



A Jolly Green helicopter rests quietly before the havoc of a new SAR mission begins. (Photo by Don Doran courtesy of Warren Thompson.)

BRAVEST of the BRAVE



A Misty Pilot Recounts a Mission of Utmost Courage

BY MAJ. GEN. DONALD SHEPPERD, USAF (RET.)

Courage is a core competency often ascribed to the military. Its synonym, bravery, is always associated with fighter pilots by the fighter pilots themselves (and hopefully still by women at bars). Employing “if then” logic: if all Mistys are fighter pilots (and God knows, we all were; sorry—are!), then, ipso facto, all Mistys were/are brave; God willed it so.

In my case, it was a little less complicated. When I was growing up, I was a pimple-faced kid with a penchant for heavy machinery. All I was interested in was fast women, fast cars and fast airplanes. Along came my wife, and there went the fast women and fast cars; all that was left was fast airplanes. That’s how I became a fighter pilot and thus was granted the mantle of bravery.

We Mistys were legendary for bravery, certainly in fighter pilot lore; this was usually because of our high loss rate. It could be intellectually argued that our reputation for bravery was owed to incompetence, stupidity, lack of judgment and a disregard for rules; we prefer to think our buddies were right and we were just brave.

If the truth be known, we weren't brave at all. In fact, at least half the time, we were victims trapped by circumstance in the back seat, buried under cameras and maps, slightly pissed that we couldn't be in the front seat, and totally at the mercy of a front-seater, who we thought was rough, overly aggressive and with whom we had very little karma. Most of us vowed during several

missions that we would beat the living daylights out of the front-seater as soon as we got back on the ground. The long ride home to Phu Cat, however, usually provided time to cool down.

This story tells how I learned the true meaning of bravery.

Fellow Misty pilot and buddy Ed Risinger was returning home to Phu Cat and called the tower about 75 miles out:

"Phu Cat, has Misty 31 (the first afternoon mission) departed?"

"Negative, Misty. He's in the arming area," was the reply.

"Roger. Have him come up tower frequency."

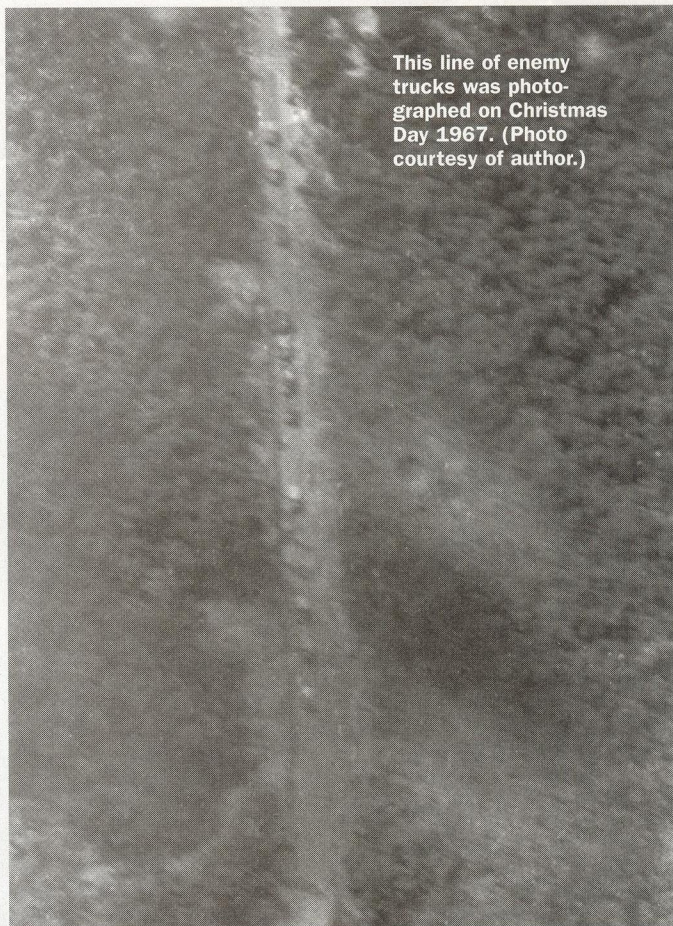
"Misty 31's up."

"Misty 31, this is Misty 11. There's an F-4 down in the A Shau Valley. The Sandys and Jollys and Misty 21 are with him, but the bad guys are all around, and he's about to get captured. Get up there as quickly as you can. They need help!"

"Roger!"

