

Gordon 2 Xepon hospital

At first, there was The Drone. It would rise a little, then fall, but always there was The Drone.

Next came The Gray.

Like The Drone, The Gray had evanescent tones, and gradually the tones took on shapes which were, like The Drone, without clear edges. And later, there was The Throb which went its own way, unlike The Drone and The Gray which seemed more in concert. And finally there was The pain: hot, tearing, pulsating, nauseating, deep and devastating pain that rolled through Gordon in waves that knotted his bowels and drove sharp daggers deep into his brain. On and on and on the waves went for what seemed like eons leaving ridges on the surface of his memory, etched by their ordered advance. And then there was The Drone again . . . and The Gray . . . and The Throb . . . and always the gut-wrenching Pain!

There was movement, and between the welter of sensations that charged randomly through Gordon's body like a break-away roller-coaster, he perceived a pattern among them that had hands and a face. When finally that pattern registered as a thought, another soon followed. A person, he surmised as he sunk back somewhere between The Drone and The Gray. Later he was conscious of his leg and his mouth, and The Hand which held the cup from which he drank, but the minute The Hand was gone, he forgot about them all -- all except for his leg.

The face with The Hand and the cup came often -- so many times that Gordon thought of how many times he had forgotten they had come in the past. Then there was the room, and he found that if he concentrated on a new throb with each spasm of pain, he could move across from one side of the room to the other and half-way back between the going and the coming of the face with The Hand and the cup.

After several dozen trips through The Thatches across the room and half-way back, his curiosity began to return, beginning with a desire to explore the source of The Pain. He was struck by the sight of a strange arm -- yellowish and slack -- that sought to lever him to an upright position. and with a spike of revulsion, he realized that it was his own. The first time he tried to rise, he fell back panting, but he felt stronger on the second attempt, and though he could only stay up for a moment, one glance was sufficient.

Gordon's right calf was swathed in a brown dressing, stained by an ooze that attracted the flies which all but hid the dressing. As if the sight had unleashed all his senses at once, for the first time he was aware

of the odd mixture of antiseptic and putrefaction, and he wondered whether he would have to lose the leg to live. I'll ask the face with The Hands about it when she comes.

But it was a different face, sharp like an ax, that leaned intently over the leg, and whose probing brought new sensory explosions for Gordon to savor. The face remained dispassionate until the inspection was over, and then it turned to Gordon with just the slightest hint of satisfaction, Their eyes met for an instant, and Gordon knew that he would keep the leg,

They came to him -- there were four in all -- smocked, wearing face masks, and The Hand placed a sickeningly sweet smelling cloth over his face, and they all vanished into milk-white gauze -- The Thatches, The Hand, The Pain, The Throb, The Gray, and lastly The Drone, they all slid smoothly down a slimy vortex.

What's that buzzing? It was incessant, the sharp stabbing buzz like the touching of electrodes. It must be the Hot Pad phone. *Someone Answer The Goddamn Phone!*

It was like that. You'd be asleep on the sweat-smelling bunk and the duty officer would snap the red lights to full and yell out "A-pad; troops in contact," and you'd stumble to the deck and scrabble around under the rack for your helmet.

"Hold it Gordon, they're giving the coordinates . . ."

"What's that? . . . 240 for 24 from Hue? . . . Mandatory? . . . Right! They're on their way."

"Who's it with?"

"Chalk One-Four on red. It sounds like a shit sandwich."

Out the door and onto the flightline. By God, it's daytime. How 'bout that? It's almost never daytime when they attack. These monkeys got an upside down circadian rhythm or something. He had gone less than fifty yards, and already he was puffing from the exertion of trying to sprint with an extra forty pounds of ill-fitting clothing and equipment hung top-heavily about his skinny frame. A T-shirted form slid by him, snaking the helmet from his hand, drawing inexorably ahead. A start-cart, already winding up to full power lumbered across the flightline propelled by half a dozen men. Gordon reached the airplane -- Victor Whiskey 6 -- and bounded up the boarding steps.

Even before the start-cart came to a stop, the connector-plugs were snugged to the plane, so that when he flipped the external power switches as he slid into the seat, the instrument panel came alive in a demonic frenzy,

"Spin 'em Magoo" he puffed, waving two fingers in a circular wind-up motion, and the airplane vibrated as the left engine began its tortuous climb.

