

THE
BOMBING
OFFICER

BY

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THE SKY WAS HAZY from the dry season's dust and the smoke of the fires the hill tribes set to clear new rice fields. Fred Upson could see well enough straight down below the plane, but it was harder to see to the sides, or ahead. He hadn't noticed the effect until the Air America pilot pointed it out. It was as if the haze had afflicted the two men with tunnel vision, from the plane to the ground below. The tunnel had no sharp boundaries; the landscape just became less and less sharply focused as you raised your eyes toward the horizon, until the mountains rimming the Plain of Jars seemed only blurs. And yet the sunlight in the cloudless blue sky was brilliant and brutal.

The bare plain rolled gently below, dun-colored from the drought. Its surface was mottled with bomb craters, scattered in the emptiness where there seemed to be no possible targets. Upson tried to picture what must have been down there when the bombs hit—what Soviet-made tanks, what concentrations of North Vietnamese troops, what communist supply dumps. The plane passed over several small buildings, not much more than sheds with tin roofs. Three neat lines of bomb craters ran toward and past the buildings in different directions. But none of the bombs had hit the targets.

“How come they were trying to bomb the village?” Upson shouted over the roar of the plane’s engine.

The pilot pushed his headset off one ear. “Say what?” he shouted back.

“The little village. How come they were trying to hit it?”

“Shit, who knows? They send ’em up here to drop bombs, so they drop bombs. Bring your bombs back home with you, you lose brownie points.”

Upson smiled and nodded, to show he had heard, and the pilot shoved his earphone back in place. A moment later, the plane went into a diving turn so sharp that at first Upson thought something was wrong. But the pilot was holding the wheel loosely and casually, with the fingertips of his left hand, while he waved with his right at a collection of tents and huts. “Lima Lima” he shouted. “There’s the Gunfighter, waiting on us.”

The small figure of a man stood by a pile of brown bales. There was no landing strip marked out, just a patch of fairly flat ground near where the man stood. The pilot cut the throttle, and Upson could hear the whistle of the wind the plane made as it settled through the air. This was the first time he had heard that sound, his first time in a small plane. The ground came up frighteningly fast. The pilot raised the plane’s long nose till it blocked the onrushing ground from sight, till it seemed he was trying to stand the aircraft on its tail. There was a bump and a squeal from the tires, and in an impossibly short distance the plane came to a stop.

“Door-to-door,” the pilot said. “You call, we haul.” He leaned over to show Upson how the door on the passenger side unlatched. The man waiting near the plane for them was perhaps a year or two older than Upson, who was twenty-nine. Upson liked him and envied him on sight. The man had a black, drooping gunfighter’s mustache. He was tall and lanky and broad-shouldered, whereas Upson was of medium, unremarkable height and weight. The man had eyes of vivid reddish brown; Upson’s eyes were a nondescript hazel, and had needed glasses since second

grade. Upson wore a permanent press sports shirt, with slacks and desert boots; the man beside the plane wore a filthy tennis hat, a khaki shirt with the sleeves torn off at the armholes, faded Levi's, and sneakers with no socks. "Dick Lindsay," the man said.

"Hi, Dick. I'm Fred Upson."

"Shit, call him Gunfighter," the pilot said. "Look at that damn womb-broom on him."

"What kind of talk is that, Harry?" Lindsay said. "What if I told your momma you knew words like that?"

"She'd be proud of me. She never went to school and learned those fancy words for it."

"Listen, Harry, can you carry a few of my people here over to Ban Leng with you? Some of them wouldn't be able to make the hike."

"Long as you pick 'em out, babes. I'm not going to be the prick that won't let their twenty-five uncles and aunts onto the plane." Lindsay nodded, and went off towards a group of peasants nearby. "Ol' Gunfighter talks Lao like he was born here," the pilot said as he watched the American with the peasants. "You believe that son of a bitch went to Yale? I shit you not. He's a good old boy, though, Gunfighter is."

Upson had gone to the University of Pennsylvania, and nobody had ever called him a good old boy. Maybe the State Department personnel office had made him into a good old boy ex officio, he thought, just by assigning him to Laos. In Morocco, his only other overseas posting, people would have condescended to a good old boy. There the main business of the American embassy was the transfer of American money and technology to Morocco, and the production of cables to Washington.