We knew our business and didn't need any more info. We were airborne ASAP and pushed max military throttle all the way to the A Shau. When we arrived, things were in a mess. Two Sandys, two helos and Jim "Fio" Fiorelli in Misty 21 were working the RESCAP. The F-4 backseater was down on the side of a mountain overlooking the valley. He had a broken leg. One

**"Put it on me!
Hurry! They're
all around me!
Closer!"**



This line of enemy trucks was photographed on Christmas Day 1967. (Photo courtesy of author.)

Jolly Green was maneuvering to pick him up. The front-seater was OK but down in the middle of the valley. His collapsed chute was clearly visible, and the NVA had him surrounded. He was calling for ordnance to be put right next to his chute and said the bad guys were all around and coming closer.

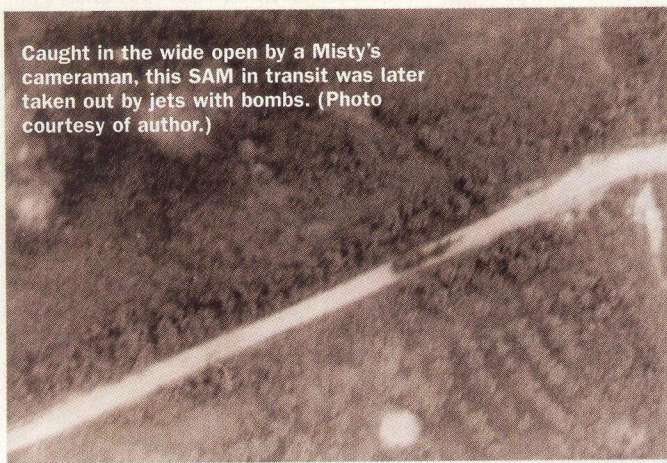
Just before we arrived, an Army Huey had tried to land to pick up the front-seater and was shot down. It managed to limp over the closest hill and set down on fire about a mile



An A-1H Skyraider armed with Mk. 82s is out on another Sandy mission to help suppress enemy ground troops so the Jolly Greens can get in close to rescue a downed pilot. (Photo by Win Depoorter courtesy of Warren Thompson.)



A lucky rescued pilot steps off the Jolly Green that plucked him out of the jungle and away from the hands of captivity. (Photo by Glenn Little courtesy of Warren Thompson.)



Caught in the wide open by a Misty's cameraman, this SAM in transit was later taken out by jets with bombs. (Photo courtesy of author.)

south of the downed pilot. The second helo landed to pick up its crew of four.

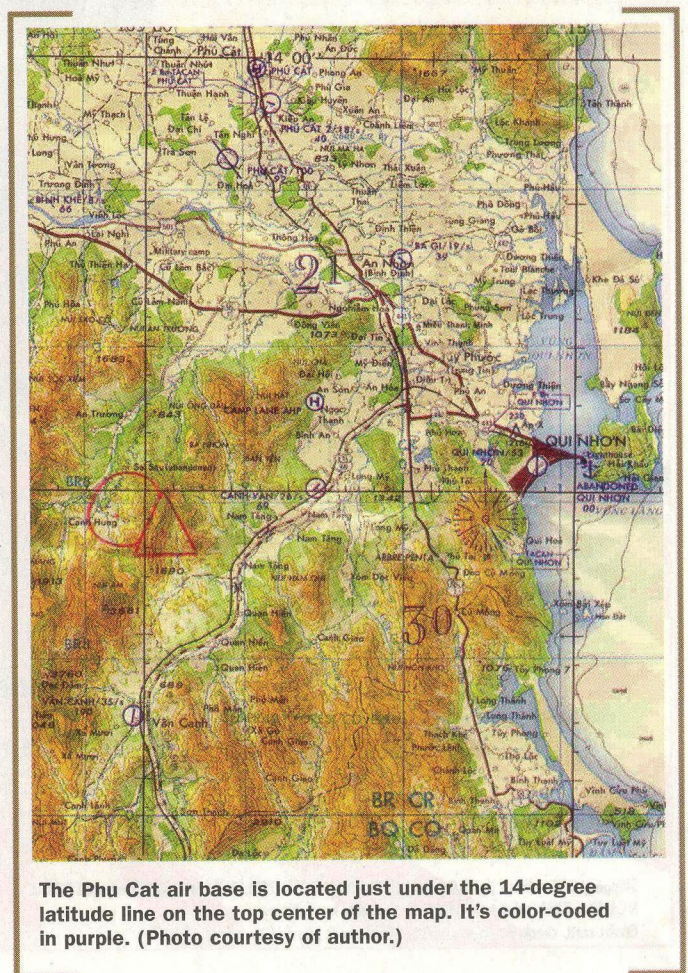
Before we could get a word in edgewise, a two-place Army Loach arrived and informed Sandy Lead he was going in to pick up the front-seater.