"It's the Special Forces Camp at Ashau." yelled John Coleman as he pounded up the steps and literally vaulted into the rear cockpit, "It's being overrun." And then through the intercom as he donned his helmet, "The weather's the shits."

The weather's always the shits, Gordon thought. It'd be a totally different war if it weren't. The stick came alive in his hand as the turbine passed ten percent, and Gordon scootched the throttle sideways and forward into the idle detent.

Light, you mother, there was that buzz again. *Answer The Goddamn Phone!*

The turbine came up to speed and kept right on climbing. 80 percent . . . 90. . . 100 percent . . . overspeed. Shut that mother down! But it just climbed higher and higher, screaming its guts out. "*Stop, You Sonofabitch!*" and the phone kept buzzing, and then there was The Drone.

They were like old friends, and Gordon felt warm and secure in their company. The Drone and The Gray and The Throb wove intricate arabesques in the fabric of his consciousness, stitching icicle-like tentacles on the combers of his pain. But it didn't last. He remembered the face with The Hands and the face with The Eyes, and their presence dragged him reluctantly up through the wall of pain to lucidity.

"Where am I?" he asked of the face with The Hand as she fed him soup, but she eyed him narrowly and left him to The Drone.

The vibration set the instruments into a frenzy, making exact readings impossible. It doesn't matter, because it's all a matter of feel anyway. With the stick all the way back, the rumbling aggregation of aluminum and steel, titanium and composite, tubes, wires, cables, reservoirs, pumps, actuators, accumulators, spinning wheels, plunging rods, Plexiglas, fabric, fuel and oil, pneumatics and hydraulics, bearing creatures made of flesh and blood, squats on its haunches, pauses for a moment as if uncertain of its fate, and lifts free leaving the pounding ride behind. "Decorate flight airborne, switching to Joyride."

Gordon felt a momentary elation as the aircraft breached the top of the cloud deck entering the clear early morning air above. The low sun-angle glanced off the undulating undercast painting gray-brown valleys beneath golden domes of pubescent cumulonimbus. The South China Sea turned from slate to cobalt and from cobalt to aquamarine where it collided with the salt-white strand. To the west, the deep browns and violent greens of the Assam were etched deeply by fiery fingers of the dazzling furnace. A pall of smoke marked Gordon's rendezvous. It was such a patchwork world of incredible contrasts, stitched tenuously together by Gordon's childlike desire to have it mean something.

"Hillside, this is Decorate Three Dash One on red." Slim static filled the earphones. "Turn down the squelch, will you please?" The static shifted to a higher frequency. "Turn down the static!" Higher and louder still until Gordon was about to tear his helmet from his head. "*Turn The Squelch Down!*"

A shadowy figure glided through the room, spoiling his count of The thatches. "Who are you?" raised the same response from the face with The Eyes as he rewrapped the leg. There were large puckers where the stitches bound the skin, but Gordon could see that the bone was intact and the flesh a healthy pink. No longer was there the putrid scent that reminded him of the pigs at 4-H, and for the first time he could remember, he was hungry. It dawned on Gordon that the worst was over. Though he spent most of the time dozing and dreaming, the focus improved and he judged his growing sense of reality in much the same way a diver judges changes in depth.

"How about hopping the cattlecar over to the other side and have a steak and suds at the air force club after we get finished debriefing?" Gordon and Rick Stone, his wingman from the just completed mission bounced along in single file on the makeshift sidewalk of aluminum milk carton racks to stay out of the ankle-deep mud that was a fixture during the wet monsoon.

"At the drop of a hat, booby, but I've got a hot date tonight."

"Xepon again?"

"Yep. Twenty-third night in a row. I'm a regular old plank-owner by now."

"Who the hell'd you piss off?"

"What d'ya mean, asshole, I get to go to Xepon because the skipper loves me. It's been the same four of us every night this week. Fact is that it's been the same damned launch time since the night Eddie Craig

ate it -- Manual Four-Five with a one o'clock target time. One of these days the gooners are going to start calling us by name. In the meantime, I'm getting to the point where I can tell the guns by their tracer pattern. Rosie's a stutterer; Floozie's got a harelip, so her shit comes up lisping. It's a hell of a deal."

