

Dear John

Francis Doherty

Forward Observation Base 2, Kontum, April 1970

It was April Fools Day, 1970, and I was flying a reconnaissance mission over the western sector of our area of operations, the really bad sector, the worst of Laos. I had been up since about 4 a.m. and launched alone. Trail recon, flying so low my Bird Dog was almost touching the treetops, looking for flickers of headlights, any kind of movement, truck noise if I eased the Bird Dog's engine back to idle. Maybe I didn't see anything, or maybe the North Vietnamese weren't working today (that would be an all-time first!) or maybe they heard me overhead and lay low, waiting for me to leave. I stayed airborne until I was almost out of gas, then headed to Dak To to refuel and try to find something in a green-brown can that pretended to be breakfast. I managed the gas but not the breakfast.

Two Huey gunship drivers grabbed me as I climbed out of my airplane.

"You gotta give us a hand at Dak Seang. It's being overrun and we can't get no Tac Air. DASC (direct air support control) won't spring for air and the Green Beanies are gettin' clobbered. We're all by ourselves. You gotta help us, Dai uy," which was Vietnamese for Captain.

"Okay. Just let me fill up my tanks and switch out my Willie Pete for Nails and H.E. I'll be right behind you."

I taxied to the runway as they lifted off one behind the other, stubby versions of the troop-carrying Hueys. Flying gun platforms, these helicopters. That's what they were. Rockets, mini-guns, door-mounted .30 caliber machine guns. Lethal. As they climbed northwest toward Dak Seang, I eased the Bird Dog's engine up to takeoff power, and as we gained speed down

the runway I let the control stick come to neutral and the tail wheel came up, free from the airstrip. A heartbeat or two more and we were flying. I kept my rate of climb to a shallow three hundred feet a minute and left the power up to gain speed, to catch the two gunships ahead of me. To hurry to Dak Seang, where a young man about my age would head up a small group of sappers in an assault on a section of barbed wire, to blow a hole in it, to charge through the hole into the Green Beret camp and kill everyone in it. He almost succeeded.

I saw him in his brown uniform and pith helmet, an AK in one hand and a canvas sack in the other. The sack was a bomb and he was going to throw it at the coils of razor wire that surrounded this place. I saw him running and flipped the switches to arm my inboard rockets. He was at the head of his squad, moving as fast as he could through a trench his men spent the night digging. I was barely two hundred feet above the ground. I fired the right inboard rocket first. Nails. Flechettes. Little darts. Far enough away for my rocket to arm, close enough for the darts to remain tightly packed, like a swarm of angry bees. The lower half of him disappeared in a puff of red mist. His head was flung back, his face tilted toward the sun, his arms spread out from his sides and tangled in the wire. The soldier's AK flew off in one direction, his bomb's canvas sack in another. His squad melted into the trench. They must have, because I didn't see them anymore. But he was dead, and I killed him. He was dead, and I saw him die.

I had never seen anyone die. Dead? Yes. Die? No. I killed these soldiers indirectly, called in air strikes on them, had bombs dropped on them, had rockets fired at them, called in nape on them. But I never pulled my airplane's trigger and killed someone, and watched that someone die. Until today. I believed this young man must have beckoned to the boy that was me this morning, and the boy that was me disappeared. Gone for good. The world would be different now.

* * *

I looked at an envelope lying on my bunk, waiting for me since this afternoon, after staggering back, sick to my stomach, from Dak Seang. Flimsy airmail paper, sent from San Francisco. The return address? Of course it was recognizable. Hers. I was surprised to get a letter because our regular method of communication had been by cassette tapes sent back and forth. Newsy monologues. She would talk about her classes at the University of San Francisco, friends from school, the patients she saw as a student nurse, older people that were called special friends. My newsy monologue? A lot of uneventful, unexciting, unscary untruths. Outright lies, actually. Because I couldn't tell her what I was really doing. On my cassettes to her I made everything up.

I studied the envelope without opening it. Then the siren began to blare. And I was on the floor, the letter jammed into my filthy flight suit shirt, my steel pot on my head and my AR's sling clamped in my fist, low-crawling for the bunker. Mortars slammed into the compound. Some seemed to be crashing into buildings right around the corner from where I was trying to slither to safety. Small arms fire too. Ours and theirs. AKs don't sound the same as M16s. The rattle of the rifles was coming from a different part of our compound. Did the NVA breach our concertina? I think they may have. "Stay away from our side of the wire," I muttered. I was a terrible shot with a rifle. Was this goddamn day ever going to end?

Once inside the bunker I sat with my back against its sand-bag walls, barely breathing, trying not to make a sound, but holding the envelope up to the little light seeping through the bunker's openings. It was too dark to read it. I tried to read it anyway, but truth be told, I didn't really need to because I had a pretty good idea of what was written on that thin paper. Something she couldn't say any other way. She didn't trust her own voice to a cassette. I knew

that I'd have to keep the letter too. Save it for the JAG lawyer who I hoped could help me with this. More letters would follow this one. Formal letters, legalese, documents to sign. I would, however, have to respond to this letter that I was holding. Just not yet.

