

THE SAGA OF MISS ME

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There is that old saying that “History Repeats elf.” That certainly is true. In this case it is a bit odd kind of repetition.

Let’s start with World War II. On 11 April 1945:1st Lieutenant Merritt Duane Francies, Field Artillery, USA, and forward observer Lieutenant William S. Martin, 71st Armored Field Artillery Battalion, 5th Armored Division, were flying a Piper L-4H Grasshopper on a reconnaissance mission near Dannenberg, Germany. This was Francies’ 142nd combat mission.



In the photo is Lieutenant Merritt Duane Francies (left) and Lieutenant William S. Martin

The two airmen saw an enemy Fieseler Fi 156 *Storch* flying beneath them. The *Storch* was similar to the Grasshopper. Both were single engine, high-wing monoplanes with fixed landing gear. The *Storch* was larger and faster, but both airplanes had similar missions during the War. Francies put his L-4H into a dive and overtook the *Luftwaffe* airplane. Both American officers carried M1911 .45-caliber semi-automatic pistols, with which they fired on the Fieseler. Both officers emptied the 7-round magazines, then reloaded. The enemy airplane began to circle.

Lieutenant Francies approached again, coming to within an estimated 30 feet (9 meters) of the German airplane. Both opened fire again, striking the *Storch* in the windshield and in a fuel tank. It went into a spin, then crashed. Francies landed his airplane nearby.

The two German crewmen got out of the wrecked Fi 156 and tried to run, but the observer had been wounded in the foot. Lieutenant Martin fired a warning shot and the German pilot stopped, then surrendered.

The captured airmen were turned over to an American tank crew. Francies later said, "I never found out their names. They could have been important, for all I know. We turned them over to our tankers about 15 minutes later after the injured man thanked me many times for bandaging his foot. I think they thought we would shoot them."

Following the air-to-air battle with the Storch, Lieutenant Francies was recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross, 24 April 1945. Major General Walter Jensen, 14th Army Corps, presented the medal to him 22 years later, 13 March 1967.

I only found out about the "Rest of the Story" some fifty-five years later.

The only part of this story I knew back in 1967 was the part about the aircraft receiving the name of "Miss Me." Keep in mind that I entered the Air Force in 1958 and 1967 was the first time I really had my "own" aircraft, humble as she was.

During the Vietnam War the Bird Dog was used primarily for reconnaissance, target acquisition, artillery adjustment, radio relay, convoy escort and the forward air control of tactical aircraft, to include bombers operating in a tactical role.

The Cessna L-19/O-1 Bird Dog is a liaison and observation aircraft. It was the first all-metal fixed-wing aircraft ordered for and by the United States Army following the Army Air Forces' separation from it in 1947. The Bird Dog had a lengthy career in the U.S. military, as well as in other countries.

The L-19 received the name Bird Dog as a result of a contest held with Cessna employees to name the aircraft. The winning entry, submitted by Jack A. Swayze, was selected by a U.S. Army board. The name was chosen because the role of the army's new aircraft was to find the enemy and orbit overhead until artillery (or attack aircraft) could be brought to bear on the enemy.

While flying low and close to the battlefield, the pilot would observe the exploding shells and adjust the fire via his radios, in the manner of a bird dog (gun dog) used by game hunters.

During the course of the Vietnam War, 469 O-1 Bird Dogs were lost to all causes. The USAF lost 178, the USMC lost 7, and 284 were lost from the U.S. Army, RVNAF, and clandestine operators. Three Bird Dogs were lost to enemy hand-held surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). A total of 3,431 L-19 (O-1s) were built between 1950 and 1959.

Mine (well, for a time), was an O-1 and had a 235 horse-power Continental engine with a fixed pitch prop.

One day I remembered that name of the aircraft back during World War II and said something about it to Harry Collier, the crew chief who kept the aircraft in flying condition. He checked around and found a Vietnamese man who could paint it on the aircraft.

I wrote down in cursive, what I wanted painted on the aircraft. The man did a marvelous job. I do not recall how much I paid him, if anything. Needless to say, it got attention wherever I went.

It seemed like "Miss Me" and I became one. No matter how many bullet holes I managed to let the bad guy's punch in her she was always a staunch and reliable mount. As you have heard many pilots say before, I didn't feel like I got in "Miss Me" but that I "strapped her on."

By the way, the "Miss Me" painting on her cowl did not help a whole lot.

Part of my memories of Miss Me include those Vietnamese observers I had as back-seaters who not only got airsick and threw up all over the place, but some of them who had a strong mentholated salve they rubbed under their nose to keep from getting sick. Problem was, the salve smell made me nauseated!

And, of course, Miss Me, if you don't mind, let us talk about Quinine. Now Quinine is an extract from the bark of the cinchona tree and is indispensable in preventing malaria.

I vividly remember taking a big orangish/yellow pill called Quinine every Thursday morning. In gratitude I must say I never got malaria, but I repeatedly got a nasty side effect of diarrhea ... and I mean bigtime!

You never saw a movie where the hero pilot gets diarrhea during a combat flight; but this one did have that problem. Since I was the only FAC in the province, I could not take Thursday off.

I had to sit on the problem.... Literally. So, Miss Me, I apologize for all those bad and odiferous times. Yes, I remember that one day where I had to sit on the problem until it dried and then it came back again. I also vividly remember "Cowboy" the Vietnamese guy who would clean up the aircraft for a carton of cigarettes.

More than fifty years later I can still hear "Cowboy" holding his nose as I would get out of the aircraft, holding his nose and repeating, "O Dai Uy, O Dai Uy! (Oh Captain).

Leaving Vietnam not only left a remorse for leaving behind friends I knew I would never see again. I knew it and they knew it.

One of those friends was Miss Me. She (Miss Me) died along with Captain Francis Birchak in 1969.