It was true. You became speciated, and what had at first been a kind of an honor -- the skipper let only the Chosen Few fly the night Steel Tigers -- had turned out to be a pain, or worse. Gordon and the others were feeling the pressure, because sooner or later, they knew, the flakmonster was going to get them if they kept it up night after bloody night. It showed even more in the RIOs (Radar Intercept Officers), many of whom had taken to avoiding the Chuckies around the squadron area. The number of ear problems among the RIOs was on the rise, and it was a matter of time before someone cracked. No, the nightly Xepon run sucked, but it was a fact of life.

"Looks like it's getting ready to rain like a mother."

"Yeah, that's what happens when they bring in a brand new school-trained aerologist. The weather turns to worms. We'd be better off with the Flight Surgeon out there watching all those vanes go around. Old Doc could wet his finger like he was getting ready to perform a finger wave and hold it up in the breeze. If it's still attached when he brings it down, he could say something like "ain't got VD." I'd feel better even if we got hit by a typhoon during taxi-out for the next launch.

The messhall smelled like latrine any time the wind was out of the north (which was most of the time) as it sat thirty paces downwind from a six-holer. It didn't make too much difference as the food was marginally better if that, tasting predominantly of the same jet fuel and chlorine which turned the water to a limpid yellow. Still, things were better than last month when the choice was between peanut butter and crackers or gaines burgers and red death. Now here was a veritable cornucopia of foodstuffs including such delicacies as shit-on-the-shingle and powdered eggs for breakfast; spam, horsecock, and mustard for lunch; and oxtails, ham-hocks, and mustard greens for dinner.

God, I'm hungry, he thought, ignoring the stench and the beads of kerosene in the greasy pans and the flies floating in the soup.

"What airplane have I got, gunny?" Like everything else near the flightline, the dimly lit line shack smelled of mildew, sweat, and kerosene. Gunnery Sergeant Bobby Lee Carroll reached under the counter

and brought up a metal jacketed folder containing several days worth of postflight aircraft status reports and sign out forms.

"One-seven, Capt'n," the gunny reported in an East Texas drawl that defied imitation. "The li'l ol' puppy jus' come up from a you-tility hydraulic fail-your." There was more, but Gordon had stopped listening, concentrating instead on the squawk sheets and maintenance write-offs. One-seven was a maintenance nightmare, a disaster waiting to happen. On three of its last nine flights it had experienced a utility hydraulic system failure. Firestone thumbed through the radar write-ups shaking his head.

"This thing couldn't find the Goodyear Blimp at five miles," he offered. "It hasn't left the flightline with an up radar in two months." Gordon nodded remembering that he had taken it up to Haiphong three days before on a BARCAP mission designed to provide the fleet with fighter cover. If a raid developed he couldn't have made an intercept, and even if he had somehow managed to locate him visually, his radar-guided Sparrow missiles wouldn't have tracked.

The rain had eased some, but the wind whipped through the sand-bagged revetments with sudden bolts of frenzy, driving sheets of water horizontally before it. Though the air temperature was comfortably into the sixties, Gordon was chilled. The plane captain took his helmet and kneeboard containing maps and mission data to stow them in the cockpit while he performed a preflight inspection on the aircraft.

Why bother, he mused. What with rain, poor visibility, and an aircraft whose underside is bathed in hydraulic fluid, what the hell are you going to see anyway? But he looked at pressure gages, wiggled bomb racks, counted arming wires, and took count of the cord showing on the starboard tire.

"Damn," he barked, causing Firestone to hurry over. "No, nothing's the matter. It's all this nickel-dime shit. I hate taking a sick cow like this to the party, that's all."

As he had a hundred times before, he shuddered in the wake of some dimensionless premonition as he climbed the steps to the cockpit. Screw it. Why not ground this turkey and go get some sleep?

He was in Aunt Harriet's kitchen, clean and neat with the smell of bacon frying in the skillet. It was Saturday, and he had spent the morning swimming, giving him the appetite of a ravenous moose. BLTs were his favorite -- three were a warm-up -- and his stomach churned in anticipation. All the while they came and went in odd directions, entering and exiting the kitchen through the walls or stove or sink.

