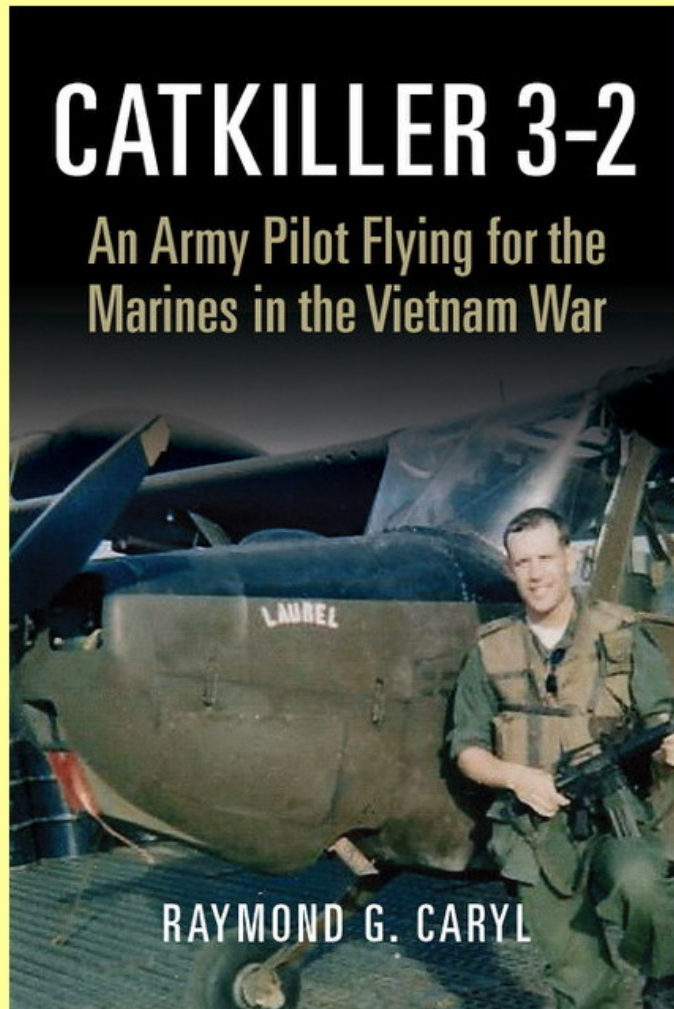




Catkiller 3-2 "Lost" Chapters:

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“LOST” CHAPTERS, CATKILLER 3-2©

COVEYS, THUDS and VNAF SPADS©

***THE RABBIT PATCH, THE DONUT DOLLY AND THE THREE
LEGGED CAT©***



COVEYS, THUDS and VNAF SPADS

COVEYS

Covey was the call sign of a group of Air Force forward air controllers (FACs) of the 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS). During the siege at Khe Sanh in the spring of 1968, there were two Covey FACs assigned to fly Cessna O-2s out of Dong Ha. Both of the pilots were majors. One a tall, slender affable fellow with an impressive handlebar mustache. The other was a shorter, pear shaped, bespectacled curmudgeon who seemed to wear a perpetual scowl. I figured he had probably been a C-123 or C-130 cargo pilot who preferred flying “safe” missions from airport to airport at 20,000 feet to flying missions 1,000 feet or less over Khe Sanh and constantly getting shot at in his little “push-me, pull-you” centerline thrust, twin engine Cessna.

These two Air force majors came and went on their own schedule and when not flying, didn’t spend much time hanging out at the line shack. They simply disappeared. I suppose they were in briefings or getting some well-deserved rest in their hooch.

One day, the curmudgeon returned to Dong Ha from over Khe Sanh in an aircraft that got everyone’s attention. We were alerted that something out of the normal was going on because the crash truck fired up with the crash crew onboard. We watched the Covey O-2 come in straight from the west, the front propeller feathered and not turning. This was a clear indication that the front engine wasn’t running and that he had taken some hits. Sure enough, after a successful landing, as the Cessna O-2 taxied into our small ramp area we could see that the airplane had taken quite a few hits. The fuselage was peppered with appeared to be AK-47 bullet holes. There was oil streaked along the sides of the fuselage from the front engine cowling. That explained why the front engine wasn’t running, but it got even better. Major Curmudgeon taxied to the far corner of our small parking area, came to a halt, shut down the rear engine, flung open the door, got out, shot a “don’t come near me, I don’t want to talk about it” look at us, shuffled once around his aircraft looking at the bullet holes, violently kicked one of the tires and stomped off.

