

ONE HUNDRED STINGERS

A NOVEL OF THE AIR WAR OVER
THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL

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EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 13:

THE EYE OF THE DOG

Dawn is the gunners' time. The thick tropical night hangs in the trees with the morning mist long after the sun rises over the South China Sea. Aircraft flying high overhead are bathed in the bright sunrays aloft while the jungle below remains deep in shadow. Easy targets.

Lieutenant Nguyen Hai Tu had been up all night and could feel the heaviness of fatigue in his legs as he walked back to his battery. Despite the lack of sleep, though, he was still wide-awake and anxious. There was still some time before the sun would be high enough in the sky to expose the cluster of trucks and oil drums that had been carefully staged at the edge of the tree line. He was hoping that his creation would appear to be realistic enough to catch the eye of one of the American forward air controllers. He had told his men that they were baiting a trap for the Yankee paper tigers. They had liked that.

His idea had not been difficult to sell to his superiors. After all, he was not asking for any additional manpower or materials. The *binh tram* motor pool commander had been happy to get rid of a couple of derelict trucks—really nothing but rusted-out hulks with no motors or other running gear. Likewise, the loading officer was more than ready to unload a dozen or so useless drums from the back of his underground warehouse. A couple of bottles of the local lao-Lao had persuaded the truck drivers to relocate his assets onto the river oxbow where his men had put together his stage set.

It was time now to get them up and ready for business. Sunrise would be in less than an hour.

Several weeks before, Nguyen had thrown himself into his assignment as battery commander. Ambitious and determined, he would settle for nothing short of perfection from his men. Even though he had been given three of the Chinese-built 37-millimeter guns, he ensured that they were maintained in a combat-ready state that reflected factory condition. He had also badgered his battalion supply officer for the full complement of support equipment and spare parts—right down to replacement barrels and extra ammunition.

By the time he was detailed to take his battery to an outpost well down the *Duong Truong San*, Nguyen had acquired the sobriquet of *Dai Ta Nho*—the Little Colonel. It was not meant to be a compliment.

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The rising sun was still just a faint glow against the thunderheads on the horizon as Lieutenant (junior grade) J. Michael “Choo Choo” Davis and Lieutenant Commander Glenn “Smokey” Stover came up on the flight deck to preflight their plane. Still not enough light to see clearly, so the deck was still bathed in the red floodlights of night operations. Stover and Davis moved stiffly in the warm, damp wind of morning, cinched tightly into torso harness and G suits, and carrying their helmets swinging by the chinstraps. The plane loomed out of the red-edged shadows, huge and sleek and menacing in its stillness and bulk. Under the wings hung twenty-two five-hundred-pound bombs, their matte green shapes tipped with shiny brass fuses that winked in the thin beams of their flashlights. Davis checked each one: delay setting, arming wires, tail fins.

The flight deck around them crawled with movement. Planes were being positioned for the next launch or moved below for repairs on the deck-edge elevators. Plane captains and crews walked around their aircraft as they did, looking for the smallest discrepancy in the fading predawn darkness. A gentle but compelling lurch announced that the ship was turning into the wind for the next launch cycle.

They climbed up into the cockpit on each side as the flight deck leaned ponderously away from the turn. The relative quiet of the deck was abruptly broken by the voice of the air boss over the loudspeakers—soon to be drowned out by the rising whine and thunder of jet engines.

The sun broke above the rim of the horizon just as they were flung down the catapult track and off into the morning air. Once free of the deck, the aircraft

settled briefly and then started to climb slowly, clawing for altitude while carrying its load of more than six tons of bombs.

Stover's first indication of a problem was his bombardier's agitated voice over the intercom.

"Shit! Looks like we lost the computer on the cat shot. I think the drum froze."

He looked over to see Davis feverishly resetting switches and checking circuit breakers. He noticed that for good measure the bombardier was kicking the pedestal between his knees in an effort to dislodge the computer's memory drum. After several more seconds he could see Davis's shoulders slump. An air of resignation haunted his next statements.

"I think the drum's a goner. We've seen this before. Once it's knocked off track the tweety birds have to send it back to the depot to be rebuilt. I have radar and a stable table, but our armed recce mission is a no-go. By the time we'd have enough daylight to be able to drop on any movers we might find, it'll be time to go home."

Stover did not have to think about their alternatives for long. They had long before agreed that they would launch with the barest of working systems, and that once airborne would find a way to get ordnance on a target. He hit his intercom button.

"Okay. We'll press on regardless. I'll ask Moonbeam to find us a FAC once we check in."

They concentrated on following their departure pattern as the *Intruder* climbed higher and higher into the morning sun, secure in the constant chatter over the radio and the steady rumble of their engines. Headed east, they crossed the narrow northern neck of South Vietnam at the ancient city of Hue. Feet dry.