Gordon tried to follow, but when he did, the scene would dissolve, leaving him with the scent of bacon.

Each time they came -- The Hand and The Eyes -- he tried to query them, but it was as if they were deaf and dumb. It was as if his safety lay in their answer and he yearned to believe that soon they would take him back to the base, but in his heart he knew. They were "the enemy" and he was their captive. While he was still sick, he was safe in their care, but that wouldn't last forever -- and it didn't.

He had been dozing, thinking about how a hamburger would taste instead of the gruel that was his daily fare, when he sensed someone's presence in the room. He turned his head to greet The Hand or The Eyes, but it was neither. It was a communist soldier -- an officer in uniform with insignia and pistol and a scowling countenance -- and Gordon guessed that it would not be long before he was taken to a prison.

The officer looked at him closely for several seconds, and even when he barked an order, his gaze never wavered. Two soldiers, also in uniform, came into the room, and before their intent dawned on Gordon, they had grasped him on either side and pulled him upright. Then, unbelievably, he was out of bed and standing on his good leg, which held firm for a second or two before buckling from the unexpected load. He sagged forward, and for a moment it seemed as if he must hit the floor face-first, but the soldiers held him up. Half-dragging, half-pushing, the soldiers propelled him across the room in a series of excruciating bounds.

This is not happening his mind protested. His injured calf was wracked by each awesome jolt, and when his bowels seized and let go, spraying watery feces on his leg and dressing, the soldier bearing up his wounded side hopped out of the way, releasing him in the process. The man on the left could not hold him up anymore than Gordon's leg could sustain him, and together they pirouetted clockwise before crashing heavily to the floor.

Milovic! The name came crashing through the sheathes of spider webs that Gordon had begun to spin in response to the serial insults to his fragile mind, What was it that Milovic had said? He was standing over Gordon, glowering down, his lip twisted into a snarl.

"Whatsamatter, puke? You don't like this?" His foot snapped forward catching Gordon in the ribcage, flipping him over as effortlessly as if he were a flapjack. What's going on here? The high fence with the inward leaning barbed wire top . . . the watchtower with a machine gun pointing down into the compound . . . the light stanchions and gate house and armed guards . . . it was a stockade. Who was Milovic?

"I'm your camp commandant, comrades." He stood there ten feet tall with a malevolence that left Gordon weak. Again and again Gordon flipped over in the dirt like a flapjack, his body heaving from the shock and pain. "What is it you said?" They were seated in the messhall eating steak and eggs. Milovic poured himself a glass of orange juice before passing the pitcher. He looked out the window for a minute and then he smiled wanly.

"If you've learned anything at Escape and Evasion School the last couple of days, it is that you should never let them capture you alive."

In the middle of The Thatches was the officer with the cruel face and the funny cap with the red star. Gordon was stretched out on the floor looking at the twenty-seventh file of the fourteenth row in The Ceiling. I ought to give them all names, he decided, and was about to do so when the officer again barked an order. This time, the soldiers grabbed Gordon firmly above the biceps, dragging him to his feet as if he were a sack of grain. Again they propelled him toward the door, where The Hand and The Eyes stood in anguish, and he left them for the last time when his leg crashed against the frame.

"Oh my God! you've killed him! My God!" The shrieking voice reached down through the waves of nausea. "No he isn't, Lucy, he's going to be all right." "No, no, he's going to die. I just know it. You've killed him." Someone was turning him over. The florid face of a stranger in a coat and tie with a shapeless gray hat swam past him mouthing words.

". . . all right . . . worry . . . bulance . . . wav . . . where do you . . . name." The woman continued to shriek, her voice soaring above the frantic wail of a siren. There must be a fire. I think my leg's on fire. There's Dr. Greene.

"OK, son. It'll be all right . . . broken in two places . . . have to reset . . ." Other hands took hold of his shoulders and held him and held him down. "aaa-eee!" He heard his own voice crying out in agony, once, twice, and yet a third time, and he felt the vomit rise in his throat. "OK, folks, let's stay back so that Doc Greene has room, he heard officer Davies say in his official I'm-in-charge-here voice, and from another quarter, "Who is it Bud? Is it Carl's kid?"