We waited until he had left and then immediately went to look at his severely perforated airplane. After several minutes spent lining up and counting suspected entry-exit holes (over two dozen of them) we surmised that the pear-shaped Covey major could NOT have survived the onslaught of AK-47 rounds that had pierced his little airplane without receiving at least one or two fatal bullet wounds. Since we had seen him walk away apparently unscathed, we finally came to the conclusion that he must have somehow

crawled out of his airplane *in flight* and perched on a wing tip while his airplane was being severely hosed down by some very accurate NVA rifle fire.

Sometimes, Covey FACs truly lead charmed lives.

THUDS

My first and only Thud encounter occurred on a bright, sunny spring day in 1968. The DASC had contacted me saying that a Marine company had made contact with the enemy and they had requested an airstrike. They were on a sweep a few clicks south of Quang Tri. I didn't normally consider this to be a particularly hostile area compared to the DMZ and Leatherneck Square, but that part of northern I Corps was always crawling with bad guys and here, they were just a bit harder to find. The Marines had taken a couple of small arms rounds, most likely a sniper, from a village that lay about 500 meters to their front. The sniper must have been nervous because he didn't hit anyone and he telegraphed the fact that he was hanging out somewhere in the ville. The Marine company had a simple solution: Call for an airstrike on the ville.

My AO and I showed up and got the particulars from the Marines on the ground and then I dialed up Plutocrat One (Dong Ha DASC) to order some fixed wing. In a few minutes, Plutocrat told me that he had a flight of two diverts out of North Vietnam if I wanted to use them. Occasionally we would get these aircraft because they couldn't get to their target in North Vietnam for some reason and they still had their load of bombs. They couldn't land back at their home airbase with a bomb load, so they would either have to drop them at sea or over the A Shau Valley unless those of us flying the DMZ area could use them. Timing is everything.

"Ah Catkiller 4-2, this is Plutocrat One. I have a flight of diverts that just popped up if you can use them."

"Plutocrat One, this is Catkiller 4-2. Go ahead and send them."

"Roger Catkiller, contact Tide flight on button orange."

I switched my UHF radio to button orange and heard the two jet fighters of Tide flight check in with each other and then Dash One gave me a call.

“Catkiller 4-2, this is Tide flight up button orange” said the deep, growly voice that was partially distorted due to the inhale and exhale sounds he was making in his oxygen mask.

“Roger Tide flight, Catkiller 4-2 is at one thousand feet on the one-seven-zero at fifteen off Channel 109.”

I had just given Tide flight my location as a heading and distance off the TACAN navigation radio at Dong Ha. The heading was in degrees (170) and the distance was in nautical miles (15). We all understood that so I did not need to say degrees and nautical miles. Our Army Bird dogs didn't have TACAN capability so those of us who flew the DMZ out of Dong Ha had drawn lines on our 1:50,000 maps to depict heading radials and distance arcs from Dong Ha knowing that was what the close air support (CAS) jets would use. This made it easier for them to find us and saved precious time as the jets burned so much fuel once they descended that we needed them to find us quickly.

The rest of my transmission included the target description, target elevation, run in heading, location of nearest friendlies, any known or expected enemy fire and what kind it might be. The details are important.

“Catkiller 4-2, this is Tide Lead, we are crossing Channel 109 now, descending out of one-zero thousand. We each have six Mark-117s. We have enough fuel for one pass. We do not have you in sight.”

“Roger, Tide, do you see the distinct north-south highway that is a couple of miles west of the coastline?”

“I have the highway in sight.”

“Okay, your target will run parallel to the highway on the east side. I will remain west of the highway at one thousand feet in a right hand orbit. I am putting a Willie Pete into the north end of the village where I want you to start your drop. Let me know when you see me.”

“Catkiller, I do not have you in sight, but I see your smoke. Am I cleared hot?”

