

Puma Two

Zack eyed the scheduling board for the next day's missions. It listed him as the wingman in a Wild Weasel flight into Route Pack VI. It was the toughest assignment available. The Wild Weasels were the SAM hunter-killers.

Was it a recognition from his superiors of his growing skill, or was it the short straw drawn by the youngest, capable pilot? He did not know. At this point, his mission count included many trips "downtown" to Hanoi.

A Wild Weasel assignment, he recognized, demanded an entirely new level of skill. Weasel flights usually came back missing someone in the formation.

Wild Weasels always arrived first over a target area, and they left for home last. Whenever his flight tuned in the strike frequency, he heard them battling SAMs. The picture of a weasel grabbing a tiger's tail came to mind.

One sure way of locating the SAM site existed: get fired upon. Then the task required dodging the missile before locating its launch point. The high stakes gambit required nerves of steel and precise timing by the pilots. Further complicating the process, sites would alternate coming on the air, then shutting down. Finally, they would fire a salvo of missiles.

The respect given to Wild Weasel crews extended beyond the Thud community. Pilots expressed their awe in different ways. Some used colorful metaphors to describe the Weasel's sheer guts. Others simply said they were crazy. They all were high praise in the high testosterone fraternity of fighter pilots.

After the mission briefing the following morning, Zack headed for the latrine. His stomach and bowels were sending a signal. He always needed to calm an intense nervousness before other missions into Hanoi. Now, it became undeniable: He was "scared shitless." He gained a greater appreciation for the phrase.

The upside meant that this latrine trip might prevent unpleasantness as the situation in the air became dicey. One experienced pilot cracked jokes in the bar about soiled underwear after missions.

"Only my laundress knows how scared I was," he quipped.

Four Thuds comprised Puma flight. A Wild Weasel led each two-aircraft element, with a single-seat Thud flying on each Weasel's wing.

Waiting for his turn to top off fuel tanks was a rare calm moment in a mission. As the lush green jungle and mountains passed below, Zack admired the beauty of this country. When the weather wasn't perfect, the building cumulus clouds offered some spectacular scenery. Lightning bolts shooting between distant thunderheads always awed him.

Following the descent from the tankers, the pace of the mission increased. Puma Flight emerged from behind Thud Ridge and split into two-plane elements. The tempo morphed into organized chaos. Orange and black clouds of AAA above, below, and at their altitude lit up the sky. It was a hot welcome! The enemy recognized the purpose of this flight. They wanted to end it quickly.

After long minutes of yanking and banking, Puma Lead climbed, banked left, and started to slide away. Zack shoved his throttle forward and turned to stay with Lead.

Staying on Lead's wing took his full attention. The radar detection warning lights flashed constantly. Ultimately, one radar would guide a missile toward them.

"Puma flight, target at eight o'clock," Lead called. From the deluge of signals in the EWO's screens, a likely site emerged to their left, slightly behind.

"Puma Three copies," the other element leader acknowledged. He would be sorting out other radar signals, searching for other sites. Lead lit his afterburner and started a steep climb. Zack pushed his throttle to its stop, moved it outboard slightly, then rammed it all the way forward again. After a slight delay, his Thud accelerated as his afterburner lit. Lead entered a steep climb to set up the launch of a Shrike missile, which would home on the radar signals. Lead rolled wings level.

The steep climb gave the Shrike its greatest range and the radar seeker in its nose a clear view below to find the SAM's radar antenna. There was a catch, though; SAMs flew faster than the Shrike. SAMs also enjoyed a range advantage over the Shrikes.

Before a Shrike reached it, the SAM crew could shut off their radar. The Shrikes needed the signal.

As they continued to climb, Zack stole a quick look at the ground below. He saw nothing that resembled a SAM site in the smoke, jungle, buildings, and roads ahead. How could they bomb something they could not even see?

Suddenly, the red launch light at the top of the instrument panel lit. A warning tone filled his ears.

“Launch light! Take it down!” Lead called.

A SAM was airborne, hunting them.

Lead rolled inverted to pull into a dive. Zack fought to follow. The high g-forces caused sweat to drip from his forehead into his eyes. The noses of their jets sliced through the horizon. In the dive, Lead rolled hard to the left, then reversed to the right.

Zack struggled to stay with him. When Lead turned away, Zack needed to react quickly and increase power to stay with his leader. When Lead reversed his turn, he suddenly turned back toward Zack. Then he would close fast on Lead. Zack alternated between shoving his power up and yanking it to idle and clicking his speed brake. Finally, Lead stayed in a tight right turn. Zack yanked his throttle to idle, but he continued to close on him.

“Tallyho!” called Puma Lead. “At two o’clock!” The SAM had originated from a different site behind them! The missile crew had silently waited for them to turn toward the first one before coming on the air to fire. Zack slid behind and under his leader to the left side, mainly to be able to hold his position. He also hoped it would give him a view of both his leader and the oncoming missile.

Without the latrine trip, the sight would have soiled his underwear. He spotted not one missile, but two missiles to the right and below Lead, closing on them quickly! A third missile trailed the pair. As Lead rushed toward the ground, the missiles rose above them. The description of an oncoming SAM was perfect. They did look like flaming telephone poles stalking them.

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