"Yep. Young Jim Gordon." "How'd it happen?" "That car there came right through the stop sign and ran him down. Made a terrible noise, it did." They're talking about me, he observed patiently, about to tell them that they were mistaken because he was right here, but somehow he couldn't quite find his voice.



"Gangway folks. Let the stretcher through," and Gordon heard the fitting lock into place. "Take it easy, son. We'll have you to the hospital in no time." The siren stayed in one place, going on and on and on without letup. Just up-again, down-again, up-again, down. Aww-ooOOO-AAWww -- Aww-ooOOO-AAWww.

He found himself stretched out flat in the back of a truck which bounded down a rutted road. At first he thought that he was back at DaNang, riding from the flightline to the living area in the squadron deuce and a half, heading for chow. But when he turned his head and saw the soldiers, hope vanished. and he remembered with awful clarity the fall and the events that led up to it.

The sun was almost to its apex, and though the temperature was well into the nineties, the rush of air was bracing. The road was narrow -- barely wide enough for one truck, much less two -- and after an hour or so of winding along a hillside, it emptied out onto a forested plain. Occasionally, they pulled off to the side of the road to allow opposite direction traffic to pass, but in the main they made steady progress, keeping to a speed of twenty miles per hour except when they came to an open spot stripped of its cover by fire, where the truck would accelerate to forty until it had regained the sanctuary of the trees. It's no wonder we never find these little bastards he marveled, remembering the hours upon hours he had spent overflying the area. The officer was up front talking volubly with the driver who was dressed in black pajamas and a pith helmet, while the two soldiers dozed in the back.

Abruptly, the truck wrenched off the road and into a denser tree stand where the motor was doused. The officer shouted something, and after several high pitched replies, everything was suddenly quiet. After a bit, Gordon heard them -- airplanes ripping through the sky. One was low, weaving back forth looking for targets, while the others stayed high, ready to pounce. Though he couldn't see them, he knew who they were and what they were doing. The scout was Playboy, a two-seater F-9 out of DaNang manned by a pair of air controllers. Above them was a flight of F-4s -- perhaps his very own squadron's -- armed to the teeth with bombs and rockets. They were pooping and snooping around looking for movement on the trail.

The soldiers were looking skyward anxiously, straining to catch a glimpse of the marauders. You might as well take your pack off, guys, he thought, realizing what they could not know, that spotting a truck from the air is hard enough when it is in the open, but in this jungle, forget it Charlie. Despite the loss of the breeze, it felt good to be stopped for a while, and here among the tall trees out of the blazing sun, he

felt almost comfortable. After the ferocious insults to his already badly mauled nervous system, it was easy for him to uncouple from reality and slide into pleasant reverie,

The other Plane was just a dot above the horizon. It was probably twenty miles out at Gordon's ten o'clock position heading north out of Hanoi. "I've got a bogie at our ten just above the horizon. I'll bring him to forty left so you can lock him. Let's get his numbers." Gordon turned into the dot, moving him to a point just behind the canopy bow, and watched the radar presentation as John Coleman moved the acquisition symbols into position on either side of the blip and proceeded to lock it up. The attack presentation blossomed, detailing the stranger's relative values. John began his litany over the radio for the wingman's benefit.

"The bogie is forty left for seventeen miles -- slightly low making good about four-twenty. We've got a hundred and twenty knot closure, but if we want to catch him before the Chinese border, we'd better kick it up to five-fifty and come back right ten degrees." Gordon moved the throttles to the edge of the afterburner detents, lowered the nose slightly, and drifted back to a heading of three-three zero.

"Hillsborough, have you a make on our bogie?"

"That's a negative Decorate, we've got him raw, but no squawk, Suggest you proceed for a visual ID." It's the same old shit, Gordon reflected with bitterness. All this sophisticated equipment floating around the sky, and we're right back to World War II rules. "Dash Two, have you got a lock?"