The North Vietnamese had stopped trying to kill me, at least for the moment. They had packed up their mortar tubes and faded back into the night. I couldn't make out the letter's words because the only real light in here would have had to come from my flashlight. And that got left back in the hooch. I wouldn't have turned it on in here anyway. The NVA may have stopped shelling, they may have backed away from the compound, but that didn't mean a sniper wasn't hanging around in the tree line beyond the perimeter's barbed wire. One well-placed shot could have made my flashlight-lit face a memory, my name a fragment of history. I was barely known and would quickly be forgotten.

The envelope was sweaty from being stashed in my shirt, next to my skin, and now sweatier from the moist grime of my fingers. I folded it and put it in my shirt pocket, protected from the dripping air that let me know where I was. Humidity was almost always present in the Central Highlands. I put the envelope on my bunk and opened my storage box. It used to house Willie Pete rockets. Now a bottle of Johnny Walker shared the space with underwear I never wore. Too sweaty for olive-drab boxers and t-shirts.

Scotch splashed into a metal cup. No ice. Who had ice? Air Force sissies, that's who. They weren't as bad as the Navy sissies, who probably drank their scotch out of cut crystal. With ice. The only troopers worse off than us were the Marines. They didn't even have toothpaste. I gulped scotch and reached for the letter, deciding that I couldn't put off opening it much longer. But I did because Phil and Doug came through the door and slugged down scotch straight from the bottle.

"We got caught on the other side of the compound. Crawled into the bunker by the main gate. There was some small-arms fire near us. Anything take a hit over here?" Doug asked. Then Phil saw the letter. Pointing at it with the scotch bottle he didn't wait for my answer. "That looks like bad news. Do you want us to leave while you read it? You are going to open it and read it, aren't you?" Phil eyed me expectantly. I believed what I thought about "arm's length." But I knew these two. I wasn't able to tell you if they had brothers and sisters. But I could tell you about their courage. I slit the envelope open with my pen knife. And pulled out two sheets of almost transparent paper. The first sentence was like a straight jab to my nose.

"Let me guess. 'It's not you, it's me.' She didn't say that, did she?" Phil asked. "She did, didn't she!"

"No," I replied. "Not that. 'I want a divorce. I've met someone and I've fallen in love. I didn't mean for this to happen, but it did.' Good God." I looked around the room. There were almost as many dust motes floating in the weak light as there were exhausted clichés in her first couple of sentences. I felt like her excuses were going to strangle me. I gulped the rest of the scotch in my cup and poured a four fingers shot this time. They just watched me and said nothing for a few minutes.

"Look, Frank, tomorrow's gonna suck," Doug finally said. If you get to wandering around and you're not concentrating then bad things happen. Have a migraine, and we'll figure something out."

"I'll be okay. I'm pissed, but I'm good to go. Let's get this mission over with." With the exception of the letter, tomorrow would be just another day.

* * *

*"Ah Suzie Q. Ah Suzie Q.
Ah Suzie Q, Baby I love you,
Suzie Q."*

The damn letter wasn't going to let me sleep so I walked out to the bunker line. As I approached it I sang a few lines from "Suzie Q." The Nung (ethnic Chinese) mercenaries who guarded this compound would recognize me because I always used Creedence as my way of letting them know that it was me. They didn't understand a word of the lyrics but they've heard me sing this before. I always sang it as I approached the bunker line so that they wouldn't shoot me.

The Nung guard I saw most often on these night-time visits poked his head out from inside the bunker, looked at me and smiled. Stars cluttered the sky, and his gold toothed smile flashed some of the night sky's glow at me. I nodded and smiled back. He reached his hand toward me, his palm gently cupped the side of my face. He stared at me for a moment, then took his hand away. The expression he wore said that maybe tonight he didn't see the boy Captain he used to know.

Nungs have been in Vietnam for decades, here when the French were here. My friend was probably here when the French occupied Indochina.

"Bonsoir, mon ami," I whispered, thinking that he might understand a little French. I knew a little. Very little.

"Bonsoir, mon ami." he answered. These were the very first words we said to one another. Not in my English, not in his Chinese, but in French. And then this man who was becoming my friend ducked back into the bunker and took his place at one of the gun ports in

the sandbags. I half-rolled onto the bunker's roof, staying as flat as I could. If I sat up my profile could easily be picked out in the moonlight by a sniper in the not too distant jungle. I positioned my AR so that my hand hit the trigger guard and the throat of the stock, making it easy to grab. Just in case.