Normally, I would not have cleared him hot because not only could I not see him, he could not see me. Snap decisions are often wrong decisions but a lot of good factors were at work in this situation. The nearest friendlies were a half-klick away and not in any danger. Tide Lead had Highway One in sight and we both knew that I would be on the other side of the highway from the target, so we could check off that safety barrier as good. He could plainly see that the Ville ran parallel to the highway, so he knew his run in heading. Tide Lead could see the billowing white smoke of my Willie Pete rocket so he knew where to start dropping his bombs. This was definitely a non-standard bombing run for me, but I felt confident that it would work.

Boy did it ever! As I looked down on the target, a very large, camouflage-painted “dart” with a long, pointed nose and little, stubby wings flashed by beneath me in what looked like level flight sequentially dropping 750 pound bombs. The amount of destruction was continuous and absolute. I had told Dash Two to begin dropping his ordnance where Dash One left off. No sooner had the flying debris from Dash One’s bombs settled back to earth when Dash Two flashed by rippling his bombs...and then they were gone.

“Tide Flight, Catkiller 4-2, BDA follows. One hundred over one hundred. The village is completely gone. Excellent drops.”

“Roger Catkiller, glad we could help.”

Because I couldn’t recall ever seeing one of those aircraft before, I just had to ask the question, “Uh...Tide Flight, what ARE you?”

Just one word to me in that deep, growly voice, “Thuds.” Then, to his wingman, “Two, go button three.”

The devastation was total and absolute and the Marine company encountered no resistance as they rose and moved toward the now silent and smoking ville. I could hardly wait to get back to Dong Ha and talk to one of the Coveys about my “Thud” experience.

Later that day I had an opportunity to talk to the more affable Covey major. I told him what had transpired and asked what a “Thud” was. He laughed and told me what I had witnessed was a flight of F-105s, the largest single engine jet fighter in the free world. Nothing was faster low level and what I had asked them to do was exactly what they

did for a living over North Vietnam...one pass, unload all of their ordnance, and gone! They normally did not operate in South Vietnam and the only reason I had gotten them was probably due to bad weather over their designated target in North Vietnam and they had enough fuel to come south, make a drop and make it to their tanker for enough gas to get back to home base in Thailand.

Sometimes good fortune falls upon a lowly Army Bird dog TACA.

VNAF SPADS

Shortly after Tide flight departed, Plutocrat One called to tell me he had another flight available if I wanted them. He slipped in a caveat though: "It's a VNAF flight, so if you don't want them, I can pass them on."

I told Plutocrat One to standby while my AO and I had a quick conference. We decided he would ask the ground unit if they had any targets that weren't too close that needed softening up. The ground commander replied in the affirmative and pointed out a ville about a klick farther south in the direction they were heading that was a likely hideout for snipers.

The reason for our exaggerated caution was because neither of us had ever run a VNAF flight in a CAS situation and we were concerned there might be a language problem, so we didn't want our Marines too close to where they were dropping their ordnance...just in case there might be a misunderstanding of our instructions. We wanted to use them (so as not to offend an ally, and after all, they *did* want to help), just not too close to our Marines.

So I told Plutocrat we would take them and was given a UHF frequency to contact them on. As it turned out, they were perfect for the target we had for them, a very small ville that was not much more than a cluster of two dozen or so hooches very close to Highway 1. Dash One could speak pretty good English and we had no problem understanding each other. He told me they each had a dozen 250 lb. bombs and two hours of loiter time. *Two hours! What in the world were these guys flying?* The answer appeared shortly as two Douglas A-1 Skyraiders trundled into view from the south flying a nice, tight formation at about 3,000ft. above the ground.

The A-1 Skyraider, nicknamed Spads because they were propeller driven, Korea vintage aircraft and therefore “ancient” compared to all of the Air Force’s shiny new jets. The Air Force did use them quite successfully in the air rescue role because they could carry a lot of ordnance, had a high loiter time and could take multiple hits from enemy rifle and machine gun fire.

