had to make certain they didn’t cross the LOC along which we were operating.

It was decided that we should put two FACs in each airplane, a guy in the front seat (the GIF) and a guy in the back seat (the GIB). Each Guy had specific tasks using two of the five radios with which our Broncos were equipped. The GIF would coordinate with the convoy commander on #1 of the two VHF/FM radios and direct the fighters on the UHF radio as they dropped their ordnance. Meanwhile, the GIB coordinated with nearby FACs on the #2 VHF/FM radio and made requests for additional fighters with the Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center (A-B-TripleC – an EC-130 with a battle staff onboard) using the VHF/AM radio. When not too busy, we tuned the HF radio to either Radio Australia or the BBC for background music as we worked; “*Whistle while you work!....*”

The GIF controlled the frequencies to which our five radios were tuned, but both Guys had a control panel in their respective cockpit to control the volume of each radio. To select the radio on which they would transmit, they each had a circular wafer switch located on the console aft of their throttles. Rotating the wafer switch counter-clockwise, the UHF radio was the first stop with the VHF/FM-1 radio next; then came the VHF/FM-2 radio, the VHF/AM radio, and finally, the HF radio. Both Guys used their left thumb to press a spring-loaded toggle switch on the #2 engine throttle in their respective cockpit upward to transmit over the radio selected by their wafer switch.

Both Guys could monitor all the radios, but we normally kept the volume buttons turned down on the two radios we weren’t primarily using. That way, if someone started yelling to the GIF on the UHF radio, the GIB could quickly turn up the volume to find out what all the excitement was about.

This arrangement made the intercom (IC) between the GIFs and the GIBs an essential part of the equation. The OV-10 was a noisy airplane and we never flew with a ‘hot mic’. Instead, thumbing that throttle mounted toggle switch downward enabled the Guys to speak on IC, thus allowing them to coordinate what each was doing and to keep each other informed as to what was happening on their respective radios.



Bombing an enemy position while escorting a river convoy coming upriver from the right.

Double-bangs normally began with an early launch (takeoffs after 9:00 AM were a 'late go') from our squadron's forward operating location at Ubon Royal Thai Air Base (UBP); the Rustics home station. After our first mission, we would land at Papa-Papa (PNH) mid to late-morning to refuel and rearm our trusty steeds and grab a bite to eat. We would then launch to cover another stretch of the LOCs assigned to us by the ABCCC.

One day, 'Rowdy' (a Rustic FAC) and I flew a 'double-bang' mission. We were both weary from earlier 'double-bangs' in the preceding days, but we were also young and 'bulletproof', or so we believed! I was the GIF on the first mission and Rowdy was the GIB as we supported a convoy coming up the Mekong River. We directed several airstrikes on enemy positions attacking the convoy. As we neared the end of our mission, we were relieved by some other Guys and headed to Papa-Papa for a break.

After lunch and a much too brief 'siesta' in the shade, we got airborne with Rowdy as the GIF and me as the GIB. We returned to supporting the convoy coming upstream on the Mekong. The afternoon sortie was routine as we again directed airstrikes against enemy attacks on the convoy.

When we reached ‘Bingo’ fuel (the minimum needed to get home safely) we briefed the Guys relieving us and headed back to Thailand. Flying northward, we cleaned the canopy on which we had used grease pencils to scribble information about those airstrikes we had controlled. It all had to be briefed to Intelligence when we got home, so we copied it down and then erased it from the canopy; the information would become classified because it updated the ‘order of battle’.

As we cleaned up our mess, we climbed to 10,000 feet MSL to get into cooler air (Broncos are unpressurized with no air conditioning); it also got us mostly out of the way of other airstrikes. Once we leveled off, Rowdy announced, “Bud, I’m pooped – you fly while I catch a quick nap.” He trimmed up the airplane (in the Bronco’s back seat, there was only a stick with no trim button) and made me the PIC.

I responded, “Before you ZZZ-out, how about tuning the HF to the BBC?” Rowdy quickly dialed in a frequency we all knew and then told me he was locking his shoulder harness so he wouldn’t lean into the stick.

The music that came into my headset was what I would call ‘Dinner Music’ as it reminded me of an orchestra playing soft music in the dining room of a fancy hotel. As tired as I was, I would have preferred Rossini’s “William Tell Overture”, but figured dinner will soon be over and I’ll get some livelier music.

Rowdy got quiet really quick leaving me to point the airplane roughly north while waiting to pick up the TACAN signal at Ubon. With few nav-aids available to us over most of SEA, we FACs were good at dead reckoning and also very familiar with the local landmarks.

As I cruised along listening to the music playing on the radio over the drone of our twin turboprops, thoughts of a cold beer (or two) over dinner were on my mind. I was also watching the cumulus clouds building in the tropical afternoon as the ‘Dinner Music’ continued, and... . . . ***I suddenly awoke with a start!***

WAIT! ***I’m supposed to be flying, not sleeping! Where am I? Where am I going?*** I checked the instruments and saw I was now heading west at 10,500 feet. I glanced around and knew exactly where I was, so I turned back to a northerly heading.

“**OK!**” I told myself, **“I NEED TO STAY AWAKE!!!!!!”** I started by punching off the HF button; I didn’t need any more ‘Dinner Music’ or I might be missing dinner while floating in a life raft in the Gulf of Thailand after we run out of gas and have to bail out!

I can do this, I thought; I just need to not be droning along! I decided to follow my T-37 IP's advice, 'If you're bored with boring holes in the sky, then do Snoopy Flips!' My version of Snoopy Flips was to begin climbing up the clouds I encountered and, when I topped them, I would roll nearly inverted and fly back down their back side. My idea was to make this a roller coaster ride and to do it so that I never touched a cloud. This was fun, I thought, and I'm going to try and be smooth enough that I won't wake Rowdy up.

Things were going fine for the first four or five clouds as I easily topped them and flew down the back sides; Rowdy never stirred. However, as I topped yet another one and began my roll across the top, the UHF radio burst to life as someone, somewhere yelled on Guard channel (243.0), "**SAM! SAM! Take it down!!!!**" I don't know where this call originated, but we were in an area where Surface to Air Missiles (SAMs) didn't operate; however, my heart still skipped a beat (or two!).

This was a common radio transmission in SEA whenever the enemy launched a SAM trying to shoot down an airplane. 'Taking it down' was a tactic used where we would roll into the direction from which the SAM was coming in an attempt to out-maneuver it. SAMs had small wings and our goal was to make the SAM try such a tight turn that it would either tumble or else not make the corner and miss us. It was a gamble and the timing was especially critical, but it worked when flown correctly.

To say the least, Rowdy was no longer asleep! He was awakened by someone screaming about SAMs on the radio as I was rolling inverted and pulling the nose downhill. He grabbed for the stick while I yelled on IC, "Everything is OK!" But he wasn't having any of it. Grabbing the stick and rolling quickly left and then right, he determined I was right – there was no SAM.

Now we were both wide awake, so we continued homeward dropping down to buzz some water buffaloes we encountered along the way. After landing, we debriefed and grabbed a cold beer (or two).

I never again fell asleep on the job!