

REMEMBERING MY BROTHER, MILITARY SERVICE 1959 - 66

Bob Gilchrist, born Robert with no middle name, decided to correct this insult on entering the Academy. He offered his confirmation name Michael, and so with the protection of the archangel, patron of warriors, so it was thereafter. With the help of Providence, Bob survived the rigors of a four-year struggle to have a chance at being a fighter pilot. On graduation, the name Robert Michael Gilchrist was fourth from last on the program and Bob was seriously disappointed he was denied the honor of being the goat. Just the same, he was called Lieutenant and better, he had orders for pilot training.

The sleek T-38 Falcon was introduced to student pilots by early '62. Bob must have anticipated the satisfaction of a really hot training experience, but his class at Laughlin AFB, Del Rio, TX had an X behind the class designator, an x for experimental. It should have been R for "retro". Bob got a taste of history, flying the last T-birds to give wings to US airmen. His were awarded 2 Jul 64.

Now on to Davis- Monthan AFB and the F-4C Phantom – WHAT! NO GUN? How can a strutting, best in the West, no-gun fighter jock ever demand respect. Tail hook's cool, but no substitute for a gun. This will be fixed.

Bob accepted the humility of the back seat and navigator duties with more grace than anyone would have expected who understood his drive never to be second to anyone again, now that he was where destiny had taken him. His plan: best in the back is the fastest route to the front. He was serious, updating the nav computer and such with the frequency of the green GIB he was.

From DM to George AFB. As you approach George on the road, it suddenly breaks the desert horizon as something not really identifiable, but decidedly unnatural. As you close on this scene, you're sure you have discovered the training base for the colonization of the Moon or perhaps it is the Moon. The Academy had been fertile ground for meeting young women, and Bob meet an amazing number. Since graduation, Laughlin; DM and George seemed like an Air Force conspiracy to draft him into the isolation and life of a monk. However, fast cars, skill and daring brought San Antonio, Phoenix and LA a lot closer. Fast airplanes, skill and daring were about to bring Ubon Royal Thai Air Base a lot closer.

The 431st deployed TDY to Southeast Asia in flights accompanied by tankers. Bob was impressed and comforted by the nav assistance, but allowed that the inertial nav on the fighter was more than adequate. Did acknowledge that updates from the tanker while over the pond made the INS look good.

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Bob flew his first combat on 4 Sep 65 and began a mission diary in a 4"x 6" notebook. The first of two sorties read: "...First one was against a suspected truck rest camp on route 1, very near the coast. Hit target, but no visible damage since the area was infested with trees. No flak visible or reported by any other member of the flight (2+15)." That was a typical entry. The 2nd sortie (1+30) was far more exciting, but the notable item was that it was flown in the same area," southwest of Vinh". He reported that a fighter was lost near Thai Hoa that day.

On 23 Sep he records the downing of Lt Col Risner's Thud out of Korat. On 2 Oct he writes, "Very unusual day – all missions (all bases) RTB safely." Bob frequently salutes the Air Rescue Service, describing the nerve of the low and slow. Who remembers 5 Oct? Bob gives five pages to what he describes as the costly nightmare.

Somewhere along the way, Bob and his AC received a 2nd Air Division directed letter of reprimand from their squadron commander for taking out the wrong bridge. Bob's response, "It was an enemy bridge, wasn't it?"

After his 51st sortie, he writes: "1 Dec – took a trip to Saigon to see Jack (older brother). 2 Dec – VC blow up U.S. hotel – about 50 casualties." I didn't know he was coming. How he found me and penetrated the protection of Prime Minister and Air Marshall Nguyen Cao Key's compound and 422nd VNAF "palace guard" Fighter Squadron was typically Bob. What a great time we had.

Bob's last sortie of this deployment was number 56 on 17 Dec 65. Bob heads home to George AFB with a total of 300 hours in the Phantom. Brother Jack rotates in Feb 66 to the 41st Air Rescue Squadron at Hamilton AFB and the nav station in the HU-16B. Once again we and our sister, Carole Bassett, are all living in the same state.

Near his completion of upgrade to aircraft commander, in the summer of '66, Bob eyes a young lady dining with her parents at the O Club. He turns to a friend and announces, "I'm going to marry that girl." He then invites himself to join Lt Col Richard Cole, his wife and daughter Cindy, home between semesters at UCLA.

