

A Vietnam War Story written in 2019 by
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This is a short story about two farm boys (Don and Duane Mrosła) from central Minnesota. The "boys" joined the Air Force after high school to see the world. Their brother Richard had graduated from USAFA in the class of '60 and was flying around the world in C-130's. The boys enlisted in the Air Force, went to basic training at Lackland AFB TX, then to Kessler AFB MS. While at Kessler the boys applied for the USAFA Prep School and then the Academy. The boys got accepted to the Prep School and then got appointments to the Academy. After USAFA the boys attended pilot training at Laughlin AFB TX. From Laughlin the boys got C-130's to Pope AFB NC.

After a year at Pope, Duane (Du) got orders to CCK AB, Taiwan. Don (DJ) waited a week for his orders. None came. Base personnel said brothers could not be in the war zone at the same time (Sullivan Brothers Act). After signing waivers and waiting two weeks, DJ got orders to go to CLARK AB, Philippines. After talking to personnel, DJ was going to CCK also.

Our "mission" in Taiwan was to fly to Vietnam for a 15-20 day rotation. While in Vietnam we would fly "in-country" missions hauling passengers and cargo from base to base. The boys started flying in Vietnam as copilots in Feb '71. By Nov '71 they were upgraded to aircraft commanders. In Apr '72, a large number of North Vietnamese/Vietcong troops had surrounded a group of South Vietnamese troops with American advisors in an area about 100 miles north of Saigon called An Loc. To prevent the loss of these troops/advisors, the C-130's were called in to airdrop "supplies" to the surrounded troops. Since the Air Force had not been making airdrops in Vietnam for years, most of the pilots had not been trained in CDS (container drop system) airdrops. Since the boys had done numerous drops while at Pope, we were two of numerous crews picked to make these drops.

Up until this night, our Wing from CCK had lost 4 C-130's and 3 crews (18 crew members) since the airdrops had begun. Because of the loss of the aircraft/crews, it was decided that the safest way to make the drops was to do it at night, flying low level (200' AGL) and then climb to drop

altitude (500' AGL) over the drop zone and release our load, then descend back to 200' AGL for the escape route.

On this mission, my crew (DJ's) left Saigon with a load of ammunition (32,000 lbs/16-1 ton pallets). My crew was one of three C-130's orbiting at different locations while a gunship cleared the run-in to the drop zone. Once I was cleared for my drop, my navigator and I were looking at the drop zone. While starting our climb from 200 feet to 500 feet all hell broke out. It was like flying into a thunderstorm. The entire ground lit up around us with white flashes (like being in a thunderstorm). I heard a lot of "pinging", our aircraft was taking groundfire (hits). I said to myself "you ba-----ds aren't getting me before my wedding" (which was two months away).

As I added power, our cockpit lit up like a Christmas tree. Our red fire and nacelle overheat lights were going off and we could read our instruments from the light coming off #1 engine (left outboard) as it was on fire (this was at night). The last thing my 2 loadmasters heard was "we are on fire", then we lost all electrical power. The next thing I saw was my copilot's hand reaching for the number one fire control (to shut the engine down). I almost broke his wrist as I knocked his hand away from the fire control handle. We had a brief discussion. He said #1 is on fire and we have to put it out. I came back with "I'll tell you when to put it out!". I had a good engineer and he did his thing. He reset all the generators and was able to get one back on line which gave us our intercom back. I yelled over the intercom "jettison the load, jettison the load now!". The loadmaster came back with "it is not moving". In the excitement, we had not completed the drop checklist and the flaps had not been repositioned for the drop, so I pulled back on the yoke and the ammo rolled out the back. The loadmaster yelled "load clear", and I turned to our escape heading and started to climb.

I then went on the radio and said to the two aircraft behind me "break out, break out, they are waiting for you!". Then I said to my copilot, "now shut down number one". We went thru the checklist (we shut the engine down, blew a fire bottle to put the flames out and waited for the fire light to go out. Since we only have two fire bottles, I did not want to use the last one too quickly as we had a ways to go to get back to Saigon.

While we waited for the fire light to go out the engineer called out "low torque, TIT, fuel flow on number 3 (right inboard engine). I told the copilot to take a look at #3. He could not get his shoulder harness unlocked (we had locked our shoulder harnesses to preclude one of us falling on the yoke if either of us got shot and causing the airplane to crash. (This was one of the possible causes for us losing three aircraft and crews). I then

told the navigator to look at number 3. He said it was wind-milling (the propeller was turning very slowly). I told the copilot and engineer to shut down number 3 engine. After we ran the checklist, a voice came over the radio-"hey bro, what's wrong?".