As I stretched out on the sand-bagged roof of the same bunker I sat on every time I came out here, I remembered a story my Uncle Dig, my mother's younger brother, told me. Dig always listened to a late-night DJ on his way home from work. Long John Neville, who broadcast in the middle of the night, and claimed that he could travel to Mars on the notes of his saxophone. I was able to see Mars tonight. Long John Neville always made Uncle Dig laugh. My uncle's story made me laugh. I needed to laugh, especially now, to reassure myself that I was still able to. I lay back, my palms cradling my head, and looked up at the sky. No ambient light here, so the whole of the universe was visible. All of it. Stars stacked on stars that seemed to go up forever.

She found someone, she wrote. She didn't mean for this to happen, that it just did. And she had fallen in love. She didn't say with whom, or where or when. She just said that she was in love with someone else, and that someone wasn't me. That was what her letter said. That someone wasn't me. I shut my eyes. Not to doze but to squeeze out everything but this one thought that refused to be shoved aside. She said, "I don't love you anymore." Her words turned me inside out. Do we need to do this now? Why now?

Did doubts whisper? Did they sneak up in the dark, wiggle around inside my brain and ask me questions I didn't want to answer? Because the question self-doubt was asking was so uncomfortable. That one question in particular kept hammering away. I opened my eyes and whispered to no one and everyone but most importantly to myself that maybe I never really

loved the girl to whom I was married. I didn't feel relieved. I needed to get a handle on this admission, to try to sort out what I felt. I needed to be sure that I wasn't reacting to her "I don't love you anymore" out of anger, retaliating because she poked her finger into my heart, the heart I wore on my sleeve.

A slight breeze began to move the soaked air a little. The illusion of cool. Thanks to the letter I hadn't slept at all, and soon enough the alarm in our hooch would buzz softly. Softly would wake Phil, who slept as lightly as I did. Our other roommate, Doug, could sleep through anything. Even sirens.

Barely perceptible trembling announced the presence of B-52s turning Laos into a collage of craters and shattered, twisted, splintered trees. I wondered if they were pounding the area we were going to photograph in a few hours. Time to see if the water was turned on in the latrine, and if the showers worked. Maybe with hot water. I slid off the bunker's roof and waved a thumbs up to the Nung who was awake, my friend, who stuck his head out of the bunker I was sitting on. I received a gold-toothed smile in return, then headed back to our hooch. I liked these guys, the Nungs, especially the guy with the gold tooth. He always had a smile for me, and his tooth almost always flashed a little of whatever moonlight or starlight there was. But I wondered if I'd recognize any of them during the day. I had never seen them in broad daylight. They were asleep and I was usually flying, from before dawn until just dark.

* * *

The end of March signaled the beginning of Spring, the bloodiest five months of my war, the worst stretch of days, that lasted through the summer, week after week, and didn't end for me until the beginning of September, when my Company Commander, Arlie Deaton, and I flew down to Qui Nhon, where I saluted him, and then hugged him. I was crying. Because I was going

home, I had survived, and some friends hadn't. Once home I would have to deal with the legal consequences of this letter on flimsy air-mail paper that arrived yesterday. But it was only the beginning of April, and I still had five months left in my deployment to figure out the best way to do what I needed to do about her letter. On the roof of the bunker last night, just hours into the second day of the month, staring up at heaven, I decided that from now on I was going to have to be strong enough to get past her "I've met someone and have fallen in love." Let the job anesthetize my churning stomach. Surviving Laos was going to take every ounce of mental toughness I had.

Anger, not heartache. I was so damned angry because she could have waited until September, until I got off the airplane in San Francisco. Then, when no one was trying to kill me, she could have told me that we were over. In the meantime, she could have lied to me over the next few months that everything was good with us. Lied to me until I was safe home. Lied to me so that I could concentrate on what I was doing without getting sidetracked over a part of my life that had apparently ended. What I didn't know couldn't kill me. But what I was doing could. Especially now, because as the last minutes of March spilled into the beginning of April, the terrible days began. One after the other, with body-bags daily, until September, when I climbed on a big airplane and slept all the way to California.

This damned war had me boxed in, because she didn't know what I had been doing, and I couldn't tell her. Flying over Laos was a figment of everyone else's imagination except for the pilots who did it. Since I couldn't talk to her about the mission, she wouldn't know how dangerous it was or how deadly her letter could have been. Her letter cornered me, distracted me, diverted my attention, interrupted my concentration, and could have killed me. I decided to bury my anger as best I could, and refuse for now to hear her words tramp across my

consciousness. Don't respond to her letter for a few days. See what happens next. Cool off. Stay alive.

The letter, now opened and read twice, lay on the poncho liner that passed for a blanket on my unslept-in bunk. I had to stop thinking about it because today we were heading into a really bad section of Laos. Our alarm went off about two minutes after I crept through the hooch's door. Doug was still asleep when Phil and I left FOB2 and drove our jeep as fast as we dared to the MACV compound to pick up Ben Brown, our crew chief. Ben hopped in the front passenger seat and yawned, "Hey Dai uy" to Phil and me, then yawned again. "What time is it anyway?" It was that time when it was too dark, too early in the morning. Phil climbed in the back while Ben rode shotgun. His M-16 was locked and loaded with a full clip of ammunition. Phil's AR-15 was locked and loaded as well. Safeties off. Mine rested across my lap, its muzzle pointed away from Ben, loaded but with the safety on. The unlit dirt road to the airfield was bumpy, and it took us past the cemetery.