The huge air base at Da Nang was a sprawling island of light on the coastline to their left. The dark, hostile masses of North Vietnam and Laos spread out to the north and west, dark but lit here and there by the fires set by exploding weapons or downed planes. Newer fires blazed intensely with white-hot centers, the occasional secondary explosion sending out tendrils of flame into the surrounding darkness. Older fires stretched in widening ragged circles under the heavy forest canopy. No one was trying to put them out. They would burn until exhausted or stopped by a river.

They flew west into the remnants of the night, the rising sun painting their backs and reflecting off the polished plastic of their canopy. Below them narrow, sluggish rivers snaked through the jungle, wandering trains that gleamed dully as if left by snails. The thick morning mist rose from the damp jungle floor and hung in the treetops, wispy as Christmas angel hair. Another half hour would pass before the sun could peek over the low coastal mountains and begin penetrating the darkness that clung to the bush. Even then, the gloom would give up only reluctantly, and hung in pools of shadow under the trees. They could see nothing on the ground but the winding ribbons of water that wound through the low hills. Hidden within was the network of dirt roads and tracks that made up the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

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Blind Bat Two Two flew in a wide flat circle six thousand feet above the Plain of Saravane. The converted C-130 transport was equipped with infrared spotting gear and a supply of parachute flares and “logs”—long-burning ground marker flares. It had been a long night for Blind Bat, and he was impatient to be heading home. Moonbeam was sending them one last load of ordnance that had become available at the last minute before he handed over airborne control to Hillsboro. The Navy *Intruder* would be their final sortie before the lumbering plane could turn back to Base in Thailand. The crew was tired, and they had run out of flares.

The Night Optical Device (NOD) navigator in the belly of the plane had spotted what looked like a small convoy of trucks near the banks of a meandering stream. The NOD sensor essentially turned night into day for the Blind Bat crews. They reported seeing three poorly concealed trucks and stacks of POL drums at the edge of a tree line. From what they could tell, the convoy was parked for the day a few hundred meters from a likely crossing point.

The challenge would be to find a way to talk the *Intruder* pilot into finding the target in the lingering gloom with some reasonable degree of accuracy. They had a few logs left on board, but they were virtually useless in heavy tree cover.

A new voice came up in the pilot’s headset.

“Hello, Blind Bat Two Two, this is Tombstone Five Zero Three. Single Navy Alfa six with twenty-two Mark 82 Snakeye on board. Estimating your position in four minutes.”

“OK Tombstone make it snappy . . . we’ve got some trucks,” radioed Blind Bat.
“Trucks and supplies. Let us know when you’re overhead.”

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In the *Intruder* cockpit, Stover and Davis looked at each other. It sounded almost too good to be true. There were seldom any clear targets on the Trail, especially in daylight. Maybe a small convoy had been caught with its pants down.

Blind Bat did his best to describe the target area as they approached: the stream below snaked its way through the flat countryside, often disappearing under the triple-canopy forests on its backs. As the darkness faded, Blind Bat could make out long stretches of the creek reflecting the brightening sky. He could see that a series of sinuous bends outlined the rough shape of a dog's head below, bulbous snout and all. The trucks sat near the dog's muzzle at the end of a long tree line. Maybe they had been surprised by their approach while unloading. Nothing moved on the Trail in daylight.

He finally heard from the jet as it began to circle high overhead.

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The *Intruder* arrived at the coordinates they had been given but could not see another aircraft against the shadowed landscape below them. Stover hit his radio.

"Blind Bat, this is Tombstone. We're at the rendezvous point that Moonbeam gave us. Angels base plus fifteen. Request you turn on your formation lights so we can find you—it's still pretty shadowy down there."

Within a few seconds, both Stover and Davis spotted a pattern of dim red lights below them well to the west of their position. The lights stayed on for a count of five seconds before winking out. Blind Bat's voice came up on the radio.

"How's that? Did you see us?"

Stover knew that the lights were positioned on top of the transport's wings. There was no danger of being spotted from the ground. He'd rely on Blind Bat to stay out of their way. He keyed his mike.

"We see you Blind Bat. Tombstone is ready to get to work."

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Lieutenant Nguyen Hai Tu was poised to duck in under the camouflage netting when his sergeant appeared at his shoulder out of the darkness. He jumped, but

quickly regained his composure. The sergeant leaned close to his ear to speak, as if they could be overheard by an unseen enemy lurking in the shadows.

"*Trung uy!* We keep hearing an airplane. High up. Not one of the daytime pests."

Nguyen 's progress through the thick brush under the trees had kept him from hearing anything above the noise of his own footsteps. He decided to stand still for a moment, trying to tune out the growing chorus of early morning birdsong. After a few minutes, he nodded his head. Unconsciously mimicking his sergeant's conspiratorial whisper, he replied.

"Yes. I hear it. High up, as you said. Multi-engine turboprop I believe. It's likely one of the American Hercules transports. Have you been hearing it for a long time? Is it circling or just passing over?"

The sergeant was quick to answer.

"It's been at least an hour. Sometimes louder. Sometimes fading away. But it's definitely the same airplane moving back and forth to the west."