The work had been agreeable enough, and had even seemed important. But, even in Upson's short time in Laos, his service in Morocco had come to seem trivial. There the Americans were spectators; here, they were actors. In Morocco the embassy officials had been cautious and passive; here they seemed aggressive, masculine, confident.

In Laos the American mission commanded an air force, an army, the economy—an entire country, really. Upson had never doubted his ability to handle his job in Rabat's political section; he was not so confident that he could measure up to the demands of wartime Laos. He had never made the varsity in high school and had not bothered to try in college. Now, he thought, I have made the team at last. As if the coach mistook me for some natural athlete with the same name. The question is whether I'm good enough to take advantage of the break and keep my place on the squad.

Lindsay was bringing the group of refugees over toward the plane. There were women and children and old people, but no young men. Some were barefoot and some wore rubber sandals, like shower sandals. Both men and women wore skirts of checked cotton, knotted in front. Some of the women wore cotton blouses; some wore nothing above the waist but brassieres that made their breasts look conical. The small children wore only shirts. Upson was the only one who paid any attention when a little boy squatting near his mother peed into the dust, watching as the dark patch grew in front of him. Lindsay was talking sternly to the villagers, like a father trying to hold his temper. Finally several old men and women and a sick child went to the plane, where the pilot helped them up through the cabin's sliding door. "How many more can you take?" Lindsay called.

"Many as you can cram in," Harry said. "Just fill the son of a bitch up, and I'll get it off the ground somehow."

Lindsay sent more of the old people over to the plane, where they boarded without protest. But one last lame old man refused to go. Finally Lindsay half dragged him to the plane, boosted him aboard, and slid the door shut behind him. The roar of the plane's 340-horsepower engine filled the air and the plane started to move, its propeller boiling up a thick cloud of dust. By the time the cloud had cleared enough so that Upson could see again, the plane was far away, climbing heavily. An old woman was in front of

Lindsay, her head bowed and her palms pressed together in an attitude of prayer. “Poor old lady,” Lindsay said. “The old guy didn’t want to leave without her, but he could never had walked out with the bad leg he has.”

“What was she saying just then?” Upson asked.

“She was thanking me for giving her husband the chance to live, even though she knows she’ll never see him again.”

“She won’t?”

“Probably she will, sure. Down in the refugee camps. But she doesn’t know that. None of these people know what the hell is going to happen to them. Some of them believe what the NVA have been telling them. That we’re going to push them out of airplanes and take over their land.”

“What’s the NVA?”

“North Vietnamese Army.”

“I thought everybody wanted to leave, to get away from the communists. That’s what they said at the embassy.”

“Did they say the people were voting with their feet?”

“No.”

“Sometimes they say that, too, at the embassy. The thing is, at the embassy they don’t know their ass from second base. A lot of these folks would rather stay here no matter what’s going to happen, so I sort of give them the impression they don’t have any choice. What else can I do? In a few days, the NVA will retake the area, and the whole goddamned PDJ will be one big free-fire zone.”

Upson didn’t have to ask what PDJ meant. He had learned a few of the acronyms already: PDJ for the Plain of Jars, from the French *Plaine des Jarres*; RLAF, pronounced Arlaf, for the Royal Lao Air Force; PL for Pathet Lao; RLG for the Royal Lao Government.

“From the air coming in, it looked like it must have been a free-fire zone before,” Upson said. “So they must have lived through it once.”

“Sure, but this time the NVA is coming, too. So they’ll have both the bombing and the soldiers to contend with.”

Upson explained what he had seen on the way up—the lines of bomb craters that had approached and missed the little village. “How could they miss it three times running?” he asked. “And why were they trying to hit it in the first place? I thought inhabited villages were off limits.”

“Maybe they had intelligence it was an arms dump and the civilian population had left. Maybe they just bombed it anyway. That’s what the air force does. May not hit, but it bombs. The old prop planes, the A-1 Es and the T-28s, they can hit what they aim at. But the fast-movers, forget it.”

“Really? You get the impression it’s precision bombing.”

“Sure it is. Once I was showing a movie outdoors, eight miles inside an area that wasn’t validated, where they weren’t supposed to bomb. Before I could get through on the radio to call the bastards off, a couple of F-105s made four passes at a lighted screen, probably the only light in fifty miles. Missed us every time.”