I raced as fast as I dared in the pitch black to the airfield. Ben and Phil had their heads down, concentrating on not falling out. I was concentrating on not running into something that decided the middle of the road was as good a place as any to stand and wait for daybreak. The little slits of headlights were turned off as we zoomed past the cemetery. We were convinced that someone was in there, among the Tao shrines and Buddha statues, with a rifle, eyes adjusted to the faint beginning of dawn, just waiting for the one time we didn't turn our jeep lights off. So we always turned them off. If I had to pick one place to ambush a jeep, this would be the place. Little pagoda-like mausoleums, shrouded in the murky dark, provided perfect hiding places. We scrambled past this cemetery every day, once in the pre-dawn and once just

past dusk, but almost never in the daylight. Our rifles were always loaded, the headlights always off, and the jeep always going near the speed of sound.

We had a photographer waiting for us. A Green Beret sergeant with a really big camera. He would be in Phil's back seat. Phil was flying "low ship" this morning and I got to be the cover ship, the high ship. Phil was going to be right down on the top of the jungle canopy. Hard to hit because he would be so low. Me, on the other hand? Me and the fucking letter that I had to stop thinking about were going to be about five hundred feet above the trees. Perfect altitude for small arms fire to find me. I should paint a bullseye on the fuselage. Make it even easier for the bad guys.

We had never met this photographer. This was his first mission, a piece of information he almost too eagerly admitted. His introduction flew out of him, words crashing into one another in a garbled jumble. And he had not stopped moving, twitching, waving his hands to punctuate his bits and pieces of biography. Moonlight glinted off his steel-rimmed glasses, flashing around like semaphore signals. Phil put his hand on the sergeant's shoulder and, letting his Tennessee accent slow the pace of the sergeant's words, said softly, "We only have one rule. Only one pass for photos. One pass and haul ass. That's the only rule, Sergeant. Our only one. Got that?"

"Roger that, Captain," he said as he jitterbugged from foot to foot. It occurred to me that the speed of his movements had tripled as we got closer to takeoff.

Standing in front of the sandbagged revetments that protected our airplanes, what would turn out to be the worst day in my life began. This was a day Phil and I only spoke about one more time. And that discussion would take place later today, in the early evening, when the Special Forces Major debriefed us. Forty years passed before Phil and I talked again about the second day in April. Neither of us could let go of it. We kept this day buried with all the rest of

the terrible days we shared. As far as I know, Phil has never even said the sergeant's name again. Ever.

We didn't exactly spell out to our photographer how bad the area was that we were going in to recon. I thought the tone of Phil's voice, by his "one pass and haul ass" statement, conveyed how seriously ugly this part of Laos could be. It was as ugly as we expected.

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Two small airplanes flipped upside-down almost simultaneously and spun toward the treetops. I was the high ship, covering Phil, so my Bird Dog stopped its descent at about eight hundred feet. Phil made one more rotation of his spin and pulled out right on the trees. We proceeded west and slipped over the next ridgeline. Phil turned north and paralleled the ridge. We used the sun, just up and at our backs, to look sideways through the jungle canopy. Morning dew reflected off the leaves, the sunlight flashing prisms on the moisture. We were at the perfect altitude to see the vine-draped floor. And see what we were looking for, amazed at what we found, terrified that people would wake up, impatient to get the hell out of this place.

A base-camp, bigger than our own compound back in Kontum, was tucked into the trees, dug into the ground, camouflaged with leaves. The occupants were probably running for their AK47s, running for the .51 caliber anti-aircraft guns we knew they had to have, as soon as they heard us. And certainly they had to have heard us. I hoped the photographer was taking all the pictures he needed and that we wouldn't be hanging around here too much longer. Finally Phil slid his Bird Dog over the eastern edge of the ridge and into the adjacent valley. Away from all of the guns. I could hear one of the .51s open up, its kachunking racket as it fired at us. Phil was still below me, but now in a slow turn. The wrong way, back to the west.

"Oh no no no no no. Don't do this," I yelled. My words flew out the big side window of my airplane where only the wind could hear them. Then I yelled at Phil over the radio, demanding that he turn back to the east, begging him to turn back to the east, swearing at him to turn back to the east. He didn't. He made a second pass. And I stayed with him, because that was my job. I could never leave Phil to make this stupid second pass alone. I could never desert my friend.

There was more than one .51 banging away at us now. The sky became a stream of green streaks. Every fifth round of an AK47 streaked green. Tracers, so that the NVA could see where they were aiming. They snapped as they went by my open windows. My Bird Dog shuddered when they hit it.