I put a willie pete into the center of the small ville and cleared them hot, thinking I could just sort of let them have their fun and spend a minimal amount of time directing their drops. Guess again. They expected me to adjust every bomb they dropped and clear them in hot every drop. The end result was that I began to pay *very* close attention to just how they went about dropping their ordnance. To tell the truth, it was very different than we were used to seeing and proved to be quite an interesting and intricate ballet in the air.

They began by remaining at about 3,000 ft. above the ground, but began circling the target in a manner not at all unlike a hawk or other bird of prey would circle a mouse in an open field. They circled *exactly* 180 degrees from each other and then Dash One transmitted, “Dash One in.”

I responded, “Cleared hot.”

Dash One then executed a perfect wing over and dove *straight down* toward the target. At about 500 ft. AGL, he released one 250 lb. bomb, announced, “Dash One off” and then climbed straight up, entering the 3,000 ft. AGL circle *exactly* 180 degrees out from Dash Two!

I then told Dash Two to put his drop fifty meters to the east of Dash One’s drop.

Dash Two responded with, “Okeydoke.”

Rolling inverted, then pointing his Spad straight down, Dash Two announced, “Dash Two in.” Same thing again: Straight down, release one bomb, announce, “Dash Two off,” climb straight up and enter the circle *exactly* 180 degrees out from Dash One. It quickly became obvious that this was not their first rodeo!

They did seem pretty insistent that I adjust their drops around the ville, so I did, but those two did not really need any supervision as they were deadly accurate with their drops. Unlike the limited loiter time jets that we normally had, and were quite used to

for CAS, these two seemed to hang around *forever* dropping one bomb at a time and wanting an adjustment from me every drop. They were there for nearly an hour and put on quite a show of precise airmanship.

As previously stated, Dash One spoke very good english and quickly dissolved any concerns I had about making a mistake due to a misunderstanding. Dash Two on the other hand seemed to be limited to: "Dash Two in" "Dash Two off" and "Okeydoke."

Sometimes all you need to say is, "O-KEE-DOKE!"

The Rabbit Patch, The Donut Dolly and The Three Legged Cat

I was almost four months into my one year tour by now and getting pretty comfortable with my flying routine. The days that I flew nothing but visual reconnaissance or the north and south coast missions tended to get pretty long, especially if we didn't scare up any action. The best days were the ones spent in the Tactical Area of Responsibility running jets and adjusting artillery on the bad guys. That was when the adrenaline flowed, time went by in a blur and a genuine feeling of accomplishment swept over me at the end of the day. That was also when, at the tender age of twenty-five, I was ready to let off some steam. I wasn't the only one either.

We rarely flew at night, so evenings were spent at the Black Cat Officer's Club playing cards, tossing back a few cold ones, or writing letters home and listening to music on the tape decks in our rooms. There were other entertainment opportunities as well, like half court basketball next to our newly constructed Third Platoon hangar. Spirited competition between some of the Catkiller pilots and Marine AOs seemed to become a natural extension of our time spent together in the air. Every Tuesday night some of us would pile into the platoon's $\frac{3}{4}$ ton truck and make the five-mile drive to the Stone Elephant Navy Club in Da Nang for Steak Night. There we could purchase a steak dinner for \$2.50. It was fare fit for a king. We picked out our own steak, which we then grilled ourselves at a BBQ out- side, then added a baked potato and salad. The steaks were great, but the highlight of the evening was all

the vanilla ice cream covered with chocolate sauce that we could eat!

The evening was topped off by the ride back to Marble Mountain. It was especially memorable if Capt. Dave Latimer was with us. Dave was a West Point grad and the unofficial leader of the platoon. He had a ready smile, a quick wit, seemed to be really squared away in regard as to how to stay alive when flying, and was just a little bit irreverent for a West Pointer who didn't seem to be impressed by rank. We lieutenants followed him around like a bunch of baby ducks. Dave also had another talent that was quite impressive: he had a natural ear for picking up foreign language and could converse a fair amount in Vietnamese. This singular talent of his always made our ride home interesting because we would stop at the little cluster of shanties along the side of the road just a few blocks before the main gate to Marble Mountain Airfield. They were made of what appeared to be scrap lumber and covered with flattened soda and beer cans that had been nailed to the outside for additional protection from the elements. They were inhabited by several Vietnamese working girls. What is allegedly the world's oldest profession had taken a toehold in what we referred to as The Rabbit Patch. Of course, it was off limits to U.S. personnel and was periodically raided by U.S. military law enforcement. Any U.S. military personnel found there were supposedly dealt with harshly under the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

This was another face of war that isn't talked about very much, but has existed since mankind decided that armed conflict was a way to settle differences of opinion. To the conqueror goes the spoils and those

who are invaded learn to adapt or perish.

