

Fred's Combat Mission over the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos –June 1967

By: Jimmie Butler

Fred Beauchemin's assignment to Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base (NKP) overlapped mine by about 4 1/2 months while he as a Civil Engineer working to expand the remote base into the surrounding jungle.

Here's a story I wrote in tribute to Fred about a unique FAC (Forward Air Controller) Mission in an O-1 in mid-June 1967. As I look back, I can think of only 1 mission by a single O-1 deep into Laos in my 8 months of flying O-1s at NKP. This is it. On regular combat missions over the Trail we always flew in pairs so one of us would probably be around to see where the other O-1 crashed or the parachute came down.

Thought some of you might enjoy learning about Fred's combat mission over the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

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This story dates back to mid-June 1967, when we both were assigned to Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai AFB, Thailand. Fred was completing his tour as a civil engineer for the 56th Air Commando Wing during a year when this small airbase in the jungles near Laos was expanding almost exponentially. Fred was extra busy, and so was I. I had flown nearly 100 combat missions since arriving in February and was the additional-duty squadron Administrative Officer nearly 30-40 hours per week. So we occasionally crossed paths but that was about it.

Fred contacted me on about 16 June. He told me he was leaving for home the following Monday but was the subject of a special request from 7th Air Force Headquarters in Saigon. Someone decided that perhaps if a USAF Civil Engineer got a look at the Ban Laboy Ford on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, he might have some ideas about being able to close the ford for longer than we were able to do with some heavy airstrikes. The Ban Laboy Ford was one of the 3 most important target complexes in Laos—and one of the most heavily defended during the dry season.

Fred's bosses had decided that Fred was the most qualified man to take that look. I don't know what level of choice he'd been given in consideration of him being very, very short as far as his time left at NKP and in SEA. Anyway, Fred told me he'd agreed to take the dangerous mission only if I was his pilot in one of our Squadron's O-1 Bird Dogs. I told him that was doable



*Figure 1 An unarmed Cessna O-1 Bird Dog flown over the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos by Forward Air Controllers of the 23rd Tactical Air Support Squadron.*

On Friday morning, 18 June 1967, Fred and I got aboard 857 and off we went in our O-1 Bird Dog, which had no real navigational equipment and was not designed to fly in the weather. Both of us knew if I didn't get him back safely, we'd be in trouble with Georgia.

The good news was that by mid-June, the Southwest Monsoon was taking over the weather over Thailand and Laos. So, we weren't going to be up against the full threat of anti-aircraft artillery around Ban Laboy. However, in June 1966 aircraft out of NKP had been shot down in that area by troops left behind when much of the ground forces had given up the road until about October 1966.

The bad news was that Fred and I were up against monsoon weather covering most of our route there and back. We spent most of our 3-hour-and-10-minute mission dodging clouds that were almost down to the ground. Besides being one of the most dangerous target areas, Ban Laboy and the border with North Vietnam were about 85-90 miles from the base in a single-engine Cessna that cruised at about 80.

Actually, we had a pretty good time getting there and back. Fred showed no misgivings or second-guessing his decision. We were out there to accomplish his mission.

Once we got to the ford, I increased my maneuvering some as I had learned on Day 1 not to fly more than 10-seconds in a straight line when over the high-threat sections of the Ho Chi Minh

Trail. After circling a few times to give Fred a good look, he made a request none of us Forward Air Controllers (FACs) had ever considered. Fred wanted me to fly him down the river.

Within a mile or so, we found what Fred was looking for. Laos has a lot of karst—limestone formations/mountains like you've seen in settings of some James Bond movies in Southeast Asia. Fred pointed out a section of the river flowing alongside a towering karst cliff. Fred's analysis based on his engineering expertise: If we directed airstrikes against the cliff, we could temporarily dam the Nam Ta Le River. The result should be a water level at the ford higher than trucks could cross until the NVA got enough explosives across a mile or so of virgin jungle to start breaking up the dam.

He gave 7th Air Force what they asked for. Sadly, the bureaucracy didn't see the opportunity for what it was, and his innovative solution disappeared into that bureaucracy.

I see this note in my log of that mission: Route 137. That's the designation for that road on the North Vietnam side of the border about 8 miles east of the ford. I guess I took Fred across the border so he could say that he'd flown into North Vietnam in an unarmed Cessna. Not many men could claim that who weren't regular aircrew members in SEA.

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Fred was very brave and dedicated to accept that mission in the first place. If he'd told them to find someone else, no one could really have faulted him for not choosing to go deep into enemy territory 3 days before the end of his tour. I had learned from Day 1 in February that anytime you crossed the Mekong River into Laos in a small, unarmed Cessna, you might not be back.

Fred's actions demonstrated, without a bunch of bravado, what kind of man, officer, and American patriot Fred was. Among Fred's many accomplishments in his very successful USAF career and years after retirement, that day was one of Fred's finest.

That will remain my most defining memory of Fred.

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At the reception after Fred's memorial service, Georgia gave me this photo from a USAFA Class Reunion many years ago. Fred and I are on the right side of the picture with my hand on Fred's shoulder.