"My ailerons are shot out and I can't turn and there's blood and brains all over the cockpit!" Phil's voice a howl of fear.

"Rudder turn east and don't climb," I shouted back. I could see that one of the big machine guns, with bullets as big as beer cans, was splitting the sky behind Phil's tail. A round from an AK severed the steering cable which was connected to his tail wheel. I could see the cable dangling. Then upside-down, diving, with my nose now coming up until my home-made grease-pencil sight was on the .51, I fired my four rockets almost simultaneously. We were finally hauling ass, but catastrophe, which had become commonplace this bloody spring, announced carnage.

I was able to see Phil ahead of me, bobbing up and down but not zigzagging through the air because his aileron control cables were severed. Rounds must have clipped them as they passed through his wings. I didn't see gas streaming from Phil's wings or mine, so the self-sealing fuel tanks must have done what they were supposed to do. They closed up around the

holes in them, squeezing shut to hold in the gas that we needed to get back to Dak To. I only glanced at the undersides of my wings. I knew they were stitched up by more than a few rounds. Some slammed the back of the fuselage too. But they missed me. I didn't focus on the kachunking rhythm of the .51s. I didn't hear them anymore. Maybe we had flown away from them. Eventually we would be able to climb. But not yet. We needed to cross the border out of goddam Laos.

My mind was racing, dancing around what went wrong. Maybe the self-sealing fuel tanks were the only things doing what they were supposed to do. And the airplanes. They did what they were supposed to do. But the three of us? The wretched taste in my mouth told me that we really screwed up.

Phil hardly spoke on the way to Dak To. Phil's words, "blood and brains," were almost the last words he said that morning. I told him that I could see one of the cables that ran from his rudder to his tail wheel was severed. He'd have to use differential brakes to keep the airplane straight down the runway after he landed at Dak To. His acknowledgement was that one word, a swear word more sighed than spoken. "Fuck!" That was his final word.

I called ahead and had a Huey medevac chopper standing by to speed the sergeant to the big evac hospital at Pleiku. I did this because I needed to. Because maybe there was a chance that he was still alive. But Phil's "blood and brains all over my cockpit" signaled the futility of my knee jerk action. The rest of the way back I replayed this morning in my head. Thought about what I should have done, what I didn't do, what I should never have allowed to happen. Three things. Bad things. Bad things always come in threes.

I knew that it didn't do me any good to think about what Phil did or didn't do, or what role the sergeant played in what Phil did or didn't do. What mattered to me was what the hell

was I thinking? Why did I go along with what just happened? Why did I let him do that? I should have given Phil an East-bound heading as soon as we pulled off the target after the first pass. I should have roared at Phil over the radio to turn East when I saw him come back for the second pass. I didn't. "Please, God. He can't be doing that," I thought. We swore to one another we would never ever make a second pass. He told the sergeant we would never make a second pass. But the sergeant begged Phil to go back again over the camp. He pleaded and wheedled and cajoled Phil to go back again over the camp. Phil outranked the sergeant. He could have told the sergeant to shut the fuck up. He didn't. And me? I howled out the window at Phil, imploring him to get out. Phil didn't hear me. The radio didn't hear me. The wind outside my cockpit window did. The wind ate my words. When I finally did roar at him over the radio it was too late.

The third thing I didn't do? I didn't find the .51s until they had us bracketed. Until they were banging away at us. Until one of them sprayed the sergeant's last thoughts, last words, last flickers of life in a mist of blood that soaked the air around Phil, that covered his cockpit in bits of brains, a horror that has been chasing me, over the years, through the night, where the war was fought, again in the dark, where my nightmares lived.

* * *

Thank God the water at FOB2 was turned on this evening. My shower took forever, and Phil's shower took even longer. I stood alongside my bunk, a towel around my waist, my flip-flops squishy with soapy water that ran onto the floor of our hooch, some from my hair and some from my shoes. I held the envelope from San Francisco in my hand, then withdrew the letter. Water dribbled down my forehead and dripped onto one of its pages, smearing some of her words. It was as if the water from the shower, the water that began to scrub the events of the

morning off of me, was beginning to scrub her off of me too. I read the letter again, filling in the words the water splashes obscured. The more I read the angrier I became.

She could have given me her news just before I came home. She could have just moved in with whoever this guy was, lived with him. She was sleeping with him, obviously. I didn't need to deal with what she wanted right now. It was going to take all of my will-power to put one foot in front of the other every morning, to climb into that cockpit every morning, to come so close to death every morning.

But this morning, this awful morning, I landed at Dak To just behind Phil. I could see Phil's severed tail-wheel steering cable skipping off the dirt of the runway, little puffs of dust popping up as the cable bounced along the ground. Phil brought his airplane to a stop and a jeep pulled up alongside him. I landed, stopped just beyond Phil, shut the engine down, and ran toward Phil's Bird Dog. Two medics were lifting the sergeant from the back seat. It looked like blood had smeared all over the visor of his flight helmet. As I got closer I realized that the sergeant's visor had been shot away. And what I thought was smeared blood was what remained of the sergeant's face.