It seemed that several Vietnamese civilian families lived there, including children, a couple of old men and one man who appeared to be in his early 30s. He was missing one leg above the knee and moved about with the aid of crutches. He may have been a Vietnamese soldier wounded in the war or maybe he had simply stepped on a mine or been somehow terribly injured by some other means. The bottom line was that he was severely limited in what he could do and didn't seem to be employed or employable, so he just sat around. I surmised that the ladies plying their trade to lonesome Marines who frequented the place were the only means of support for the families who lived in the can-covered shanties by the side of the road.

As officers, we weren't about to push the "proper conduct" envelope very far, so there was no way that we were going to get out of the truck. But as Birddog pilots, we tended to live near the edge, so having a little fun by pretending that we were interested in what these ladies were selling was exciting. We considered it harmless fun, but looking back, I don't think our mothers would have appreciated our behavior. We would stop the truck at the side of the road in front of one of the shanties, remaining in the vehicle. The working ladies would quickly gather and begin offering their services chanting:

"No MP, no VD, five hundred P, you boom-boom me."

Funny how kids and hookers always seemed to pick up English pretty quickly wherever American servicemen turned up around the world.

The ladies all smelled strongly of Listerine ointment and tried their best to convince us to get out of the truck and come into one of the shanties with them. We never did, but Dave would jabber at them in Vietnamese until one of them, who was, as we say, “quite well endowed,” lifted up her top in an attempt of enticement. That done, we would drive off quite pleased with ourselves and the little game we had played. I guess I could try to justify this rather childish behavior by saying that we were just letting off steam and nobody was really hurt. But truth be told, we weren’t really holding up our mission of “winning the hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese.

Our off time didn’t always involve questionable behavior. There was a Base Exchange nearby where we would go periodically to buy film, magazines, various sundry items and maybe a tape deck, camera or watch. There was also an excellent beach and the quite warm water of the South China Sea just across the runway. We worked hard, played and relaxed when we could, ate pretty well, had hot showers, toilets that flushed and got to sleep between clean sheets. I had even managed to scrounge a huge wall-mounted 220-volt air conditioner. I had talked a couple of Seabees into mounting it on the wall of our hooch and hooking it up for a couple of bottles of hard liquor. Enlisted Seabees and Marines were not allowed hard liquor, only beer, so they definitely felt like they got the better end of the deal. This thing must have been the equivalent of a 3-ton unit and should have kept the 12 by 12-foot room that I shared with my roommate, Jan Smith, ice cold. What I didn’t know was that it was nearly out of freon. I’m pretty sure the folks that I had scrounged it from knew this and just wanted to get rid of it. There was

just enough freon in it to provide a little bit of cool air, so Smitty and I did sleep a bit more comfortably than our comrades in the rooms next door. It's a good thing that the energy police weren't around in those days, because the ratio of cool-down to electricity consumed by that huge 220-volt monster was pretty low.

Overall, life in the Third Platoon at Marble Mountain was pretty good considering I was in a war zone. Between a varied and manageable flying schedule, a fair amount of off time to shop at the China Beach Exchange, the beach right across the runway, the Black Cat O-Club and the Navy Stone Elephant Club for steak night, the only things missing were females. The U.S.O. and the Red Cross tried to help us here as well, and sometimes, as if by magic, civilian members of the opposite sex would arrive out of the blue.

One October afternoon, a covey of very attractive females descended upon the Marble Mountain Air Facility. All the troops in Vietnam were occasionally blessed with a visit from gals someone had dubbed "Donut Dollies." These ladies were young women from back in the United States who volunteered under the auspices of the Red Cross to come to Vietnam and spend time with the troops. They would show up unannounced and bring a slice of home with them, playing cards, smiling, laughing, and sometimes just listening to lonesome young men a long way from home. These gals were like your sister or maybe even your mom. They were good listeners and were always smiling and in good cheer, even though their hearts may have been breaking for the guys they were trying to cheer up. Some were cute, some were pretty,

but they all were “Round Eyes” and that made them beautiful! They were also dedicated, patriotic Americans who in their own way were heroes.