“Why didn’t you turn off the projector?”

“When I went to cut the generator, the villagers said to leave it running and stay where we were. Their theory was the planes were sure to miss whatever they were aiming at. If we cut the lights they’d have to guess where we were, and maybe they’d hit us by mistake.”

Upson thought of the maps in his new office down in Vientiane, with their precise markings and carefully drawn overlays, showing where bombing was permitted and where it was forbidden under the rules of engagement. “How could they have been eight miles into an unvalidated zone?” he asked.

“Not much of a mistake,” the refugee worker said. “It’s dark, you see a target of opportunity. At those speeds, you cover eight miles in less than a minute. Besides, those guys figure as soon as they cross the Mekong, they’re in Indian territory. So basically, deep down inside, why give a shit about a bunch of rules of engagement? The only person who cares is you, babes. The Mad Bomber.”

“The what?”

“Aren’t you taking over from Thompson as the new Mad Bomber?”

“I guess so. Air force liaison officer.”

“Right. Lots of luck. It’s a kamikaze job. Do it right and you go down in flames, like Thompson.”

An old man came up to them, leading a delegation of Lao. He asked a question, and then Lindsay went into a long explanation of something. Everyone listened humbly and politely. At the end an old woman went off to the huts and returned carrying a gas can. Lindsay opened the can, sniffed at it, and sloshed the contents around.

“Do you have any kip on you?” he asked Upson.

“Yes, some.”

“There’s probably five hundred kip worth of kerosene in here. How about giving her fifteen hundred for it, and I’ll pay you back tonight? If you’ve got any extra, in fact, maybe you could exchange some of their PL money for RLG money. Send it to the folks back home as a souvenir or something. just don’t tell the ambassador.”

“Why not?” Upson asked, starting to count the Royal Lao Government currency in his wallet.

“He figures that if we won’t change their communist money for them, they’ll learn that they can’t count on the PL. So now their life savings are worthless.”

“But wouldn’t that just discourage other people from coming over to the government side?”

“You tell the ambassador. It didn’t work when we did.”

Upson had about twenty thousand kip, forty dollars at the official rate. The black market rate was just about the same, because the kip was freely interchangeable with the dollar. It was an extension of the dollar, really, as Upson had learned in the round of briefings set up for him when he joined the embassy staff the week before.

When Lindsay explained that the American stranger was willing to pay government currency for their Pathet Lao savings, the refugees began to rummage through their bundles and clothing for money. “I told them you’d only take two for one,” Lindsay said. “That way, more people

will get at least a little something. And the stuff may be worthless, but it's kind of pretty, really. Take a look at the five-hundred-kip note."

It showed happy Pathet Lao workers in an underground factory, safe from the bombers. "They're making aluminum cooking pots out of the American planes they shoot down. They make little ashtrays, too, with inscriptions saying it came from the thousandth American plane shot down over Laos. They give them to communist bloc visitors as souvenirs."

"A thousand sounds awful high."

"Sure it is. They lie just like us. Maybe they've shot down a couple hundred, mostly in the trail area."

When the transactions were over, Lindsay pulled a small hunting knife from its sheath and began to slash at the burlap-wrapped bales piled near the improvised landing strip. Rice ran from the cuts he made.

"How about that?" Lindsay said, letting a handful run through his fingers to the ground. "Three weeks ago we airlifted this stuff in, and now we don't have the aircraft to take it back. So I'm supposed to burn it to keep it from the NVA. Shit."

When Lindsay had slashed all the bales on the outside of the pile, he poured kerosene around and touched it off with a lighter. After the first big whoof, oily black smoke began to rise straight up into the still air. The sun was so bright that the flames themselves were almost invisible.

"That's something they never teach you in school," Lindsay said. "How to burn rice. Burns itself out after a while, and most of it'll still be left. Probably it's ruined by the smoke or the kerosene or something, but I don't really know. It's like the rest of this war, kind of an out-of-town tryout. Next time we get into a guerrilla war in a fifteenth-century rural culture we'll have it all worked out, how to burn rice."

The Lao stood around the rice dump, watching without expression as it burned. Now and then a child would run

toward the fire till it got too hot, and then run laughing back to its mother.

“Harry’s got to make a swing to a bunch of other sites,” Lindsay said. “Gives us time to grab something to eat, then walk out to the ridgeline over there. The Vietnamese will have the whole damned PDJ again within a few weeks, so it’s the only chance you’ll ever have to look at the jars.”

