

Night Train to Bangkok - Cates
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The war in Laos was all but over in the spring of 1974 and I had been in Udorn a full five years. The furniture was packed and gone. Lucette and the kids had left a week before and were vacationing in Spain. I had accepted employment in Taiwan and would leave tonight on the train to Bangkok.

I could have gone back to Saigon, but opted to leave Air America. I could sense the whole thing was over, but couldn't escape the feeling that it wasn't time to leave. Last minute details kept reminding me of past events and memories flooded my mind.

I was hot, sweaty, dirty and tired and only half finished with digging a large hole in the back yard. Old Dollar was our family pet and watchdog. We couldn't take him to Taipei and tried desperately to find him a home, but big Great Danes that didn't like anyone outside of the immediate family were hard to place. A local car dealership wanted him as a guard dog, but Dollar did not like any of them and I knew his life would be miserable. The alternative was to put him to sleep and the family left the task with me. As it turned out, the local vet could not get near him to administer the lethal dose. Dollar would have none of that. So, I had to do it myself while telling him gently that everything was going to be OK. He had complete trust in me and died in my arms.

Now, I was in the process of burying him in the back yard...a perfectly good dog that wanted nothing more than to be left alone with his family. I felt like shit. He also required a big hole and I rested often leaning on the shovel while staring down at his lifeless body wondering why I felt like the bad guy when it was his disposition that caused all this.

Then a memory event was triggered and I laughed involuntarily. It wasn't funny at the time. Charlie Basham lived in the same compound. I often made homemade ice cream from strawberries I got from missionaries on the Boleven Plateau and was in the process of finishing up when Charlie walked into the house. Dollar raised his head and I looked at him, but Charlie didn't pay him any attention and most dogs will not be bothered unless they sense danger. Charlie had just got a big spoon full in his mouth when a smaller dog we had barked for some reason.

In a blink of an eye Dollar was up and had his fangs sunk in Charlie's face. Great Danes are not smart. I hope that doesn't offend anyone, but it's the truth. They react on instinct. Dollar sensed danger and reacted. Charlie never moved a muscle. He just looked that dog right in the eye and continued chewing. There are not too many people who can stare eye to eye with a large dog with his fangs puncturing his face and remain unnerved. I was stunned...along with the dog. The only one who was calm was Charlie. Dollar backed off whimpering and Charlie finished off the ice cream.

"Charlie" I choked out. "I'll get my gun and shoot the damn dog right now."

"Wait ten days." Charlie said.

"What?" I didn't know what he meant at first, and then realized...rabies! Charlie wanted to make sure the dog didn't have rabies.

Charlie walked out telling me it was pretty good ice cream. After ten days Charlie told me not to shoot the dog. The fang marks had almost healed and Charlie recognized that Lucette and the kids depended on Dollar for safety when I was up country.

That memory kind of helped me with the task and I kept on digging, but before long I was out of breath and started thinking about the strawberries and the Boleven Plateau.

Not long after arriving in Udorn I had been designated an instructor pilot in the H-34 for those who were just arriving new, or from Saigon. I was teamed up on this hitch in Pakse with Link Luckett. Link had been in Saigon flying the Bell and was actually senior to me, but he was checking out in the H-34 and we were doing some line training.

Link was more than just senior to me at Air America. Link probably forgot more about helicopter flying that I ever learned. One of his accomplishments was the rescue of some mountain climbers near the 18,000-foot level of Mt. McKinley with a normally aspirated helicopter. No small feat! Link was awarded the Carnegie Silver Medal for his heroic effort. (You can read his story at <http://www.plums.com/db/chf/press.asp?id=45130>>) He was also awarded the Frederick L. Feinberg Award in 1961. This award is presented to the helicopter pilot(s) who accomplished the most outstanding achievement during the preceding calendar year. The award consists of a stipend (\$200), the engraving of the recipient's name on a plaque, and an individual plaque. This award honors the memory of an outstanding helicopter test pilot and an exemplary person.