Our Third Platoon had to rely on the 282nd for billeting, meals and most importantly, the Black Cat O-Club, which had a real poker table, a juke box filled with current popular songs, live entertainment, and a bar. The O-Club was always well occupied every evening and the booze flowed freely. Most of the pilots in the 282nd were young warrant officers, many of them barely 21 years of age. Absolute professionals when it came to flying their helicopters during the day and party animals at night in their little O-Club. The entrance to the club consisted of a full outside door, a short entry area and actual swinging “wild west” doors that opened into a well-appointed interior with a stage and simple but more than adequate bar. Inlaid in the floor just inside the swinging doors was the 282nd unit logo consisting of a large yellow circle and a large, black, three- legged Cat. It was placed intentionally so that as you walked through the swinging doors, you had to step to your left or right to avoid stepping on the Cat. If you stepped straight ahead, you would step on the Cat. If you stepped on the Cat, you got to “buy the bar.” That meant that you got to buy everyone who was in the club a drink. Even at .50 cents a drink, it could be expensive when the club was full of pilots. Which it usually was.

On this particular afternoon in 1967, several Donut Dollies graced the 282nd and by default, the Third Platoon of the 220th Catkillers at Marble Mountain with their presence. They were, of course,

accompanied by several field grade officers and the usual company grade straphangers. Everyone was in high spirits and smiles and laughter swirled around them like a heavy perfume. Noticeable, and notable, among the young ladies was a tall, statuesque, drop-dead gorgeous black gal. She had a million dollar smile, all the right curves in all the right places and quite rightly seemed to be the absolute center of attention for everyone, especially a tall, handsome black captain from the 282nd. Later that afternoon, after the Black Cat Officers Club opened, the beautiful young lady reappeared on the arm of the black captain. We immediately dubbed him, "Captain Wonderful," and skulked around in a state of absolute depression and jealousy at his good fortune. Of course, he didn't help matters much by parading her in front of us, obviously his date, as we silently envisioned ways to eliminate him and steal away with the prize. Ah, but happiness verging on a state of ecstasy has its price.

After strolling with his "date" around the company area for all to see, Captain Wonderful steered her toward the Black Cat O-Club, undoubtedly to ply her with liquor and attempt a conquest. Most of us were convinced that was his intent. Hell, that's what we would have done.

I was already sitting at the bar when Captain Wonderful and his *date* entered the Club. Being an officer and a gentleman, Captain Wonderful gallantly held the outside door of the O-Club open for his lady and moved forward with great élan to push the swinging doors open for her. A grand entrance was in the making for Captain Wonderful and his

prize. And then, it happened.

The Donut Dolly strode straight ahead, chin high, a lovely smile upon her face. She was the center of attention with her proud, righteously confident escort following right behind her. And then it struck Captain Wonderful. His Donut Dolly was gonna step on the cat. And the O-Club was packed!

Pilots, good ones at least, have pretty good reflexes and those of Captain Wonderful were exemplary. Without hesitation (and without, I'm sure, conscious thought) he reached out with his free hand and violently yanked his Donut Dolly back! Two things then happened simultaneously: first, Miss Donut Dolly, thinking she was being assaulted, quickly pulled her arm loose from Captain Wonderful's grasp and gave him a look that would strike any mere mortal dead, then she stepped on the Cat!

A loud cheer arose from everyone inside the O-Club. Not only were we all going to get a free drink, compliments of the now hapless and completely deflated Captain Wonderful, but we, the unwashed masses, were to get our revenge. If we couldn't have her, he wasn't going to get her either! Combat does strange things to young men, especially when you toss a beautiful woman into the mix.

Yep, entertainment came in many forms and we were fortunate to receive it, especially when compared to the grunts who spent their entire tour in the boonies slogging through nasty rice paddies or NVA infested jungle.