

After twenty-four years' service—B-24 bombardier with the jolly Rogers in the Pacific in WW II, postwar pilot training, then several tours as an information officer, most recently at US Strike Command headquarters—the author was looking forward to an assignment in Europe. A phone call changed all that. Instead, he plunged into fun and (nasty) games at Fairchild AFB, endured prickly visits with the medics who played darts on his anatomy, flew dive-bombing sessions in the Douglas Racer, and paddled hip-deep in pythons through the Philippine jungle, as he traveled ...

# The Rosy Road to Vietnam

By Lt. Col. John G. Rose, USAF

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BOB STEVENS

**A** CHEERFUL voice on the phone said, Good morning, sir. This is Sergeant Jones. I have your next assignment here. "Good," I said assuredly, since I knew where that would be.

"Germany?" I said.

Vietnam, he said.

Well, sir, that's how it began—Gooney Bird pilot in Vietnam after twenty-one years behind a desk and twenty-four years since last in combat. What follows is to help you old birds over the spot in the road that starts with the cheerful voice on the phone.

These are the facts that came to light in the following weeks:

(A) You can't just sling a few things in a B-4 bag, dig out a flight cap, and hop the next jet for VN.

(B) There are more shots in the Doe's little black bag than you ever dreamed.

(C) You are younger and tougher than you think.

(D) No, you don't know how to fly a Gooney Bird.

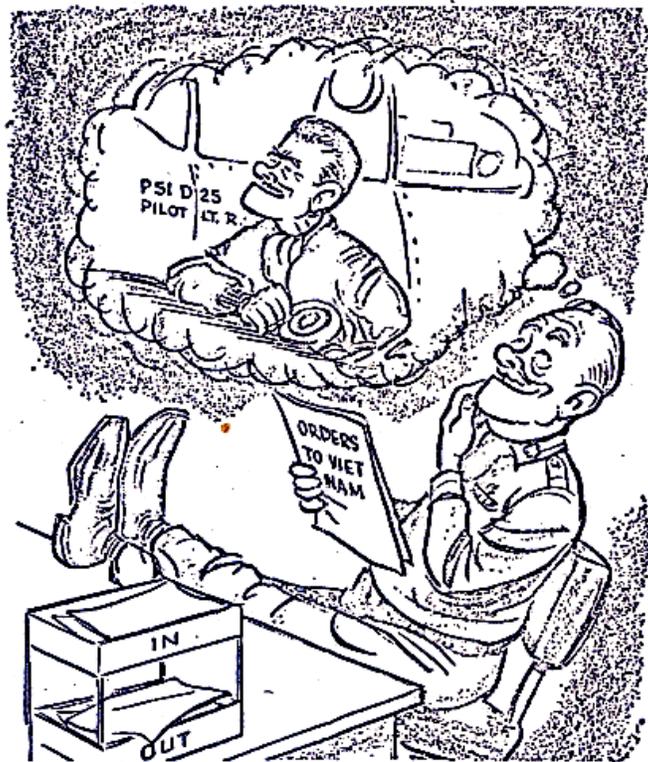
(E) There is a Jungle Survival School in the Philippine Islands where you can get very wet.

All of this was not readily apparent in one great blinding flash, of course, but gradually the above facts emerge as you hurtle through the schedule pre-paring yourself for combat.

First tip: DON'T ACCEPT PCS ORDERS WITH TDY AT SCHOOLS EN ROUTE. HOLD ON TO HOME AS LONG AS POSSIBLE, PREFERABLY UNTIL THE DAY OF YOUR PORT CALL.

This has many advantages, not the least of which is that somebody cares about you and pays you and passes messages to you and KNOWS WHERE YOU ARE ALL THE TIME!

OK. So now if you've not been to Survival School in the last five years, you go to Fairchild AFB, Wash., for three weeks of delightful training that will prove to you that you are (*see C above*) younger and tough-



er than you thought. If you have never attended Survival School, you're going to approach this phase with some trepidation, being over forty and all ... haven't really kept up with that 5BX stuff, you know. If you have been through it way back ... it ain't changed, brother!

There will be no attempt here to draw the longbow on any of this ... if it was rough, we'll say so; if it was not, we'll say that too. Oh!! It was rough at Fairchild ... mentally and physically.

Second tip: RELAX ... PREPARE YOURSELF FOR A REAL TRAINING EXPERIENCE. REALIZE YOU'LL HATE IT WHILE



YOU'RE THERE AND WON'T REALIZE WHAT YOU GOT OUT OF IT FOR A MONTH OR SO AFTER YOU'VE LEFT. DON'T TRY TO EVALUATE IT WHILE YOU'RE THERE. YOU CAN'T THAT OBJECTIVE WHILE YOU'RE STILL HURTING. The three weeks at Fairchild will let you look deep inside yourself to find out who really resides in that blue suit you wear so proudly.