We pushed Phil's airplane clear of the runway. I opened the cockpit door to collect his AR, flight helmet and helmet bag full of spare ammo clips. Phil had his arm looped over the wing strut. I wasn't sure if he was hugging his Bird Dog or hanging on to the strut to keep from collapsing.

I put the letter, a little soggy from the shower, back on my bunk and looked over at Phil. He was moving in slow motion. At least he was moving. Water trickled in little rivulets from the back of his head down his shoulders. We've been together at this Special Forces camp since January. And if you asked me to tell you one important thing about him I couldn't. That we had

shared the insanity of these past months was our only connection. The one thing I could tell you but would have a hard time explaining was that I would die for him. Not for God or Country, for bugles or drums, the cadence of marching feet or flags snapping in the breeze. Not for Vietnam. These things did not deserve my friend. This war could not take my friend's life. Even if I only knew him momentarily. We almost died this morning. In the same place, for the same no-good reason. That counted for something. Whatever that something was, it had a whole lot more to do with love than that stupid letter on my bunk.

On my first night at FOB2, at the end of December, 1969, Doug and Phil arrived late after finishing their missions, after the mess hall closed, in a jeep Phil had just stolen. Neither one offered any details regarding the heist. I didn't care. It was a jeep, freshly painted bad-ass black, with SPAF stenciled across the windshield's frame. Sneaky Pete Air Force. That made it ours. Introductions consisted of very little personal information, words delivered slowly, sparsely, cautiously, giving away nothing. Don't get too close, don't let anyone see inside.

Did fear ever allow anybody to know anyone anyway? I didn't think it did. Fear demanded my flying partners be kept at arm's length, then there was not as much pain if one of them died. So if you asked me anything else about Phil or Doug there wouldn't have been much I could have told you. A few sketchy details. A little bit of biography maybe. But that's about it. I felt as though we had just fallen in for a parade on a very dusty field. At the command "dress right dress" I extended my left hand out to touch Phil's right shoulder with my fingertips, just as Doug touched mine. Now spaced to march in formation, we proceeded in step across a few months together, always moving a day closer to salvation, or a day closer to eternity. We never knew which.

Phil's given name was Claude, after his father, a career Army officer, and was from Knoxville, the accent that shaped his words unmistakably Southern. Sandy, Phil's wife, was from Knoxville as well, and they had been married less than a year. He may have attended college, but I don't remember him saying he did, and I didn't ask. I knew that he would tell me what he wanted me to know. And I was alright with that. Because the understanding was that the less we knew about one another the less devastating the loss of one of us would be. Doug was from Colorado. I had no idea where or even if he went to college either. I do remember that Doug was married as well, and I think her name was Jeannie, but I can't be sure.

If we talked at all, the conversation usually wandered around the events of the day, of what we saw, of trying to remember the locations of gun emplacements or ammo caches or truck parks or bridges or North Vietnamese troops, at night, in our hooch, over a few beers, and a dinner of boiled rice and dehydrated vegetables, because the mess hall was always closed when we got back. But we never let on about being terrified. Frightened yes, but frightened of making a mistake, of missing something we should have seen. Never about sweat-drenched fear. We understood that giving in to it would cause us to curl up into a ball and refuse to move. Giving in to it was not allowed. If I let fear take over, then I would never be able to make myself fly back over Laos again.

Talk seldom lingered on the past and never ventured too far into the future. The past could give away too much of us and the future could only extend cautiously forward a day or two, no further. I don't think I ever talked to Phil or to Doug about what I planned to do once I left the Army, and their future plans went unannounced to me. The only story Phil ever told about himself was how, after arriving at his R & R hotel in Honolulu, he pushed the emergency

stop on the elevator because he couldn't wait until he and Sandy got to their room. I loved that about him.

The idea of keeping each other at arm's length sounded good. But it was never true. I looked at Phil, and Doug, straight on, unblinking, registering every twitch. I didn't care what they once did or what they were eventually going to do. I cared about them in "my right now." I needed to rely on them, trust them, know that they would protect me just as much as I would protect them. I knew that I needed to keep Phil and Doug alive, defend them no matter what, because I needed them to do that for me. I really would have died for Phil, for Doug. But the rest of this war? It was just so much bullshit.

At arm's length? What did that really mean? How was it even possible? In our secret little war survival was dependent on two certainties. The first was 001534. My Bird Dog. I was sure that that airplane would somehow get me home. The other certainty? A belief that was more than friendship, more than two names, Doug and Phil, more than faith. Devotion maybe? A word men, or boys trying to be men, seldom used.