Bob is alerted to a welcomed PCS to Spangdalem AB, Germany with a catch: go as a GIB or take TDY enroute through Southeast Asia, complete 100 combat missions as an AC and report to Spandalem as an a AC. This is a no brainer for Bob.

Timing to these events uncertain, but one August morning I receive an 0-dark-30 phone call from Bob, speaking loudly, excitedly and announcing his intention to marry. I congratulate him, but question why I have been flattered to be told in my semi-conscious state. Then I find that he and Cindy are driving to my quarters at Hamilton and would arrive that afternoon. Bob would be departing for SEA from McCullen AFB by F-4 in a couple of days.

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After sunrise, I call my sister and brother-in-law (former AFA ATO) and invite them to a “meet the fiancé and farewell Bob” barbecue for that evening. Not much later I get a call from Col Cole. He is firm, polite and announces that he and Mrs. Cole will be no more than 2 hours behind Bob and Cindy. By the time the Colonel and Mrs. Cole arrive Bob has a room at the VOQ and Cindy is staying with us. It's 8 adults and 5 kids for dinner.

Well this was a hyper-memorable and late evening with emotions running high in all directions. The only feelings running south had to do with Bob's plan to marry Cindy in Thailand and have her stay on as a non-command sponsored dependent. Bad idea! Bob heard that in different strengths from everyone except Cindy. That included our parents on the phone, Dad and Bob winning the contest for most vociferous. Come morning I still didn't know how the wedding plan was going to play out.

My last conversation with Bob was with a stare in the eye and a hard swallow to voice the spiritual concerns we shared, but spoke of too infrequently. I challenged him to be prepared for death and he responded with assurances that made me glad I had spoken.

Ironically combat sortie 89 may have ended at the same target as sortie number 1. Bob and co-pilot Lt. Eugene Pabst flew wing in a 2 ship, night armed road recce and made a rocket attack against a truck park on the coastal highway 1 south of Vinh near Ba Don. Bob and Gene held to the north while lead expended all under his own flares before calling in number 2. Lead made a level flare pass while 2 called, “off the perch.” Lead saw a flash over his left shoulder, turned hard and saw a fire slick on the water. It was about 17 minutes after midnight 7 Oct 66 local. There had been no voice or signal transmissions since 2 initiated their attack. Lead was bingo on fuel almost immediately and returned to Ubon. No rescue effort other than alerting other strike and support missions over the next few days to guard for distress calls.

I went immediately to Littleton, Colorado to be with my parents. A day earlier Dad received a letter from Bob expressing the likelihood he would not return and asking Dad to use his indemnity to see that Cindy finished her degree at UCLA.

I went on to George AFB on the 9th and stayed with the Coles. Cindy and her parents were there as were her younger sister and brother. Cindy had received her Bangkok purchased engagement ring in the mail that morning. The wedding plan hadn't firmed up until after Bob departed the States. They were to be wed in Hawaii immediately after the 100th mission.

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I felt some obligation to counsel Cindy to move on with her life as the circumstances were not favorable for survival and Bob intended not to be taken alive. I opened that subject with her in front of her father, who had parachuted over China with Jimmy Doolittle's crew after the Tokyo Raid in which he was co-pilot on the lead aircraft from the USS Hornet. He listened to my plea silently and then recounted how later in WWII they were bombing Hanoi. A hit B-25 dropped out of formation and slammed into a hill and exploded, no chutes and no escaping the crash. Months later the crew hobbled into China.

Cindy then explained that she and Bob had anticipated all this. The families at George were all too well acquainted with such concerns. Bob had told Cindy he would not be taken, but to give him a year and then give him up. She gave him two.

Mrs. Cindy Chal is a UCLA alumna and mother of two boys, both of whom I believe have had military aviation experience. Her youngest son is Air Force Captain Nathan Cole, pilot and USAFA grad of 2006. Her father continues to be one of a handful of the still surviving Tokyo Raiders.

Thank you, Class of '63 for remembering Bob and his seventeen classmates who gave all they had in the service of our country during the Vietnam War. I miss him now as I did 47 years ago.

Jack Gilchrist, Lt Col USAF Ret 26 Aug 2013

The last shall be first.

