

CHAPTER I: A DAY AT THE BEACH, ALMOST

U-TAPAO ROYAL AIR NAVAL BASE, THAILAND APRIL 1968

Major Spike Wilson, USAF, got off the crew bus that had just parked in front of the B-52 that he would fly tonight. He was about 5' 10" with slick black hair and a pencil thin mustache just above his lip. He had dark, beady eyes that were very close together (and seemed to stare right through you when he wanted them to) and a unique smile that was as thin as his mustache... most of the time. It was referred to as the "Spike smile," and its display could be interpreted many ways. He was in a rare foul mood.

The mood was a result of the night's target. The mission plan for tonight meant that they would fly north, which meant surface-to-air missiles. The missiles were designed by the Russians to do one thing: *shoot down B-52s*. He was not pleased with the SAMs and with the other side of the bomb team, his navigator, because both could get you killed.

Spike was an expert at his craft and had little patience with those that weren't experts at theirs. He was a "Mustang" meaning that he had been commissioned as an officer and had become a "rated" officer after successfully completing flight training and being awarded the coveted "wings" without a college degree. Getting commissioned and becoming an aviator *without* a college degree was almost impossible in the early 1960's, but Spike had always overcome impossibilities through sheer determination and unknown skills that always seemed to work.

With his crewdog buddies (other B-52 aviators), he was very closed about his personal life prior to the honor of flying for the United States Air Force.

The B-52 was the largest bomber ever built. The Russians had a larger bomber, the code name was the M4 "Bison," but it had a slight fault. It didn't fly. If it did, it would crash. So Spike disqualified it as competition. He wondered why USAF's Tactical Air Command kept building fighter interceptors to defend our shores against attack from Russian bombers that could only float over. Shit, the Navy could take care of those.

In reality, he knew why they kept building fighters. Flying those things was second only to sex... plus they got *paid* to do it. The bastards. He was rated

C.K. McCUSKER

navigator/bombardier and not pilot for only two reasons. His eyesight was not 20/20, and he was too smart. During both WWII and Korea, the smartest guys (as determined by entrance exams) were always sent to navigator training. Spike's thoughts were repetitive on the subject...

But if they got to fly fastburners (fighters) and he flew bombers, were they really that dumb? Yeah... he could fly fighters as well, but the B-52 was just fucking awesome looking. It scared people that saw it parked on the ramp, let alone flying. It was the ultimate flying intimidator. Besides, the B-52 was a navigator's aircraft. The pilot's job was to drive them to work. The offensive team (two navigators) blew the crap out of the target and got a ride home. Their 'chauffeurs' were generally nice guys and did a good job of avoiding potholes (SAMs) when necessary... like tonight.

The SAM thought brought Spike back. He turned toward his navigator, his eyes penetrating, with a hint of a snarl: "Nav, so help me... if you screw up the timing and checklists on this strike, I will personally kick your ass either back here or on the ground up North just before the gooks shoot us. The rest of the crews in this three ship rely on us as lead. They'll beat the shit out of you, too."

Lt. Terry Litmon was Spike's Nav. His call sign was "Lemon" because he was one. Most navigators assigned to B-52s were smart, dedicated, and good at their craft. Lemon was the exception. No one could understand how Lemon had made it through flight training, let alone gotten a B-52 assignment.

"I am prepared today, sir. I assure you that everything will go as planned."

"That's what I'm afraid of. I'm not sure we ever use the same plan."

Spike already knew that he would have to do both the Nav's job and his own tonight. Spike Wilson is a B-52 D "Radar Navigator," which was the new politically sensitive term for a bombardier. Spike, however, would never use or accept the term "Radar Navigator." Radar Navigators were pimps. He was a bombardier. He was known throughout SAC as the "best of the best" in the cockpit, especially in combat situations. On the ground, he was known as the best of the best as well... at raising hell, partying, business acumen, women, and (as a result of the former) juggling ex-wives who never seemed fully "ex."

The pilot was walking toward the aircraft with Spike: "Now c'mon, Spike. Nav was only nine minutes late Thursday, and we lost our SAM cover and nearly got blown out of the sky. Give him a break, man. He missed, but so did they." He was getting drilled by the pilot because his Nav sucked. Just like he would drill the pilot if the co-pilot sucked. The crew of Spike's bomber consisted of Spike, two Pilots, a navigator, an electronics warfare officer [EW], and a gunner. They boarded the aircraft quickly through the bottom hatch below the cockpits. The

Co (Co-pilot) did the exterior walk around. It was very hot, but much hotter inside.