We killed piles of North Vietnamese troops. But they kept coming. We blew up their gun emplacements. But their guns kept firing. We destroyed their trucks. But the truck traffic along the Ho Chi Minh Trail was like the San Diego Freeway at rush hour. We bombed their bamboo bridges and they rebuilt them overnight. This was their country, not ours. They shouted, "Go Home." Eventually we did.

* * *

After the photographer's body was removed from Phil's airplane, one of us, and I can't remember whether it was Phil or me, taxied the shot-up Bird Dog to Dak To's dirt parking ramp. Two of our crew chiefs would have to fly here to get it flyable, and then someone would have to

fly it to our company headquarters at Camp Holloway for major repairs. Then I flew Phil and me back to Kontum in my not as badly shot-up Bird Dog, taxied to the ramp and slowly turned 001534 so she pointed tail-first towards its sand-bag revetment. Phil passed me his rifle, flight helmet and his helmet bag full of spare ammo clips after I climbed out from the front seat and then he climbed out too. We pushed the Bird Dog back into its space, tied it down, and counted bullet holes.

Phil and I trudged on toward our stolen black SPAF jeep. Me in the driver's seat, Phil riding shotgun, not seeing anything. He kept his eyes slammed shut. I drove back to FOB2. My eyes wide open, not registering anything, my head pounding.

* * *

Still wet from the shower, the towel around my waist, I reached for the letter. My fingers touched something new, a little box stamped with airmail postage that was hiding next to "Dear John." Now what? A little mailer box with a cassette tape in it. Someone must have picked up this morning's mail and dropped it off. The cassette had to be from her, because she always sent a cassette. Always. Cassettes were everyday. Not her Dear John letter. She felt that bad news needed to be presented in a real letter. A letter I had to hold, a letter I couldn't erase, like a cassette. This cassette? It had her return address on it. Her apartment's address, across the street from USF's campus. It had to be her, and I had to listen even if I didn't want to. Because I was supposed to go on R&R soon. Hawaii. Six days. She was still going to meet me, she said. She still wanted to come so that she could explain. So that I could listen. She'd be at Fort DeRussy, on the beach in Honolulu, and if she didn't see me get off the bus from the airfield she'd get on the next flight back to San Francisco, back to school, back to whomever it was that she loved now. I

played her tape a second time, then loaded it into my cassette recorder and started taping over her words.

"If you come, you come. And I'll do my best to listen to what you have to say. To understand how you feel. I don't want to know the new guy's name or anything about him. That can't be part of these six days. One more thing. Be sure you take your pill. A baby is not part of the deal."

* * *

"Say that you'll be mine. Say that you'll be mine.

Say that you'll be mine, baby all the time,

Suzie Q."

I got dressed in a t-shirt, cut-off camouflage pants (no see-me shorts) and walked out to assume my perch on the bunker's roof. The Nungs stuck their heads out of the doorway when they heard "Suzie Q." "They're not used to seeing me in the twilight," I thought. But they recognized the song, and now they're wondering why I'm here in the early dark of evening instead of my usual pitch-black night visits. I was sure they were wondering about me in Chinese. The tape recording back to her, telling her how I felt about her coming to Honolulu, was already deposited at the mailroom. Once there I couldn't get it back. Once there I figured I was committed. Get it over with. Because if I procrastinated, the hurt from her would surely kill me.

I looked out across the naked mine-field toward the tree line, maybe a hundred yards away, and climbed onto the bunker's roof. The Nung with the right front gold tooth stuck his head back out of the bunker and looked up at me. He studied my face, read the sorrow in my expression, then mimicked wiping tears from his eyes. His pantomime took the place of my

English and his Chinese. I shook my head yes, then rested my forehead on my knees. My AR was on the roof beside me, its muzzle pointing downrange, its trigger within easy reach of my right hand. I turned my head and looked at the black gun. I'm twenty-four years old, a captain, a pilot, with a gun that I can point at someone. And squeeze the trigger. And kill that person.

In this almost dark, which is turning to the blackest of nights, I think about Phil, but just for a moment. Because I know he can deal with all this better than I can. He stopped the elevator between floors, didn't he? When he was on R&R? I need to think about R&R, and decide if I even want to go.

She was there at Ft. DeRussy when I stepped off the Air Force bus from Hickam airfield, and she smiled when she saw me. I smiled back at her. We didn't say much in the cab back to Honolulu's airport, on the airplane to Maui, or on the way to the hotel on the beach at Lahaina. And I didn't stop the elevator on the way to our room. The bellman deposited our bags and left. I tossed my flight suit and boots into the closet, undressed her and guided her under a shower that streamed warm water. She scrubbed the red Central Highlands dirt from my shoulders, my neck, the back of my hands, my hair. I turned her around so she faced away from me and soaped her small breasts, her belly button, her ballerina's backside, and her vagina. I soaped her and stroked her and caressed her to orgasm, but I never kissed her, and she never asked me why. I didn't want to think about love, for me it was too much to deal with. So just orgasms. Only orgasms. I didn't want to breathe her in, I couldn't allow myself to get lost in her. When she left, when she got to the airport in Honolulu, when she left for San Francisco, when she walked up the airstairs onto the airplane, she never turned around. And when I couldn't see her anymore I never wanted to see her again.