"That's Charlie. I've got him forty-five left for twelve. Hundred and eighty knot closure." Well, here we go again playing spear carrier for Dash Two. What damn good is it being the leader when your wingie gets to be the shooter? At eight miles, Gordon scratched the throttles around the afterburner detents and rammed them home, lowering the nose still farther to help the acceleration. Almost immediately the Phantom was through mach one, the true airspeed counter clicking rapidly through seven hundred. At 820, with the distance down to four miles, he modulated back to maintain speed and watched the bogie's planform grow in the canopy. Three miles and its type was unmistakable. "MiG-21 with a pair of Atolls," John reported. "Dash Two will be in-range in thirty seconds."

"Check his insignia," instructed Hillsborough, so they bored in until they were two thousand feet beneath the MiG at half a mile. The enemy pilot was oblivious to their presence. "Chinese markings, are we cleared to fire?"

"Stand by, Decorate." They had swept completely underneath the MiG and come out the other side.

"Dash One is breaking it off to the south" Damn! Come on you dilberts, give us a cleared-to-fire."

"Dash Two at min range. Am I cleared?"

"Stand by, Dash Two."

"Dash Two off, breaking away south," and he turned to follow Gordon back to the coastline.

"Dash Two, you're cleared to fire."

"Thanks a fucking bunch asshole. You're all heart."

"Gordon! Wake up!" Why don't they leave me alone? "Huh? What's going on?" It was still dark out.

"Something's happened. They want us to double the hot pad. Tyler and Kerr are getting dressed." It was three-thirty as Gordon shimmied into his flightsuit. First good night's sleep in a month, and they rack me out. God, I'd like to lay back down and get a few more z's.

KA-BLAM! BAM!BAM!BAM! BLAMITY-BAM! The truck shuddered in the staccato pounding. CRR-RACK! A 200 foot tree split apart below its first branches and thundered to the ground less than fifty feet behind the truck, sealing them in their copse. A layer of fine dust filled the air, bringing twilight and setting Gordon on a choking spell, each paroxysm stunning his brain into even deeper incredulity. What the hell is going on now? Are they rocketing the field? And then it came back to him where he was.

"*You Sonsabitches!*" He yelled between spasms, "*You Damn Near Hit Me!*" The soldiers, wide-eyed with terror, moved to abandon the truck, so when Gordon poised to yell again, the nearer one reached out and bashed him on the side of the head with his rifle-butt before diving over the side.

Gordon went back to coughing, but the blow brought him to his senses. They must have seen us come into here, he concluded.

The dust had almost settled out when he heard the Phantom pulling out of its dive followed closely by the pounding of a stick of bombs. Both doors to the cab flew open, the occupants joining the first two, and again the truck was jerked around by the concussion, but the hits were farther off. They're dropping in ripple mode, he reasoned, probably from the TERs, and he traced the procedure that was so deeply ingrained after so many missions.

Gunsight set to 105 mils . . . inboard racks select and home . . . Ripple with 140 millisecond interval off the racks . . . fuse arm nose and tail . . . master arm on. Gordon visualized what the pilot of the first attack plane -- who was probably at that very moment approaching the roll-in point for his second run -- was seeing and doing, only this time he would have selected centerline and all instead off inboards.

OK, keep the nose up . . . keep it up. OK. Roll her over and Pull it through. Throughout the turn, Gordon envisioned the tree stand as with the pilot's eyes. He would watch it out the side of the canopy, just forward of the intake ramp. The target moved forward of the canopy bow, and it was time to commence the run. The airplane would be 7000 feet above the ground, two and a half miles away. It would plunge nearly 3000 feet in the final forty degrees of turn before coming to a wings level position with the nose spiked thirty degrees below the horizon.

"Four thousand . . . 430 . . ." The RIO in the back seat would coach.

"Five hundred to go . . . 10 slow . . ."

"Standby . . . on speed . . . STANDBY . . . MARK!"

Gordon lay still, fascinated by the construct of his mind's eye. He watched the bombs kick loose from the rack, trailing back with the first now farthest aft. Arcing down below the retreating bomber, the slender darts made straight for the copse, and as they entered the trees.

BLAM!BLAMITY!BLAM!BLAM!BLAM! followed this time by whizzing and snapping as shrapnel scythed through the branches. The truck staggered under a mighty blow.

"Hello Chalk One-Four, this is Decorate One-One with a flight of two Fox-fours. Twelve delta-fives overhead at base plus nine for your control."

