

Early in my career I was fortunate to learn from seasoned masters and brilliant practitioners, combat pilots willing to pass their wisdom and knowledge to those who would someday face the same challenges they themselves had survived. I was fortunate to observe such a master in "Real time" as he taught an enduring lesson by example, and with a surprising twist?

BACKGROUND:

In 1968 I was flying aerial surveillance and combat reconnaissance over southern Laos. My mission as a Forward Air Controller (FAC) was to interdict logistics traffic coursing the Ho Chi Minh Trail between North Vietnam and the battlefields of Cambodia and South Viet Nam. Politicians had decreed a temporary cease fire that limited combat operations on both sides of the conflict. In the absence of observable enemy activity it appeared that my mission would be a flight of futility, until I was awakened by a Fox Mike (FM) radio transmission. "Nail FAC in STREEL TIGER, come up voice!" I switched my command wafer to FM and responded, "Nail 213, go!" A flight of four A1-E/H Skyraider aircraft checked in, call sign SANDY. It was a "Cherry Flight" of four, with loiter time. Lead was requesting permission a free-fire target as training for his inexperienced wingmen. I responded "Roger Sandy Lead, Delta 45 in 0+10."

Route 93 was a primary highway through Laos and a major thoroughfare for truck traffic. It threaded past numerous small villages, bridges and support facilities, one of which was called Muong Phene. It was otherwise an inconspicuous village except that it was adjacent to a multi-span bridge that had once crossed a tributary to the Mekong River. Long since destroyed, only one span of the bridge was still visible and it was attached to a shore line abutment designated as "Delta-45." I arrived over the bridge with the SANDY flight orbiting above me and proceeded to mark the fallen bridge span with a White Phosphorous rocket. SANDY was "Cleared Hot."

After some lengthy time SANDY Lead discussed the attack process, procedures, and the techniques necessary to conduct a strike on the evident target. He then patiently continued his instruction with each of his wingmen hoping for some success as I gave each wingman repeated authorization to "Hit My Smoke." None were able to do so. Lead finally cleared his flight off-target to become observers, then patiently and carefully talked his wingmen through his own attack while expertly dropping his ordinance precisely in the center of the defiant bridge span.

As Lead cleared off target, however, our world—both his and mine--were shaken by the most horrendous explosion either of us had ever witnessed. The NVA had been transporting ammunition down the river at night and storing it beneath the collapsed bridge span! It was obvious the insurgents were confident no one would ever think to bomb such an unrewarding target? They were wrong! This singular **example** of professional airmanship left a lasting impression on me, and most certainly upon three newly minted Skyraider pilots.