The pilot said: “Hey, Chief! Why can’t you get the damn A/C started ten minutes before our pre-flight so we don’t swim! This is not the Navy, Chief!”

The Crew Chief was in charge of maintenance for the aircraft. “Sorry, sir. I will have it on next time.”

It was started immediately and lasted for almost a full minute. As a result, they would sweat completely through their flight suits and then freeze once they got to altitude at FL350 (35,000 feet) in twenty minutes because the heat in the cockpit didn’t “quite” work in any B-52.

The pilot was pissed. “Chief, you were playing Bocchi ball with Stubby on the back of the tarmac when we got here. Dammit, next time have the bird ready for pre-flight! Now, get the APU going. We have to get out of here.”

Each member of the crew completed his checklists except for the Nav who was carefully studying sections that didn’t apply. Spike completed his for him.

Spike, glaring at the Nav who was still studying the wrong checklist: “Pilot, offense is ready to taxi.”

Pilot, chuckling: “You did both your checklist and the Nav’s that fast? You never cease to amaze me, Spike.”

“Hey, do me a favor, and you two guys upstairs circle the wagons, OK? Then you can have a true circle jerk.” Spike’s temper was on edge, which was unusual.

“You’re right, but at least we’ll have a wagon. Chief, pull the chocks and pins, and give me the count. Charlie Tower, Bronze One is ready to taxi.” Charlie Tower controlled all the aircraft on the ground.

“Bronze Two ready, Charlie.”

“Bronze Three.”

The three enormous aircraft, carrying one hundred and eight 500 pound bombs each, taxied to the runway and launched one minute apart without any mechanical incident, which was highly unusual. The target tonight was a rail marshalling yard just on the outskirts of Vinh, which was the largest city in the southern part of the North. It was also the first city in the north with SAM site COAs (Confirmed Operating Area). If the rail yards were taken out, it would slow down the supply of munitions to Viet Cong and the NVA in the south

C.K. McCUSKER

by a few weeks. The zips would repair it over time, but then Spike or another bombardier would blow it up again.

Spike thought that was their *real* job: breaking things, *again*. It was the “agains” that would get you killed. The zips would figure out how to hit you, given enough chances.

The Major didn't like this shit at all. He had already flown over a hundred missions out of U-Tapao and been shot at by SAMs eleven times. In the last sixty days they were flying almost all their missions to the north, and that meant they were getting almost continuous exposure to SAMs. The NVA troops that manned the SAM sites were getting better with experience. They had hit two B-52s in the last thirty days, but none had gone down. The more of these missions they flew, again, the greater the odds became that a shooter would get lucky.

Bronze cell took off and flew northeast for one hour and fifty-one minutes until they reached the beginning of the bomb run over Vinh.

Lemon: “Crew, we're IP inbound. We will enter a COA in 45 seconds. Heads up.”

Spike: “Confirm the target in the crosshairs, Nav. Bomb, run checklist. C'Mon, Nav, get with the program.”

Lemon wasn't there, as usual.

Lemon: “Roger, radar. Bomb run checklist.”

“Lemon, how many times have I told you never to call me radar? Now move it on the checklist, or I'll have the whole damn sequence done before you get through half of it.”

“Don't call me a Lemon, Spike. I was number two in my class in flight training.”

Spike was moving furiously, flipping switches and adjusting dials. “That proves you are not only a Lemon, but dumb. You're single, with an entire city full of beautiful women because of the University being right there, and you finish number two in your class. The only way you could have done that, since you are sure as shit no genius, is to study your ass off in lieu of drinking and broads. That proves my point... bomb run checklist complete. You're fired.”

Lemon was cautiously defensive in his reply. “You can't fire me. Only the Squadron Commander can make a crew change.”

Spike, now pissed off: “Pilot, Bombs, center the PDI... I just fired the Nav because it’s impossible to fix dumb.”

“Roger, Bombs, PDI centered. Nav fired due to dumb.”

“I AM NOT DUMB!”

No one listened even though he yelled over the IC.

The pilot centered the Pilot Directional Indicator and turned control of the aircraft over to the bombardier who flew the aircraft by moving a joystick. Spike was a perfectionist and flew directly to the target.

Spike: “Bombs away in 15... 10... 5... Bombs away! We’re clean.”