"Be careful," warned Lead. "It's really hot in there, and we've already lost an F-4 and a Huey. The Huey is down about a mile to the south. I don't think you should go in there!"

As the Loach operated on VHF, we couldn't hear the other side of the conversation, but it was evident the Loach was going to ignore Sandy Lead.

"OK. We'll try to cover you," replied Sandy.

We watched as the Loach made an approach to the downed pilot's chute. He was hit several times, pulled off smoking and headed south towards the downed Huey. He sat down hard by the burning Huey.



The Phu Cat air base is located just under the 14-degree latitude line on the top center of the map. It's color-coded in purple. (Photo courtesy of author.)

"Great! Now we got two helos and two more guys down," I thought.

"Jolly 2; turn around and go back! We got a Loach down now by the Huey. Pick them up," commanded Lead.

The second Jolly Green had just lifted off, after rescuing the Huey crew. Now, it turned around and maneuvered to pick up the pilots from the downed Loach.

"Sandy Lead, Misty 31 is with you. All in sight. We got willie petes and 20 mike-mike."

"Roger. Fall in behind Misty 21's pattern. He's working north-south. We're working east-west. The pilot is 50 meters west of the chute. We need ordnance all around him. They're closing in!"

We fell into a tight north-south pattern behind Fio. No briefing was necessary. We tried to time it so a Misty was rolling in just as a Sandy pulled off, to have max ordnance exploding in the faces of the "Gomers."

"Jolly 1 is in a hover. PJ (pararescueman) is going down."

The Lead Jolly was now in a hover about one mile east of the action to rescue the backseater, and a PJ was being lowered on the hoist to assist the injured pilot.

On my first pass, I launched a rocket, which hit a few meters north of the chute. I then squeezed the trigger to fire the guns.

"Good, but closer!" yelled the front-seater on his survival radio. "Put it on me! Hurry! They're all around me! Closer!"

We continued the daisy chain, alternating the Sandy A-1s with CBU and bombs and the two F-100 Mistys with rockets and 20mm. On my second pass, the guns jammed.



Ed Risner checks out some battle damage to an F-100. (Photo courtesy of author.)

"Damn! Hate!" I yelled and banged my fist on the instrument panel. "Goddamn, cheap-ass, low-bidder crap!"

I recycled the switches and tried every trick, but to no avail. We continued to make passes until we ran out of rockets, and with jammed guns, I dived right down to treetop level and hit the AB just above the chute.

"We might not kill them, but maybe we'll deafen them," I thought.

On the downwind leg on one of my patterns, I glanced toward the hovering helo that was picking up the backseater.

"Jesus! Look at that!" I shouted. The hovering helo was being repeatedly hit by gunfire.

"We're picking up some hits," said the Jolly pilot calmly. "We'll be out in a couple of minutes."

He was cool as ice.

"No fooling!" I thought.

We continued our passes over the downed pilot, and on each downwind, I looked at the hovering helo. I watched him on four patterns, and although I didn't count, I'm sure he was hit 20 to 30 times just while I was watching. Although he was a helo pilot, he had somewhere caught the fighter pilot disease: *cojones grandes!*

I wish I could report that all came out well. We were not that lucky. Jolly 2 rescued the Huey and Loach crews, and Jolly Lead picked up the backseater and probably 100 hits. The last thing the front-seater said was, "They got me. I'm breaking my radio. See you after the war."

BRAVEST OF THE BRAVE EXTRA

The Misty Mission

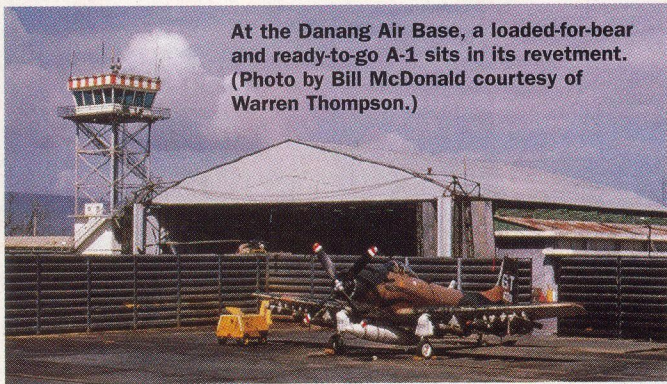
In 1967, a group of experienced fighter pilots formed Operation *Commando Sabre*, a top-secret unit with call sign, "Misty." The mission was to fly fast and low to find hidden targets such as truck parks, POL storage sites and SAM missiles. They flew the two-seat F-100F, armed only with 20mm cannon and smoke-marking rockets.

