



FIRST FLIGHT, AN AVIATION MECHANIC'S STORY

Edited and arranged by Dennis Currie

Growing up in Newburgh, Indiana, with your father president of the school board, had a serious influence on any decisions you made in life. So two months prior to my graduation from Castle High School, I made the decision to enlist in the army. Yes, that's correct—my service number began with RA and preceded every entry into the mess hall, as I worked my way through basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky. Ah, yes, I do remember the marches up and down those infamous hills named *Agony* and *Misery*. However, in as short of time as it took for basic I was through my engine schools at Fort Eustis, Virginia.

The orders came quickly for Vietnam, as it did for many of my generation. I came into the country at Saigon and ended up in a camp of replacement personal. My orders were to report to the 1st Aviation Brigade. But, I was held there doing odd jobs for about two weeks. I was finally put on a flight to Da Nang and reported to the 1st Aviation Brigade Headquarters. I was held there about two days, waiting for transportation to Phu Bai, and somehow I wound up in a convoy headed for that far away city. As we drove out from Da Nang, I could not help but think, *'What a beautiful country,'* with rice paddies dotting the countryside, and the little villages we drove through were like nothing I had ever seen. Many vehicles on the road were little three-wheeled carts with small engines, some carts with water buffalo pulling them, and busses full of people with the tops full of their personal belongings.



My first view of Hai Van Pass was *Wow!* There were bunkers on the hill side, about every fifty yards; however, about half way up the mountain we encountered a problem. One of the trucks broke down, and as we pulled up behind the disabled truck I looked back down the mountain and traffic had started to back up. I climbed out of our vehicle to assist, and we raised the hood and tried to find the problem. However, not familiar with diesel engines I was stumped. Down the hill a jeep approached us, and the driver butted up to the front bumper of the truck and jumped out and onto the hood of the disabled truck.

As he looked down into the engine he said, "I have two questions, what is wrong with the truck?" The driver said, "It just quit." His second question was, "What are you hauling?" "Three pallets of beer and some parts," said the driver. He looked at the driver of our truck and asked, "Can you push him?" Our driver replied, "I don't know." "Well let's try," was the response, "I need him in that wide spot just up the road. Ok!"

We butted our bumper to the truck and tried to push, but the back tires hopped and smoked. "Put it in all-wheel drive," the jeep driver said, and after grinding gears we dropped into all-wheel drive and low gear, and finally the truck started to move. The jeep then guided us to the wide spot in the road. Traffic started to flow up the pass once again. After enlisting about fifteen or twenty Vietnamese to help, we unloaded the beer from the broken down truck—half on our truck and the rest on another truck. I asked, "What about the parts?" "Leave them", he said, and I quote, "*I can show up in Phu Bai with all the beer and no one will care about the parts. But if I show up without the beer, they will hang us all!*"

I didn't know at this time, but a wrecker was just minutes away. The jeep pulled out in the flow of traffic and stopped all traffic. He said, "Move out," and up the hill we started again. At the top, we found the jeep driver waiting for us. I didn't even see him go by.

We started down the other side. About halfway down, we slowed to a crawl, as I heard, "Hey, you going any were near a mail box?" "Yes", I said. "Mail these for me; my girl probably thinks I found someone else". He jumped up on the running board and handed me a stack of letters. "Thanks", he said and jumped down. I mailed those letters from Phu Bai that evening. The rest of the trip through many little villages and past many rice fields was without incident. I was finally let out at the front arches of the 220th Aviation Company, and once again, *Wow!* I was impressed.

I was assigned a small room with a bed, footlocker and stand-up locker. I followed everyone to the mess hall were I was treated to a great meal. Back to my room I started putting away my gear, with people dropping by to welcome me to the 220th, and telling me were everything was. However, that first night was short lived, with sirens at 3:00 am and me wondering where was that bunker? So, I just followed everyone, and it was back in bed at 3:15 am, with breakfast at 6:00 am, roll call at 7:00 am, and the beginning of the new work day.



In this photo is Sammy (our electrician), and down at the end of the walk was the movie house. The last building on left was my room's location. The young lady in the center took care of our room, washed our clothes, and polished our boots. In back of me would have been the barbershop, at the end of the walk the mess hall, and turning left the CQ and the famous arches. Boy, I loved this place. By the way, on the other side of the movie house was the volleyball court. You must read Phil Caverhill's story to appreciate the volleyball court!!!

