

Good morning



VIETNAM CHRONICLES

FLYING IFR FROM BAO LOC TO PHAN THIET, VIETNAM IN 1966

A TRUE BUT UNTOLD STORY

The year was 1966 in about September of that year. I was a U. S. Army 1st Lieutenant. I was flying my Cessna 0-1 in the vicinity of Bao Loc, Vietnam. The 0-1 Birddog was manufactured by Cessna, in 1951, for use by the U. S. Army and the U. S. Air Force for visual reconnance. Otherwise know as a FAC or forward air controller missions. The airframe is like a Cessna 182, with the seats front and rear. It has a Continental O-470 engine. That engine is large for that airframe. The airplane had 4 2.75” rockets. Two smoke rockets for marking the target and two were 10 pound high explosive rockets. We had bullet proof seats and also wore a flack vest. We flew with an M-16 and used all tracer ammunition.

The 0-1 Birddog has a wing span of 36 feet and length of 25 feet, 9 inches. The weight is some where around 2,000 pounds from the factory. The weight is listed as about 2,800 pounds when it is loaded with extras. For service in Vietnam the birddog had between 4 and 8 rockets, an armoured seat, extra radios, self sealing fuel tanks, plus a flack vest and other miscellaneous “add on’s”. It was said that someone performed a weight check, in Vietnam, and found the airplanes were flying over gross. In other words, much over the listed 2,800 pounds. The calculations were performed at sea level. The results would be more severe when you consider “density altitude” and also the fact that the birddog was flown at altitude in the mountains.

A 213 horse power Continental, O-470 engine, powers a two place, tandem seat tail dragger along at 90 knots at normal cruise. The variable pitch F model will get off the ground about 200 feet earlier (sea level, zero wind, 2600 pounds) than the fixed pitch A, E, F or G models. The O-1 was equipped with UHF, VHF and FM radios.

I had a passenger on board, and that person was my crew chief, Specialist Hartzog. Specialist Hartzog was often a passenger on Visual Reconnaissance missions. I taught him to fly from the back seat. I considered the ability for him to fly was insurance in case something happened to me. Have you ever heard of the golden BB? That was a lucky enemy round that killed or incapacitated the pilot. He could get me back to the airfield, but could not land. This mission was a visual reconnaissance mission, or a forward air controller mission (FAC). I was approximately 20 clicks west of Bao Loc conducting a visual reconnaissance mission. I had been flying about 1 ½ hours, with about 4 hours of fuel on board. I suddenly looked east from my aerial position and noticed low level clouds in the vicinity of the Bao Loc airfield.

Bao Loc was considered an out post on the way to the Cambodian border. The airfield was leased from a Frenchman, who was a left over soldier from the French Indochina war. The airfield was 900 feet long and was never maintained. There was no heavy machinery available at Bao Loc so as to level the numerous ruts in the dirt runway. The North end of the runway had a barrier in the form of a stream. Surrounding all of the runway were tea bushes about 8 feet to 12 feet in height. We had none, 0, navigational facilities at or any where near the airport or Bao Loc. There was no beacon, no tower, no runway lights or anything else to identify Bao Loc airport as an airport. It was only a rectangular piece of dirt surrounded by tea bushes and jungle. The U. S. Army had an outpost, called a MACV. with about 20 Americans stationed there. MACV was Military Assistance Command Vietnam. The Americans were to support the Vietnamese Army of approximately company size. The local (MACV) had an Army Specialist monitoring a radio. If we had a problem the Specialist was the only person that you could talk to. We had no helicopters in the area. Helicopters were stationed 50 nautical miles or more away. The helicopters could be notified, but by the time they arrived at the scene, the sense of urgency would be over. The pilot would probably be captured by the Viet Cong. Almost all downed American pilots would die before release by the Viet Cong. In other words, it would take hours to arrive at the scene. The Cessna had FM and VHF radios on board, but there was no one to talk to.

Upon flying toward the Bao Loc airfield I visually observed a cloud cover which was rising and moving in my direction. The weather in Vietnam was unpredictable and could change in a matter of minutes. There was no weather service in Viet Nam. Everything was visual and up to the pilots discretion. In other words the weather could be clear and 20 minutes later

it would be overcast, and raining. Especially in the monsoon season, which was about ½ of the year. The terrain was flat around Bao Loc and the airfield, but had mountains surrounding the flat area. The mountains were several thousand feet higher than the flat area around Bao Loc.



Bao Loc airfield. See the O-1. Note stream at the end Of the runway. See mountain in background.