Navigator: “Turn right heading one-one-zero. Start climb to flight level three six zero [36,000 feet]. Max the airspeed. We need to get out of here.”

Pilot: “Roger that, former Nav. One-one-zero. Three six zero. At the firewall.”

EW, nervously: “I have a threat radar, crew.”

Threat radar meant a SAM site, or sites, were searching for the flight of the three B-52s. If they located one of the bombers, they would “lock on” and fire a SAM that would track an electronic uplink to the bomber at three times the speed of sound.

EW, his voice terrified: “I HAVE UPLINK!”

Spike: “Shit, E-dub! Jam it! Pilot, take evasive!”

The EW tried to break the uplink electronically. He had seconds to do it. He didn’t.

There was a bright flash of light, and the aircraft jolted violently.

Pilot: “Red Crown, Red Crown. Bronze One has been hit! I repeat, Bronze One has been hit by a SAM!”

Red Crown is an airborne and seaborne command post. “Roger, Bronze One. Can you make it feet wet? [Over water]”

Co-pilot: “SHIT! THE OUTBOARD STARBOARD POD IS GONE!”

C.K. McCUSKER

The engines on a B-52 are all arrayed in pairs. There are four pairs of engines, eight in all. The pair on the far end of the right wing had been blown off by the SAM.

Pilot: "Crew, we're OK. Calm down, Co. This wonderbird can fly on four engines if need be, and you guys know that. Give me FOB [Fuel On Board]."

Co-pilot: "FIRE WARNING ON FIVE AND SIX!"

Pilot, his voice irritated: "GODAMMIT, calm down! Shut them down!"

"Red Crown, Bronze One has fire and all starboard engines shut down. Correct that. Five and six shut down, seven and eight are gone."

Red Crown: "Roger, Bronze One. Give intentions. Souls on board and fuel on board. Your nearest airfield is Udorn. I repeat Udorn."

Bronze Two, the bomber in trail behind One, came up on Guard frequency, which everyone can hear since it's not secure: "Bronze One, Bronze Two. Is your crew alright? We see a lot of flames. It looks like you took a direct hit by that SAM."

"Crew's OK, Two. *Almost* a direct hit, or I wouldn't be talking to you. We're under control for now."

Red Crown angrily came on Guard: "ALL AIRCRAFT STAY OFF GUARD UNLESS YOU HAVE AN EMERGENCY! I HAVE AN AIRCRAFT IN TROUBLE! REPEAT. STAY OFF GUARD!"

Co-pilot: "Pilot, we only have 6000 pounds of fuel left."

"That's better, kid. Only controlled hysteria is allowed."

Spike jumped in: "Pilot, we are 17 clicks at 105 from kilo."

He was giving the aircraft's position to expedite rescue if they ejected. He was also doing Lemon's job.

"Red Crown, Bronze One. We are almost bingo [out of fuel]. We're one seven at one zero five from kilo. Six souls on board. We're going to 10,000 ft. and leaving for a swim. Will advise."

The Pilot nosed the aircraft over into a fairly steep dive.

“Roger, Bronze One. You have no choice. SAR [Search and Rescue] is en route. Good luck and God’s speed.”

“Roger, Red Crown. Bronze One appreciates the SAR in the air.”

Co-Pilot, in a calm, almost resigned tone: “Now we have a fire warning on four. Not that it makes any difference.”

“That was much, much better, Co. OK, crew, we’re getting out of here. Stand-by light and horn.”

“Red Crown, we’re going wet now.”

The pilot didn’t wait for a response. He reached up and flipped the cover on the ejection light and horn and flipped the switch. Bright red lights went on throughout the cockpit, and a loud buzzer sounded. The Gunner fired the explosive bolts that held the guns and his radar onto the plane and bailed out manually from the tail, and then the ejections began with the navigator, followed by the other crewmembers, with the pilot going last. He checked his pins, rotated two handles on either side of the seat, and squeezed the levers on the handles. The hatch above him exploded off the aircraft, and he rocketed into the night.

Spike ejected just before the pilot, second from last. His hatch blew, and he ejected downward like the navigator had. The force of the ejection shocked him. He hit a wall of wind that was going over 400 miles an hour, and it was freezing cold. His chute deployed almost immediately, yanking him up and swinging him like the pendulum in a grandfather clock. He remembered to pull the releases on the risers, and the swinging settled down.