We usually walked down to the hangar, as it was not that far from the arch. I was told that there was a field hospital next door, and a dog kennel. I still wonder how these two units got together. The hangar was old but quit adequate for our use. To the left, as you entered, was a room used for offices, and along the back wall a room used as the tool room.

Leading out to the rear was a door to a courtyard with shop trailers. These were the electronics and radio departments. As you moved to the right from the rear door, there were two doors, whose entrances were to the engine shop, followed by the prop and sheet metal shop. Over the top of the shop was storage, simply filled with a lot of junk. I walked into the engine shop, and there was a young man who asked me a question I will never forget, “Were have you been?” He then gave me some keys (engine shop, and tool box) and said, “I am a truck mechanic and I want to go home,” and began to walk out of the shop. As he did I asked, “What are we working on?” “Engine change—new engine on the stand,” he replied and pointed.

This whole conversation took two minutes, tops, and then I stood there alone. I turned around and looked at the half-assembled engine, with no magnetos, no plugs or wires and no exhaust. Well, time to go to work. I spent most of the morning aligning the magnetos—remember they must both fire at the same time, or oops! Mag drop; no pilot wants a mag drop. Someone came by and yelled lunch. We all filtered up to the mess hall and had lunch. I returned to the hanger around 1:00 pm. After installing the plugs, wires and exhaust, I rolled the engine out to the aircraft in the hanger. With a little help from some fellow crewmembers, we installed the engine on the plane. Proud of my work, I called for the tech inspector, a very nice person, who they called *Barnie*, which by the way was what they called me. *Barnie* walked around the plane for some time just shaking his head, finally handing me a gig list a mile long. Listed were: no safety wire on the exhaust, no safety wire on the plug leads, no paint on the engine basket nuts, etc.. I took the list and walked away, ‘*Picky, Picky, Picky,*’ I said to myself.



The Hanger Crew 1968—69

I finished the list in record time and summoned *Barnie* once again. This time he came with a flash light. “Oh No,” I said. *Barnie*’s trip around the plane took twice as long as the first. “Not bad— here is your list.” This time there were only thirteen things wrong, including five that I had to redo. I remember this number, because I said to myself, ‘good number,’ *Barnie*.

By the time I had finished the repairs, the prop guys had installed the prop. One more time, and *Barnie* (by the way, he is now on my poop list) came for the final inspection. One prop bolt not painted, all else okay! The prop crew painted the bolt, and we pushed the plane out to the run up pad. As this was my first plane to run up, I was proud when I entered the cockpit. I looked on both sides of the plane and yelled, “CLEAR,” out the window. My hands were shaking, as I rotated the engine several times to make sure it was free, while leaving the magneto switch off. “CLEAR, CONTACT,” I yelled, turning on the magneto switch as I hit the starter one more time.

After a few turns the engine caught and fired to life—pouring black smoke from its exhaust. Wow! Was all I could think as I ran the engine until it came up to temperature—as I was taught in school. I revved it to about 1500 rpm’s, then reduced it to 900 rpm’s, followed by 2000 rpm’s, and finally back to 900 rpm’s. *Barnie* came by, opened the door and looked at the gages, giving me the thumbs up.

Barnie is now off my poop list, as I continue running the engine for about one hour, running it up and down and switching from one magneto to the other and finally back to both. It sure sounded sweet. I finally decided it was broke in and ready as I shut the engine down.

No sooner than I turned it off and here came people from everywhere in the shop. Sheet metal guys put the cowling back on, the engine and prop guys reworked the prop, and yes Barnie took one last look at the work. When they were done they rotated the plane and faced it away from the hanger. Barnie had me sign the log and document that I installed the engine. My first one, I was so proud! I took one last look at my work and headed back to the engine shop.

My first look at Captain Kovach, or “Bear” as he was affectionately referred to, was when he threw me a helmet and said, “Let’s go.” “What! No, I fix them, I don’t fly in them!” “Oh yes you do!” he replied. Now, thinking as fast as I could, I said, “I have to clean my shop and put the old engine in storage, I don’t have time to fly.” “Let’s go,” were the last words I remembered, as he threw his helmet in the seat of the plane. We walked around the plane lifting, turning and even kicking the tires. “Get in,” he said, as I thought, ‘Oh my, he is really going to make me do this.’ “Can I smoke a cigarette?” “Later,” he said, “I don’t want to miss evening chow!” “Yes, let’s go to chow and think this over”, I said. “In!” as he pointed to the back seat. As I climbed in, I didn’t want to show it, but I was shaking so hard I thought he would feel the plane shaking.