"Roger Decorate, we've got real problems here. The bases of the trash are ragged 500 to 1,000 feet. The gooners got it wired with ZPUs on both flanks. They've taken the north wall, and unless you can put something on them, it's all over."

There was a slight break in the overcast at the northwest end of the valley, and Gordon slid beneath the clouds and accelerated for a look-see pass. Smoke boiled up from the embattled citadel, and an abandoned A-1 Skyraider lay smolder on the runway. Ground and clouds merged precipitously just as he

crossed over the south end of the base where the small band of special forces and their Nung mercenaries fought for their lives, and then he had to pull hard back on the stick and light the afterburners to climb back above the cumulo-granite.

"Decorate, Chalk One-Four. You've gotta lay some shit on them this next pass, even if it means dropping on the friendlies. They're dead if you don't."

"Roger, Chalk. Break, Dash two, give me about forty seconds on the interval, and keep your speed up." Gordon wheeled back to the sucker hole and roared in for the attack.

450 . . . 475 . . . 500 knots.

The ground a blur of greens and reds and browns.

Smoke . . . the airstrip . . . walls . . . swirls of activity. Hold it just a little . . . now!

He felt the bombs depart, and he laid the stick far aft into his gut awaiting the concussion of his bombs, He didn't have to wait long. The nose was barely 20 degrees above the horizon when he felt them go off, and he tensed, as if by doing so he could avoid the deadly hail of his own bomb fragments, some of which must almost certainly find him. He watched his instruments for the slightest indication of trouble, but they remained steady.

"Dash Two's off," and after a bit, "I've got a rough runner -- heading for feet wet passing two thou." Gordon bent back to the left, rolling half-way upside down to pick up his wingman. "Left engine's shut down and the right's surging. I don't know whether I can make it to the water or not."

Gordon was about to switch them to emergency frequency to declare an emergency when Dash-Two's airplane disintegrated. There had been but the minutest wisp of tell-tale smoke, and then the Phantom became a giant fireball, that, when it burned out, revealed a pair of engines tumbling wildly amidst a cloud of debris. In the rapidly dissipating pall, Gordon had the morbid sense that witnessed the souls of the crewmen depart.

This time when Gordon awoke it was raining, soaking him to the skin. He shivered wildly in the cold. Where is the face with The Hand? There were other images -- men in uniforms.

What are they doing? . . . they're taking me somewhere. Where? Slowly the images coalesced. Maybe they're taking me to Hanoi -- to the Hanoi Hilton as the crews back at DaNang called the prisoner of war stockade.

Are we stopped for a rest? . . . probably giving way to other traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail . . . that or maybe the road became unusable during a downpour.

There's something about airplanes . . . airplanes and trees and noise and dust. The truck and the soldiers swam into view along with falling darts and . . . Something hit the truck! My God, we took a hit! Gordon tried to sit up, but he couldn't move. He was pinned. By what? Gradually he was - able to work his hands loose. "I've been this route before" he smiled feebly, recalling how he had been tangled in the parachute. At last he was able to explore around with his hands. It was the limb of a tree. Well, they'll be around in a bit to get it off me, he philosophized and then, because he was too drained by the ordeal of the day to feel revulsion or hope, he fell fast asleep.

It was still light when he awoke, and though where he lay was deeply in shadows, he could see the tree tops bathed in the golden afternoon sunlight, Gordon took stock of the situation. He was indeed pinned beneath a limb, but it was difficult to come to grips with just how badly he was jammed. Turning his body and head as far as possible to the left, he was at last able to spy the truck. It was a mangled piece of junk, slammed into the shape of a U-bolt by the trunk of a fallen tree. He was fully twenty feet from the front wheels, which like their rear counterparts were clear of the ground by nearly two feet. The cargo bed was almost perpendicular to the ground with the tailgate standing ten feet high, and gradually he began to fathom the fate of his captors and how he had come to his present situation.

"I'll be a sonofabitch. this about tops everything," he marveled. "Saved by a 500 pounder." That'll be a hard one to sell at happy hour. But just how he'd get out of his predicament was not at the moment obvious, not that this aspect of things had entered his mind. For the moment, he was too caught up in his miraculous salvation to take on new worries.