Spike thought to himself: *This is bullshit. I’ve spent twelve years practicing to kill or be killed, and they almost won this round. I have to be nuts to do this. Christ! Pay attention... you’re over water... deploy the raft... check the beeper... roger, on... its getting warmer... check the...*

Suddenly he was under water, but it wasn’t nearly the shock he went through when he ejected. He popped to the surface quickly, buoyed by the survival vest that he had activated instinctively. He snapped the releases on his harness to get rid of his chute. The sea was fairly calm, and the moon allowed some visibility. He grabbed the lanyard and pulled the raft to within reach. It took two attempts, but he finally pulled himself into the one-man raft. He rolled over on his back and laid his head back onto the edge of the raft... *Shit, where’s my helmet?!*

C.K. McCUSKER

A light flash passed over him. “*What the hell? That was quick. They must have had a Navy boat in the area.*” He started to search for his strobe light to signal the boat when he heard the “whup-whup” of a chopper.

The light passed over him again, but this time it stopped after passing him and slowly started to move back toward him. Spike suddenly realized that it could not be our Navy. It had to be a North Vietnamese patrol boat!

Shit! This raft is a yellow cork floating in the black sea! Get out fast! He rolled out of the raft and reached for the standard issue switchblade in the leg of his flight suit, opened it, and cut the lanyard that tethered the raft to him. He shoved the raft as hard as he could and then swam as fast as he could away from it. The light made another pass near him and then stopped on the yellow cork bobbing in the sea. An automatic weapon opened up and shredded the raft only thirty yards away as he continued swimming. Training kept him from panic, but if the SAR didn't get there soon, the boat would find him, and if the raft was an example, they would clearly kill him rather than take him prisoner.

The enemy boat had made a fatal mistake. The SAR team saw both the searchlight and the gunfire at the raft.

SAR consisted of one or more rescue choppers as well as fixed wing aircraft that dealt with other threats to the downed aircrew member. The USAF, or Navy fighter, bird on sight used the boat's searchlight to get a visual ID.

The bright flash and missile contrail were probably the last things the enemy saw. The boat exploded in a huge eruption that seemed to be only a few hundred yards away from Spike. He felt the concussion of it almost immediately.

Spike smiled his “Spike” smile to himself as he bobbed around in his life vest in the South China Sea. He would probably live through this now, but as much as he tried to set it aside, he was still terrified.

The noise of the chopper became louder, and the searchlight was scanning the water close by. Suddenly it was over him, and the light blinded him. A loudspeaker blared, “STAY WHERE YOU ARE! WE WILL COME TO YOU!”

The speaker call almost caused him to laugh out loud, but he wasn't sure if it would be a laugh or a scream. Plus, water was splashing over his mouth as the life vest barely held him above the light swells.

Stay where? I am where! You guys are there! C'mon, guys, get me out of this Naval environment! I traditionally fly rather than float!

The thought was instantaneous, but he again didn't find it funny. He gave a thumbs up and sighed in relief. He had survived his first shootdown and had not become dead due to missiles and bullets.

I gotta get a new job. Besides, I'm approaching the pinnacle of my mediocre career anyway. Maybe I marry some Thai princess and just do nothing but get laid and count money. Then spend it. Then get laid, count more, spend more. Pretty safe and simple. Run out of money? Raise taxes. Peasants get pissed and start revolt. Wife finds out about girlfriends and runs to King. He is pissed about revolt and a little bit about the Princess. He decides throwing me in a pit of cobras is a good idea. No princess. No getting laid. No money. No counting. No spending. Now cobras. Something is wrong with this checklist. Abort! Abort!

Spike left his nightmare checklist when the Navy para-rescue diver hit the water very close to him after jumping from the chopper. The crew lowered a "horse collar" harness, which they grounded in the ocean, and the diver helped him into the harness. He was hauled rapidly to the chopper door and wrapped in a blanket by the medic on board.

Spike was back at U-Tapao less than eight hours after being checked out by the flight surgeon on the carrier that picked him up. He flew his next combat mission just over 36 hours after his return. B-52 "crewdogs," as they called themselves, were in short supply. The entire crew of six had been rescued successfully, but the fired Nav had broken his hip on ejection, so he was grounded indefinitely. Spike thought it was a highly convenient break. He needed a navigator that knew how to navigate. He also needed a new Princess and a revised checklist. He realized he had very nearly been killed. That thought had always been pushed back as a distant possibility.

Not any more.