Typically, Mistys were up at 0300, off to a quick breakfast and then into a mission briefing. They studied HHQ reports, photos from Intel and previous Misty flights and then made a predawn takeoff. They flew for 30 minutes, let down over the South China Sea and crossed the coast at high speed. Often, the whole sky lit up with tracers as they turned, banked and pulled high-G, looking for camouflaged, heavily defended targets. The front-seat pilot flew the aircraft while the backseater handled radios, maps and a hand-held 35mm camera. When a target was discovered, they marked the target for bomb-laden fighters.

Of the 155 Mistys officially assigned to fly missions over North Vietnam from June 1967 to May 1970, 34 were shot down. Eight others were shot down when flying non-Misty missions, and two were shot down twice. There were seven KIA (killed in action) and four POWs.



The third generation of Misty pilots gathers in the Phu Cat Officers' Club in 1968. Author is in the back row on the far left. (Photo courtesy of author.)



At the Danang Air Base, a loaded-for-bear and ready-to-go A-1 sits in its revetment. (Photo by Bill McDonald courtesy of Warren Thompson.)

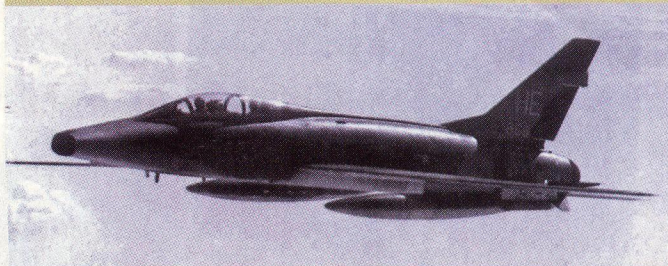
As I reflect on the subject of bravery, I recall that no one wanted to be a helo pilot. I don't remember any undergraduate pilot training class where the distinguished graduates selected helos. It is said there is something unnatural about having your wings swing in a circle above your head while flying. We all opted for fast jets, glory and the reputation for bravery, but I know who owns the title "bravest of the brave": Jolly Green pilots—hands down, bar none, no contest! Second place goes to the F-4 front-seater, who asked to put bombs all over him and said dejectedly, "... I'm breaking my radio. See you after the war." Third place is awarded to the Gomers who marched through our bombs and bullets to capture him. Damn them!

Postscript: I don't remember his name, but the front-seater did not make it back after the war. Years later, crash site investigation teams visited the area. A Vietnamese woman was interviewed and said she was involved. Several days after the shoot-down, she said she came across an American pilot who was wounded. She says he pointed a pistol at her, and she executed him. Today, the Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC) with the highest retention rate is helo pilots. God bless them! ■

Books by Don Shepperd: "Misty—First Person Stories of the F-100 Misty Fast FACs in the Vietnam War" -ed. AuthorHouse.com; "Bury Us Upside Down—The Misty Pilots and the Secret Battle for the Ho Chi Minh Trail," with Rick Newman, Amazon.com; "The Class of '58 Writes a Book" -ed. AuthorHouse.com.



Maintenance crews worked at a furious pace to get the Misty F-100s turned around and ready to go for the next mission. (Photo courtesy of author.)



Gen. Merrill A. "Tony" McPeak, USAF (Ret.); 14th Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force.

Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman, USAF (Ret.); 15th Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force.

Maj. Gen. Don Shepperd, USAF (Ret.); head of the Air National Guard, CNN military analyst during Iraq War, author.

Maj. Gen. Roy Bridges USAF (Ret.); head of the Kennedy Space Center and NASA's Langley Research Center.

Astronaut Lacy Veach; two space shuttle missions, did lead on the robotics for the International Space Station, died of cancer in 1995.

Col. Bud Day, USAF (Ret.); awarded the Medal of Honor for conduct while a POW in North Vietnam.

Dick Rutan; first man to fly nonstop, unrefueled around the world; winner of the Collier Trophy, the Louis Bleriot Medal, the Presidential Citizen's Medal of Honor; congressional candidate.



Left: First Misty commander Maj. Bud Day was awarded the Medal of Honor for conduct as a POW in North Vietnam. Right: Author Don Shepperd sits in his F-100's cockpit just after returning from a mission. (Photos courtesy of author.)