* * *

"I love the way you walk. I love the way you talk.

I love the way you walk, I love the way you talk,

Suzie Q."

The Nung guard poked his head out from inside the bunker, looked at me and smiled. Stars cluttered the sky, and his gold toothed smile flashed some of the night sky's glow at me. I nodded and smiled back. He took my hand in his, then linked his pinky finger with mine. A Vietnamese gesture, not a Chinese gesture, of friendship between young men. He stared at me for a moment, then let go of my hand.

And then this man who was becoming my friend ducked back into the bunker and took his place at one of the gun ports in the sandbags. I half-rolled onto the bunker's roof, staying as flat as I could. If I sat up, my profile could easily be picked out in the moonlight by a sniper in the not too distant jungle. I positioned my AR so that my hand hit the trigger guard and the throat of the stock, making it easy to grab. Just in case.

* * *

After Dak Seang and then the photographer the days all ran together, undefined and indistinct from one another. Fly into Laos, get shot at, call in airstrikes which counted as shooting back, twist, turn, skid, slip, spin to avoid their bullets, wipe the rivers of sweat out of my eyes, feel my flight suit turn into a smelly wet rag, fly as close to the jungle canopy without hitting a branch or a limb or a whole tree. Death so close I could almost hear it laughing at me.

After Dak Seang and the photographer and the days that ran together, after a little more than a week passed, there had been six days of R&R, whether I wanted them to be or not. Hawaiian night sweats, teeth grinding and cursing at the dark, and scrambled eggs, and orgasms

hers and mine. She never got around to explaining to me what she wanted to explain, and I couldn't bring myself to ask her. After six days R&R ended. She got on her airplane and went back to school, and I walked to the bus that would take me to a big airplane, the one that would bring me back to Vietnam, then military transports from Tan Son Nhut to FOB2, to drop my duffle in our hooch, and finally to sit on this sandbagged bunker's roof, where the stars seemed so close I thought that maybe I could reach up, grab on, and pull myself up one star after another until I reached heaven. And I could stay up there, and hide from death, and live forever.

Phil and Doug were both awake when I tiptoed into our hooch. I took the scotch bottle and poured us all three fingers into well-seasoned cups. And took her letter out of my foot locker. Under her signature I wrote, "Do whatever you want. You're free to go." Then folded the pages so her signature was the first thing she'd see. So that my addition to her letter would jump off the page at her. I tucked her pages back into her envelope, then into a new envelope addressed to her in San Francisco. I handed my friends their cups of Johnny Walker, picked up mine, and said "done!" Doug said, "Now concentrate, for Christsakes." Then Phil jumped in. "Don't let her fucking kill you. Everybody in Laos is trying to kill you, and us, and that's enough."



Captain Doherty in his O-1 Bird Dog over Laos as part of a two-ship reconnaissance mission, 1970

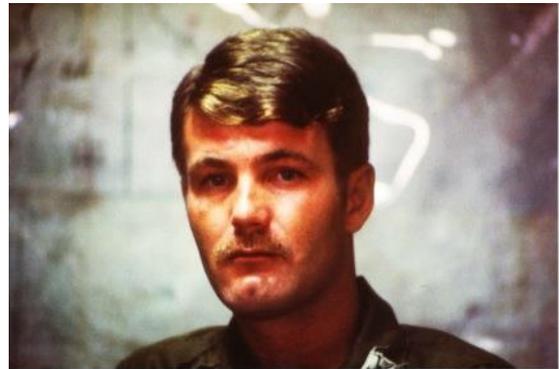
Francis A. Doherty, an Army Captain, flew as a Bird Dog pilot assigned to the 219th Aviation Company (Headhunters), based at Camp Holloway, in Vietnam's Central Highlands. He arrived in country in September 1969, and volunteered to fly covert reconnaissance missions for the



Doherty in his O-1 Bird Dog near Mekong, 1970

Special Forces Studies and Observations Group (Command and Control Central) out of Dak To from late November of 1969 until returning home in September 1970. These missions were conducted predominately over Southeast Laos. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, twenty-four Air Medals, two Bronze Stars, and a Distinguished Unit Citation. Francis left the

Army in 1972 and spent the next thirty-two years as a commercial airline pilot with Western and Delta Airlines, retiring as an International Captain in 2004. His essay "Do I Die Today?" is published in *Creative Nonfiction.*, issue 77 (2022), as well essays in the second and fourth volumes of *Vietnam to Western Airlines*, and a full-length memoir about flying in Vietnam, *Only The Light Moves*, is planned for publication in 2023. Francis resides with his wife Catherine in New Canaan, Connecticut.



Captain Doherty, 25 years old, FOB2, Kontum, 1970