Here it was brother Du! He was one of the two aircraft behind me on the run-in. He had made a run across the drop-zone earlier but had a malfunction (his load of ammo did not exit the aircraft) so he went back to Saigon and had his load re-rigged. He was on his second run-in that night when he and the other aircraft aborted the run-in to the drop-zone. Du took no hits but the other aircraft took a few hits. I told Du that I had numbers 1 and 3 shut down and was heading to Saigon. His response was "I'll follow you". I knew then that if I crash-landed, he would land on a levee and pick me up! He always had my back.

On the way back to Saigon I had the copilot call "mother" in Saigon and request to land on the right runway (25 right) at Tan Son Nhut Air Base. They told him to land on runway 25 left. I gave the aircraft to the copilot and I called "mother". I told them I was going to land on 25 right and to have the crash equipment on 25 right. I said I was going to land on 25 right -"over and out". I then went to tower frequency. It was getting light now (sun up) and I did not want to tie up the primary instrument runway if I crashed on the runway.

We had taken a lot of hits and I did not know what other problems I would have once I lowered the landing gear (possible blown tires, hydraulic problems etc). We had discussed landing with the flaps in the current setting as we had not moved them after the drop. We made a "no-flap" approach and landing on the right runway (25 right). We slowly took the high-speed taxiway off the runway and came to a stop surrounded by emergency equipment. We got off the airplane and I got on my hands and knees, kissed the ground and thanked the man upstairs for getting us back safe and sound.

As we were landing on 25 right, brother Du was landing on runway 25 left. His crew and my crew went to the club and had a 'few beers' to celebrate surviving an eventful night. At the club, my loadmasters said it was exciting in the back of the plane- bullets were ricocheting around the cargo compartment, they heard us say "we are on fire", then we lost all electrical power, then me telling them to jettison the load and then shutting down two engines- it was an eventful night. It turned out my crew made the last low-level air drop at An Loc. The Air Force went to high altitude low opening (halo) air drops that afternoon and two weeks later the siege was broken.

It had been a tough week for my crew as on our first drop (a few nights before) we also had some excitement. As we were crossing the drop zone, the nav had called "green light" at which time our 32,000 lbs of ammo was supposed to roll out the back of the airplane. It did not and the loadmaster yelled "the load is not moving" so I pulled back on the yoke and the load went out the back. I then pointed to the flap lever and said "give me 50% flaps". That is when I noticed that the flaps were at 50% instead of 12% which would have allowed our load to go at "green light". My copilot had not run the complete checklist which would have set the flaps to the correct setting. So on the way back to Saigon I had a chat with my copilot. "Didn't they teach you a damn thing at Little Rock AB!". That is when I found out that he had been pencil-whipped at Little Rock. On his last flight at Little Rock (the night before he was to go to survival training in Washington state) he was in a formation flight taxing for takeoff when they had a propeller problem. So they had to taxi back in to get it fixed. When they taxied out for takeoff the tower told them the drop zone was now closed. The instructor said "they don't make air drops in Vietnam" so he signed him off as completing his training (pencil-whipped) so that he could catch his flight the next morning. So he gets to CCK and after his checkout in-country, he becomes my copilot for his first rotation in Vietnam. The rest is history. His first two air drops were under "combat conditions". He learned a lot. I learned a lot too. It pays to know your emergency procedures and to think about different scenarios. I had done that. One of the scenarios I had thought about was if I had a fire on an engine and I needed it for power I would keep it running if it did not blow when it lit off. I could use it for awhile as there was airflow going over the engine and wing. Had my copilot shut down the engine, we would have crash-landed on the drop zone with 32,000 lbs of ammo on board. The number 3 engine had taken a direct hit thru the fuel control and had flamed-out. With the number 3 propeller windmilling, it gave me drag (like losing 1 1/2 engines). Had my copilot pulled the number 1 fire handle we would have been down to 1 and 1/2 engines. The manual has a "warning" that operation above 120,000 lbs on two engines is marginal. We weighed 132,000 lbs when we got hit. Had he pulled the fire handle we would have crashed on the drop zone. My copilot went back to Little Rock, become an instructor and retired from the Air Force.

Brother Du has always had my back- in football I was center and he was halfback, I was linebacker and he was safety behind me. In boxing he was my sparring partner. He won the USAFA Wing Open at 137 lbs and I

won at 152 lbs. He was my roommate for 5 years after the Academy. He has always had my six and I have always had his six.

The farm "boys" from central Minnesota did get to see the world. The "boys" celebrated their 50th class reunion and their 50th pilot training reunion with their loving wives. DJ and Pearl have been married 47 years and Margie and Dewey have been married 46 years as of 2019.



The Mroska "Boys"



DJ and Pearl Mroska



Dewey and Margie Mroska