“You went to Yale, the pilot said?”

“I was going to be an archeologist, once, and then I got tied up with this. I did a monograph on the jars, a couple of years ago, but the fact is nobody knows what the hell they were for, or where they came from, or how they got them here.”

Lindsay took them into an open-fronted shelter with a corrugated iron roof and walls made of woven grass. An old woman was squatting flat on her heels inside the shop, tapping with a knife to make little cuts along the length of a green papaya. When she had worked her way all around it, she shaved the fruit from top to bottom. With each shallow slice, slivers of papaya fell into the enamel bowl between her knees.

“She’s making kind of a salad, with lemon juice and hot peppers,” Lindsay said. “Pretty sour. I’d try one of these things instead.”

He handed Upson one of several green cubes which were hanging by strings from the roof-tree. Upson undid the banana leaf covering, as intricately folded as an origami construction. Inside was a pink cube almost two inches square. “What is it?” he asked.

“Pork rind and a little meat, all chopped into little slivers. Sort of a square sausage with a banana leaf for skin. In the middle there’s a hot pepper and a clove of garlic.”

“Raw meat?”

“The only way to get by up here is just go ahead and eat the food and drink the water, and then get the shits and shakes and the cold sweats for a week. Once you’re through that, the local bugs don’t bother you too much anymore. Start to worry about the sanitation, you’d go nuts.”

Lindsay laughed. “Jesus, I remember one kid they sent up to us, his first overseas tour. I took him out overnight to a Meo village where we had a rice demonstration project. Next morning he went out to crap in the bushes and when he came back he grabbed a ride on the next plane to Vientiane. What happened, he squatted down and when he looked up there was a big circle of dogs and pigs around him, waiting. Soon as he finished they rushed in, all the dogs and pigs fighting over his turds.”

“I’ll say one thing for you, Dick,” Upson said. “You really know how to give a guy an appetite.” But, of course, now he had to eat the raw meat. The red pepper in the center gave him no trouble; he had got used to hot peppers during his tour in Morocco. With the food they had warm Filipino beer, two brown bottles of San Miguel. The woman who kept the food stall had her entire stock laid out on a plank on the ground: wicker containers of sticky rice; enamel bowls of sauces and pastes, crawling with flies; a pot of grayish stew, a kettle of tea, orange soda, and three more bottles of San Miguel.

“How do you get beer from the Philippines to the Plain of Jars in the middle of a war?” Upson asked.

“Black market from our PXs in Vietnam. The stuff finds its way to North Vietnam, and then they bring it down here. A lot of the people up here are ethnic Chinese, and they’d find some way to do business in the middle of a firefight. You know Harry, the pilot who brought you in? He’s a silent partner in a bar down in Vientiane, and the rent money goes to the owner in Hanoi. God knows how it gets there, but it does.”

When they went outside again, the sun beat down so heavily that it seemed to have a force you could measure, like a wind or a waterfall. Lindsay didn’t look as if he was walking fast as they headed for the distant ridgeline, but Upson found himself slightly out of breath keeping up. A dark patch of sweat began on the back of Lindsay’s khaki shirt and grew larger as they walked. Upson could see the rime of salt crystals on the sun-bleached khaki, marking the

limit that earlier patches had reached. Maybe this one would be a record. As they began to climb, though, Upson stopped thinking about anything but keeping up.

At the top of the hill were the jars—huge things that had settled into the ground over the centuries and now tilted like the gravestones in an old cemetery. They were in no particular pattern or relationship to each other that Upson could make out. Some were only knee-high; some were as tall as a man. They were of light gray stone so rough and soft that bits crumbled off when he picked at it. Upson saw nothing inside them but a little windblown sand and dust at the bottom. He could barely reach his arms around the biggest of the jars.

“Take a good look,” Lindsay said. “We’re likely to be the last Americans to see these for a good long while.”

“Nobody has any idea what they were for?”

“Some say funeral urns, but nobody knows for sure. People up here are afraid of them, keep away from the place. They know there’s no stone like that in the whole area, and they can’t figure out how the things got here.”

