

A Jungle Survival Story

BY MIKE VIOLETTE

Long before EMC was his interest and, I daresay, his passion, Dad flew airplanes for a living. It was during an era unto its own. Norm had a load of stories and loved to tell them, throwing in an occasional embellishment. His flight training was in Big Springs, Texas “where elephants went to die,” as he would say. Four or so thousand hours of flight time included the fast and high kind of flying and low and slow kind. In either case, flying airplanes takes loads of preparation.

One of his stories was how he scored a cold beer during jungle survival training during Vietnam. Getting that cold pop in the middle of the night--in the middle of the jungle--had something to do with proper preparations, too.

But before we get to that, a bit more about planes. One of the planes my Dad liked to reminisce about was the F-106 Delta Dart and *when you kicked that afterburner, man did you go!* With a landing approach speed of 180 knots, it was a *fun plane to fly*.

Peruse airplane collections and designs from the late 50s and 60s and one finds a veritable box of chocolates of flying machines. Contrary to the Swiss Army-Knife approach of today’s procurement—witness the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter where a single design

concept forms a platform for all the services—the heydays of experimental airplane design gave birth to dozens of different birds of various breeding: engineering Darwinism.

Models such as the F-80, F-100 and their derivatives were rolled quickly through development and into (oftentimes brief) production. The pioneering designs that came out of the adolescent jet age demanded that designers and engineers bang together real hardware to be built, tested, proved (and crashed). Research into aerodynamics, propulsion and materials science leaned heavily on the trial and error method. Contrast this with today’s reliance on computer modeling and simulation to design complex airframes that give agility and stealth to multi-million dollar airplanes. No matter, whether on the test stand or in RAM, it’s all Real Engineering.

Lockheed-Martin’s Skunkworks has been a cradle of airplane design since the 1950s (and is the birthplace of the



F-106 © Peter Mancus 1976 / www.cloud9photography.us

remarkable still-flying U2, the *maybe* retired SR-71 Blackbird spy planes and, more recently, the F-35). Much of the material science for high-flying faster-than sound and radar invisibility came out of the sprawling complex near Palmdale, CA.

TIME IN SE ASIA

Anyway, Dad got checked out in a dozen or so airplanes (he told me once how many, but I forget). He spent much of his time driving a C-123 “Provider” supply plane during the Vietnam War, flying nine hundred and ninety-six takeoffs and landings (that number, I remember and it’s an even number) during that very turbulent year of 1968. He arrived a few weeks before the launch of the Tet Offensive *when all hell broke loose*, an attack that set the US back on its heels a bit. (When his year was up, he had a few more days to kill at Cam Ranh Bay; he told me that one of his buddies was making a couple of flights and would my Dad like to make it an even 1000. His reply was *not no, but hell no!*)

The C-123 was a two-engine prop job (low and slow) with a crew of three plus a loadmaster. Dad sat in the front left seat and *after a few hundred landings you knew when the wheels were inches above the runway. I could feel the ground through my seat.*

The loadmaster was positioned in the back with his headset trunked to the cockpit. His job was to drop the ramp and get rid of whatever they were delivering. Many airstrips (and the US operated out of hundreds of ‘aerodromes’ during our engagement there) were in non-too friendly places, so one didn’t dawdle. It was for this reason that the C-123 was fitted with auxiliary jet pods for short takeoff and landing operations.

Get down, unload and get out.

One time we set down at Khe Sanh, the wheels touched and we started our rollout to unload our cargo of jet fuel. The loadmaster dropped the door and suddenly there was a bunch of

*holy *@-! over the intercom.* Turns out, as the wheels hit, three mortars dropped in behind them, landing on the runway. *Wham! Wham! Wham! That was a close call.*

JUNGLE JUICE

Back to the beer: One of the rights of passage all aircrews going to Vietnam had to endure was a couple of weeks of jungle survival training—pretty critical knowledge if your plane suddenly can’t fly any more.

Survival training was conducted at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines, Dad’s first stop after leaving the States around Christmas ’67 at the ripe old age of thirty-three (well above the average age of infantry running around the paddies). In a letter back home to mom he related that *everyone is coming through here. Last night I ran into Tommy and Dick at the Officers Club.*

Clark AFB had some of the busiest air operations at the time and was



C-123 “Provider” photo by Dan Simonsen / Shutterstock.com

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operational until its lease ran out. Mount Pinatubo blew its stack and tons of ash all over the area in 1991. The US withdrew operations that year, but in June 2012 US forces returned to the area in response to China's attempt to claim territorial waters in the South China Sea. The base is located on the Philippine Island of Luzon. Local native peoples, the Kalinga, have the run of the jungle. **Friendly**s.

Training included survival and evasion and included instruction on what to eat, camouflage techniques and how to resist if captured.

As part of the 'final exam' Norm and two other guys were **left in the jungle with a parachute, a sidearm, a knife and some rations**, and their training.

They were also given five bucks.

After spreading out in tall grass each guy hunkered down within earshot of the others. It was a moonless night and they tried to **make ourselves invisible, using the training we just received**.

For a few hours it was quiet and my Dad settled off to sleep when he heard a rustling sound and the sound of metallic banging. Now, my Dad never handled a gun in my presence, but I gather that he had his service revolver out. The foliage shook.

A local Kalinga entrepreneur spread apart the fronds covering his hiding spot and peered in, smiling and holding up a sack.

"You want beer?" he asked. "Five dollars for you."

Ah, that's what the five bucks was for! Who could resist?

It was San Miguel beer and it was cold. Preparations pay off.

Fortunately, he survived the survival training and, more importantly for EMC and so many reasons, the war. **IN**

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Mike Violette started Washington Labs with Norm Violette in November 1989. **Italics** indicate quotes from Norm and should be regarded as 'faithful paraphrase' because I heard the stories several times. You get the idea (but any factual errors are mine).



(the author)

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