Well, here I was showing him how to fly a H-34, which was redundant. However, like most good pilots, Link was also a good student. We were working out of PS-22 supplying food, water and hard rice to the several outposts on the Plateau when we heard on guard that an A-7 Corsair had been shot down just off the Plateau. The single pilot was in the process of escaping and evading some highly pissed off people that he had been bombing the shit out of before they knocked him down. Two A-1 Sky Raiders were discussing the situation and I came up on guard and asked if we could assist.

They told me they were waiting for a Jolly Green coming from Vietnam, but asked if we could stick around in case they needed something done right away.

I asked for the location and knew immediately his survival depended on him being moved immediately. He was in a bad place and he was not well liked.

"Hey!" I said. "Either get him out now or there won't be anything to get."

They agreed and we briefed in the air a few miles from the spot he was thought to be hiding. We had contact with the pilot on the ground and he reported a lot of activity all around him. I intended to make a high speed descent to tree level, instruct him to pop his smoke, and make a fast stop right over his head. We couldn't land...there were too many trees. So, we had to hoist him up and I told him how we were going to do it. I then asked the two Sky Raiders if they would strafe on either side of me as I picked him up and as we departed.

They agreed and down we went with the Sky Raiders right along beside me. I was using a high-speed autorotation decent and half way down I called for the smoke. It was red and billowing in the trees and I knew that if I could see it, so could the bad guys.

We were in the tree line now and moving as fast as a H-34 can go at about 120 knots. Ground fire sounds like popcorn cooking in the next room in a helicopter with a 1525 HP Wright Cyclone at max power roaring in your ear, and it was heavy.

The Sky Raiders were unleashing everything they had and were jabbering loudly to each other. I should have placed them on another frequency, but I wanted to keep contact with both them and the downed pilot.

"Hold it down guys!" I can't hear the survivor." I yelled.

"OK Mister." "Do your thing." They yelled back.

I was over the smoke now and did a high speed stop right on the mark, but I couldn't see the pilot. I turned in a hover looking for him and Link was calmly telling me to keep it in to the wind. The Flight mechanic was busy dropping the hoist and then I spotted him and stopped dead still in a hover so he could get into the hoist.

I could hear the popcorn and I had the wheels in the trees trying to get as low as I could and hoping like hell I didn't catch a tail rotor. Link was scanning the area looking for bad guys and we both knew our time was limited.

"Tell me when he's aboard." We got to get out of here." I yelled to the flight Mechanic.

"He's on board." "Haul Ass!"

I moved out of the hover while keeping the wheels in the trees with 50 inches of manifold pressure and the turns pulled down to 2650 for best lift over drag...a trick that either Ed Rudolphs or John Fonburg taught me. The bad guys knew we had captured their mark and were pouring on the firepower. The two A-1's were dropping everything they had along side and the black smoke from spent ordnance was heavy.

Wham!!

"We're hit!" I yelled out. We couldn't stay down at tree level. Our only choice was to climb out of trouble. I had been hit before, but this sounded like big stuff. It really rocked the helicopter. The H-34 descends fast, but climbs painfully slow. It's especially slow when someone is shooting at you.

"Climb you son of a bitch." I yelled out. I was looking for a cloud to hide in and the A-1's were making pass after pass to hold their heads down.

And then we were clear. I checked below and everybody was OK. We headed back to PS-22 in silence...escorted by the Sky Raiders. Without them we couldn't have made it.

Dutch, the CIA case officer for PS-22 met us at the helicopter when we landed. We asked the pilot where he was from and he spouted off his name, rank and serial number and we all laughed. I guess the civilian clothes were confusing to him.

The heat brought me back to reality and I was only half through with the hole.

"Dammit Dollar!" "Why couldn't you have been a cat?"

It was late and I needed to finish. I kept looking out into the compound hoping to see a "B" bus with a note telling me it wasn't really over and to saddle up and head north.

I finished the grave and stood silently for a while. I washed up, locked the house for the last time and went to the Charoen Hotel for dinner. A taxi took me to the station.

I kept telling myself that I shouldn't be depressed and that the type of life style all of us lived was not conducive to longevity. I had been flying in a combat zone almost continually since 1964. Wasn't it time to let it go?

"Get over it man!" "Its done and finished." "OK, I accept it. " I told myself.

Just as I boarded the train, I thought I heard a VW engine. Was that a "B" bus? No? It was the saddest trip I ever made on that train.