Seat belt on, helmet on, trying to hold my knees so they would quit knocking, then, over the intercom, “Ready?” he inquired. I pushed the button and replied, “Ready!” He fired the engine and checked for a mag drop, and over the radio I heard “Phu Bai Tower this is” —I can’t remember the plane number, but I remember praying for them to say sorry we are closed. But they didn’t, and clearance was given as we left the hangar area. I can’t remember how many were standing there, but they had their hats over their hearts and their heads down, at this time it dawned on me, ‘I don’t have a chute,’ when the engine revved up, and we started to roll.

First the tail came up, and then I felt the wheels leave the ground, climbing and turning at the same time. The plane suddenly dropped, as the radio crackled in my ear, “Well, a little rough today.”

Do you recall that lunch we had a little while ago? Well, I was fighting to keep whatever was left in there were it was, I heard “You okay back there?” “Yes sir,” I answered (lie, lie, lie). I looked out the side window, what a view! Wow! You have to be kidding me, as I have never seen anything like this before. I soon forgot my fear, starting to enjoy the flight. “Well, let’s see if this engine is any good,” crackled the radio.

Well it sounds okay to me, I said to myself, as we nosed up and the throttle moved forward as the engine came to life. As we started to climb, I could hear the engine start to strain as we fell off to the right. “Good,” I heard him say, as we fell a few feet then leveled off. We then repeated this maneuver once again, and I am now over my fear and I love this. “Feels good,” Captain Kovach said. “Now, they put a new wing on the left side, let’s test it out” came another response; however, I was thinking, *wing test*, no let’s go get a wingman and let him ride that test flight.

We climbed for some time, all the while I thought, ‘How do you test a wing?’ I found out, as we went weightless, and the plane fell for what I thought was about one hour, but was really a few seconds. When we came out of the dive, I felt as though I had gained five hundred pounds. I kept looking out the left side thinking, ‘Will it snap off?’ The plane leveled off. “Well, they did a good job,” the captain said over the radio. “Let’s head home.”

The ride home was way too short—I was in love with flying, and I couldn’t get it out of my system. To this day I still love to fly, small or large aircraft, I don’t care, as long as I’m in the air. Thank you, Captain Kovach, for the greatest flight I have ever been on. Back on the ground the captain signed off the test flight and sent the plane back to the flight line. I locked up the shop and headed for chow, as most of the others had already left. That night, as I wrote to my girlfriend, I could not get out of my mind how much fun I had that day—and we were in a *war zone*. Oh, by the way, Captain Kovach, if you are reading this I found out later there was no wing change on that plane. You got me good! But you didn’t get my lunch.



CPT John E. "Bear" Kovach, Catkiller 16/8



photo Joe Barnett
Catkiller Mechanic,
1968-69
maintenance hanger

Working on a Birddog in the hangar

After leaving Vietnam and returning home, I had made a temporary decision to stay in the service. However, as with all temporary decisions, my calling was elsewhere. Oh well! So, I hired into ALCOA in 1971, as a floor sweeper, and during that time I met my first wife, to whom I was married until 1985. We had a son that we named Joseph Jr. However, this was not a good relationship, and I thank God and the Greyhound bus service that she left my life. In 1986, I married a wonderful woman named Karen, who had a son by the name of Maverick. Because he was the oldest of the boys, he became known affectionately as #1 son. I continued working for ALCOA until I retired in 2005. I was promoted to the safety and training department. There I spent time training new employees and outside contractors, maintaining their records before they began working in our departments. I was also the computer person for our department, performing the updates to the technical manuals as changes took place. Once a month I held safety meetings for the people who worked on the floor. I loved my job, but my health began deteriorating, requiring an open-heart surgery in 2005. Finally it was determined by my doctor that I could no longer work. By 2010, the US Government declared me 100 percent disabled from my exposure to Agent Orange. However, they gave me the greatest gift I could ever have, which was free time, and I spend every minute of it with my family.

Today I have two granddaughters (who belong to Maverick). One is named Ashley, and she lives in Texas. I miss her very much. Our other granddaughter, Tiffany, lives here in Evansville, Indiana. She is a hairdresser, and her husband works for Berry Plastic's as an engineer. I have three great-grandchildren, Hannah, Landon and Kendal, all from Tiffany. Now, we have found out that another one on the way, and by the grace of modern technology, we know that his name will be Zeb, short for Zebadiah.

I am inclosing a Picture of me with my hobby, and as you can see I love planes. I also have helicopters (all remote control models).



JOE BARNETT, EVANSVILLE, INDIANA