The Plain of Jars was the only place in Laos Upson had ever heard of, before he had received orders six weeks ago assigning him directly to Vientiane with no home leave. He had only found out that Vientiane was the administrative capital of Laos by looking it up; at first he had the vague idea that it was someplace in sub-Saharan Africa. Now he was on what the newspapers liked to call the “strategic Plain of Jars,” among the jars themselves.

No bombs had hit anywhere near; the locations of the jars were marked on the maps in Upson’s new office, off limits to the air force. There was no litter around, no path leading to this particular collection of jars, no hint that anyone had ever visited them before today. The closest sign of man was Ban Lat Sen, from which they had walked, and the settlement was far enough away to be indistinct. The smoke from the burning rice was still rising straight up, until it blended into the general haze.

“We better head on back,” Lindsay said. “Don’t want to keep Harry waiting. Every plane we’ve got is busy on the airlift.”

They had only been back in Ban Lat Sen for a few minutes when a buzzing came from the sky. Lindsay glanced towards the west and said, “There’s Harry.” Upson saw nothing at first, but at last he caught sight of the small shape of the plane coming back for them. “I better get out there and start playing God again,” Lindsay said. “We can carry another half dozen or so folks over with us to Ban Leng, save them the walk.”

He went off to talk with the village elders about who should go, while Upson watched the plane, a Swiss-designed Porter Pilatus, make its final approach. The nose was enormously long, to make room for the over-powered engine. It was a solid, inelegant working craft made for mountain flying, with nothing nonfunctional about it. The pilot landed in the same startlingly short distance as before, cut his engine, and climbed out. “Just you coming?” he called. “Where’s the Gunfighter?”

“He’s picking out another bunch to go out with us to Ban Leng,” Upson answered. “Here he comes now.”

“That all you got for me, babes?” the pilot said to Lindsay. “I can take one or two more than that even, if you got any small ones.”

“The rest of them are in pretty good shape. They can make the walk to Ban Leng all right.”

“You’re the boss, babes.”

As the Porter Pilatus approached Ban Leng, Upson could see that there was no airstrip there, either—just a long and fairly level place between two lines of low hills. A C-130 four-engine transport plane was on the ground, small as a toy in the distance. its propellers blew a huge plume of dust out behind the plane, along the ground and then rising into the air in yellow billows. Hundreds of tiny people stood well clear of the clouds. “I don’t know if I got enough room to grease her in without getting us all dusty or not, “

the pilot said. "Looks like I either go into the dust or I chop up a few Meo."

The Meo refugees spotted the light plane as it was making its final approach, and began to scatter out of its path, pulling children and animals along behind them. Upson thought the plane was going to hit a bale of possessions someone had left behind, but the left wheel passed six feet from it. "Nice work," he said when the plane stopped. "Jesus."

"Not as hairy as it looked," the pilot shouted. "Ground loop was the worst thing that could have happened to us."

The noise was terrible, a steady roar that made normal talking impossible. When the Air America pilot took off again, the plane seemed to rise away from them silently, its noise lost in the larger din. Dust covered Upson's skin and made a paste on his teeth; when he rubbed them with his forefinger, brown gummy stuff came off. Lindsay was in the worst of the dust, his black mustache now a reddish yellow. He was shouting noiselessly at the refugees, urging them up the ramp into the huge belly of the plane.

Upson wanted to be useful, but he didn't know what to do. The three or four other Americans around were all so busy that he was afraid to bother them. He stood off among the waiting refugees, feeling useless and left out. Both men and women wore loose, black turbans. The babies, slung on their mothers' backs, wore cloth caps decorated with silver coins and elaborate embroidery. Many of the families had pigs with them, tied up in cloth and cord so that their legs were squeezed against their bodies and they looked like huge wieners. Only the heads were free, with the eyes wide and staring, paralyzed beyond fear. Every family had bags and wicker baskets and bales and old cardboard suitcases held together with twine, and net bags of vegetables Upson couldn't recognize, and primitive farm implements, like something in a museum. One woman had a foot-powered sewing machine, with Singer worked into the ornamental grille of the treadle.

Finally, to get away from the dust and the noise, Upson walked to the top of a slight rise nearby and sat down. The four giant airplane engines roared, and the dust roiled so high that Upson could barely make out the U.S. Air Force markings on the tail of the C-130. The original plan, as he had learned on his first day on the job, only a week ago, had been to paint out the military insignia.