In a matter of minutes I had gone from VFR (visual flight rules to IFR (instrument flight rules). In other word I was in the clouds and could not get out of the clouds. This situation had happened before, **but this time was different**. Usually I could fly over the clouds and find a hole in the clouds, and therefore descend and come out under the clouds. I could then proceed to the dirt runway or land on highway 20, and land on the road. Highway 20 was asphalt but was very narrow. It was Viet Cong country everywhere except at the MACV and around the airfield. It was not a good prospect to land on the road all by yourself. The chances of being attacked and or killed by the Viet Cong was highly predictable. One of the Army Pilots called the MACV compound on the MACV radio and told them to shoot up a flare over the compound, so as to identify the area of the compound. The pilot asked about the ceiling of the clouds, and therefore made a determination to let down thru the clouds and therefore break out below the clouds. He then landed at the Frenchman's airfield. Remember that there were mountains around the MACV.

On this day the weather was raining with Instrument Flight Rules (IFR). The weather was terrible all the way to the ground. There was only ONE thing

to do so as to survive. GO TO THE COAST (THE SOUTH CHINA SEA). It was about a 45 minute flight to the South China Sea, with good weather. My immediate thoughts were the mountains around Bao Loc. I figured that I would have to attain 4,500 feet in altitude so as to clear all the tops of the mountains. I hoped I would “break out” over the clouds at some altitude. Usually the weather was clear on the coast of the South China Sea. The Vietnamese town on the seacoast was called Phan Thiet. Since a map was no value, because I could not see the ground, I had to guess the direction of flight to Phan Thiet.

My current problem was to get on the top of the clouds. I guessed at the best direction of flight, so as to avoid the mountains around Bao Loc. I therefore began climbing turns at about 65 knots. The Cessna would stall at 60 knots. I began circling and climbing and climbing and climbing and climbing. 5,000 feet, 6,000 feet, 7,000 feet, 8,000 feet 9,000 feet, 10,000 feet, 11,000 feet and I finally broke out of the clouds. I looked East, toward Phan Thiet, and saw the clouds were going up toward the seacoast. I then guessed, using time and distance, when I might be over the South China Sea. Knowing that the ocean was level, I needed to guess when I was over the sea. I was then over 12,000 feet in altitude.

During the climb thru the clouds, my crew chief, called me on the intercom and told me that I need to change to the other gas tank. I did not have to look at fuel selector, because my hand knew, instinctively, where the selectors was. That was a fast change of tanks. I was so focused on the 65 knot climb out, so as to be on top of the clouds, that I had not thought of changing from the left fuel tank to the right fuel tank. My crew chief than asked if everything was OK. My reply was, “I hope so”. I forgot to tell him that we were going the Phan Thiet. Phan Thiet was the headquarters for my aviation company. My crew chief’s well being was totally in my hands.



Phan Thiet portable tower.



Phan Thiet runway, on final.

Notice bomb sight

Phan Thiet did have a control tower. I called the tower and they told me that the field was “closed”, because of IFR conditions. On top of that it was raining with very little visibility. I told the control tower that I “had no choice”. I had to land. Also, I was running out of fuel. At that point, I came to the conclusion that we must be over the South China Sea. There was total overcast. We both looked for a hole in the clouds, so that we could descend to the water. Hopefully the weather would be clear under the clouds. At this point, fuel became foremost in my decision making. One tank was empty and the other tank was at $\frac{1}{4}$ full. I had used much more fuel on the climb to 12,000 feet of altitude that was expected or normal. I needed to find a hole in the clouds ASAP. Because of the fuel situation, I made the decision to descend ASAP. The last thing I wanted to be is “fish food”. I therefore made tight spiraling turns so as to descend. Around and around and around. I told my crew chief to see if he could see the ocean. Still descending, around and around and around. The Phan Thiet airfield was built by the French Army and had more conveniences. But still NO navigational aids. They did have runway lights, but were seldom on because the Viet Cong could also see the airfield. The airfield was on the top of a bluff next to the South China Sea. In other words I had gained altitude to land. There was no chance to attain a pattern landing altitude.

GOOD NEWS, we had now descended to sea level. I had “broken out” approximately 300 feet above the water. The next problem was “which way to the airfield? Also, I did not know whether I was North or South of the Phan Thiet airfield. I took my best guess and determined that the airfield must be “this way”? I also had the problem of darkness. It was pre-dark and with the inclement weather it was nearly dark at this point. My guardian angel must have been with me that day because the heading I used was directly to the airfield. Believe it or not, I had to gain altitude to make a landing, because the airfield was on a 300 foot bluff. The airfield told me that they would have the fire truck ready in case there were problems. Regardless of the wind direction or anything else, I had to land.

As in all good stories, the landing was perfect. We did land with very little fuel in the tanks. Not enough fuel to be able for a second chance to land. We then taxied to the ramp and exited the airplane. The next thing I know, my crew chief, specialist Hartzog, was prone on the ramp and kissing the

ground. At that point I needed a couple of stiff drinks. Looking back on that day, I should have also kissed the ground, but I did thank my “LUCKY STARS”.

Stay tuned for the next segment of the Viet Nam chronicles.



*HIT
MY SMOKE*

*Captain
Richard L. Kloppenburg*
Class of 1967-Vietnam
kloppenburg@mac.com
1-425-747-5263 (land)

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