Nguyen was both pleased and apprehensive. A large American transport circling overhead could mean one of two things. If it was one of their night-vision spotter planes, that could mean there was a possibility of air strikes—perhaps even catching sight of his dummy convoy. On the other hand, word had come down recently from the political officer at the *binh tram* about a fearsome gunship capable of wiping out whole battalions from the night sky. He thought for a while before speaking to the sergeant.

"It might be a night spotter. If so, we could get a chance to finally shoot down some American jets."

He looked up at the brightening sky.

"Have the men stand to their guns and be ready. Now!"

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Blind Bat had had time to consider how he would be able to direct the *Intruder's* attacks. He decided to move ahead with his plan.

"Tombstone, can you make out the course of the river right below me?"

Nearly a minute passed before the Navy pilot responded.

"Uh . . . pretty much Blind Bat. We can see a lot of it in and out of the tree cover."

Blind Bat went on.

"OK. Below me about two or three clicks to the east the river makes the outline of a dog's head. Not like Snoopy, more like a Cocker Spaniel. Can you see it?"

The two Navy fliers looked at each other with amusement in their eyes. This was different. Davis studied the shadowy terrain below them for a while, and then smacked his pilot on the knee.

"I see it! Right about our two o'clock, almost right beneath us."

Stover banked the *Intruder* to the right and into a tight turn. Davis was pointing down just ahead of the right wing. Stover keyed his mike.

"OK Bat, we got it. What's next?"

Blind Bat Two Two felt the need to explain his strategy, so radioed back.

"We're all out of flares, Tombstone, and logs won't be of any use in the forest cover. I'll do the best I can to give you the general location in the dog's head. If you can drop a few bombs as spotter rounds, we can work from there. You should be able to see the smoke."

Stover was now setting up for his dive run. He reversed his control stick and started a wide circle to the left, keeping the river bend in sight on his shoulder. As he did so, the FAC went on.

"The trucks are about in the middle of the dog's muzzle, in the tree line at its north side. If you could just put a few rounds about three hundred yards south of the river, we'll see where they land, and I'll talk you in from there."

Blind Bat was eager to get them on and off target and headed home so he could make for the barn himself.

"Any guns in the area?"

Stover asked as he adjusted the mil setting on his gunsight. He could see that Davis was resetting the Armament Panel to release a stick of six bombs on their first run. If all went well, that would leave them with enough for two more runs of eight bombs each. He glanced to his left and caught sight of Blind Bat circling well to the west of the target area.

Blind Bat came right back.

"We haven't seen any since we got into this area about a half hour ago. Some 23 sites hosed us down pretty good about ten miles to the south, but it's been quiet hereabouts."

The sun was fully up now on the horizon, a coppery, blazing disk low in the eastern sky. The dog's head was still just a dim outline below.

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Lieutenant Nguyen stood behind his battery and called for silence. The crews were in place and getting edgy. Nguyen had seen to it that they had stockpiled plenty of spare ammunition behind each of the three twin-barreled guns, and each director was pacing nervously between them. Two hundred meters to the rear, three trucks loaded with more antiaircraft rounds stood waiting. He could see each of the guns twitching back and forth as the firing crews spun their control wheels with series of half turns. All eyes were on the sky to the west.

The big spotter plane had drawn close enough to their position that everyone in the battery could hear the low thrum of its engines. At one point it had flown directly overhead, the drone of their engines clearly audible under the camouflage canopy, and then fading away.

Nguyen nearly jumped when he picked up the unmistakable faint rumble of an American jet circling overhead. The crews had heard it too and were all craning their necks to catch a glimpse of the enemy. This was too good to be true. It was all coming together just as he had imagined. He looked around to confirm that their gun position was still in the shadows of the waning night, and then looked directly above, pleased to see that the first rays of the sun were touching the tops of the tallest trees.

He stepped forward and put his hand on the shoulder of his Number Two gun captain, who had seemed to be especially jumpy. In a quiet voice that he hoped sounded steady and confident, he spoke without taking his eyes off the glow in the treetops.

"Any time now. Keep looking for the sun to glance off the Yankee jet. Then we can follow it down as it dives to drop its bombs on our paper tiger trap. Be ready. I'll give the word to open fire."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Adams Young is a native of Washington, DC. After graduating from the United States Naval Academy, he earned his wings as a Naval Flight Officer and trained as a bombardier/navigator in the US Navy A-6A Intruder all-weather attack aircraft. In the course of three Yankee Station combat deployments, he flew nearly one hundred combat missions over Laos and North Vietnam. He wrote the first chapter of *ONE HUNDRED STINGERS* in 1973.

Pete left the Navy in 1977 and began a career in the design and development of military command and control systems while working on his novel sporadically. Retirement in 2016 provided the opportunity to focus on completing *STINGERS*.

He and his wife Darlene have been married for forty-five years. They have two children and three grandchildren. After living in San Diego, California, and Portland, Oregon, they retired to Southwestern Washington state.

Pete remains active in various veterans' groups. He is currently writing the first of a series of contemporary murder mysteries set in and around Civil War battlefield