A word of encouragement here—the old bucks seem to bear up well; better than most, it seems. Pride, I imagine. My class had a high percentage of old heads, and all made it with reasonable aplomb, albeit assorted aches and sprains from things like judo, obstacle course, trek, etc. You run everywhere while in the school area, and this is good as it takes your mind off everything else except just getting places. It also gets you ready for the hills, which are very large hills indeed.

After a week of some really excellent lectures and two hours a day of Oriental exercises called combative measures, you go through an obstacle course at night with all sorts of mechanical and human devices designed to make the trip difficult. They succeed!

As you emerge exhausted but triumphant from this mile excursion; "they" throw a bag over your head, and the rest is darkness for a while.

I'll leave it there for two reasons: first, because it is classified, and second, because the training in that phase is much more valuable if you have only a vague idea of what to expect.

Sometime later you emerge rather tired, angry—maybe with yourself, maybe with "them," but emerge you do and go back to barracks. My gang sang as it marched out. That may sound silly now, but when you come out, try to come out singing. You'll see what we meant—"they" did.

Now back to the room for a shower, a meal, and maybe a little shut-eye. Hurry though; all your gear has to be ready for an 0500 departure for the hills. Packs, two pairs of socks in those well-broken-in boots, and grim determination to "make it." It's a long and lovely ride through the mountains to the spot where "they" drop you off in elements of about fifteen or so with your instructor who leads you back into static camp. There, for three days, you live and learn before you "go mobile" You'll fish and set

snare and navigate ... a euphemism for walking great distances, through the woods.

Now come the fun and games. You and your partner go it alone, as do the rest, two by two, and "they" start looking for you. "They" must be avoided at all costs. Two days later you emerge, exhausted but triumphant. This time they don't throw a bag over your head. They throw you on a bus. Boy, you've graduated!

I've hit only the high spots in covering the school at Fairchild. The quality of instruction is high, the staff is dedicated, and the facilities are excellent. All you have to do is provide the attitude and be in reasonable shape . . . lard butts had a rough time there. We have finished hurdle number one on the long road to Vietnam.

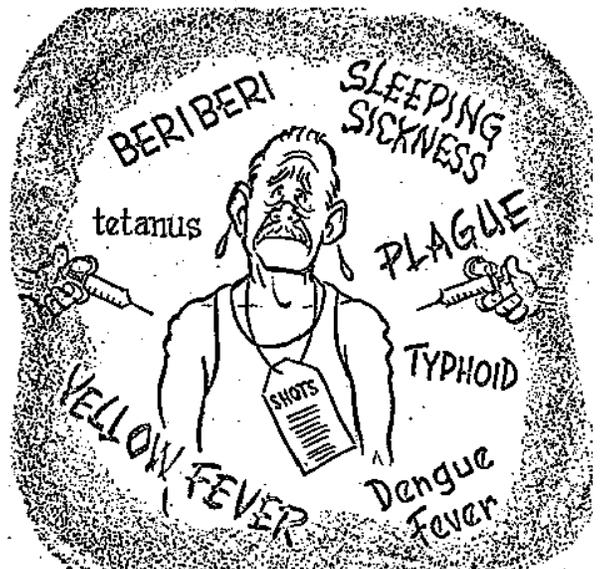
The second hurdle is Transition, or qualification in assigned aircraft. First, we go to Hurlburt Field on Eglin AFB, Fla., for two weeks of ground school and overseas processing. Don't relax, friend, they have Physical Training at 0630 each day, whether you need it or not . . . and who needs it? Not you, who have just romped over the hills at Fairchild, but there it is, a square-filler's dream . . . gray-haired old duffers out by dawn's early light running the mile, etc., *ad nauseum*.

Then there is this shot line where you find out (*B above*). Man, there are more things to keep you from catching more things than most ordinary medical men know about. The list is long and impressively full of Latin and Greek names for malady after malady (the reason for the Latin is the Greeks really didn't have a name for everything).

Third tip: DON'T TAKE THREE IN EACH ARM, THEN GO OUT TO THE EGLIN GOLF COURSE AND PLAY A FAST EIGHTEEN IN THE HOT SUN. ... YOU GET ALL THE SYMPTOMS OF ALL THE DISEASES YOU HAD SHOT INTO YOU THAT DAY. PLAGUE IS THE WORST ... SHOT AND DISEASE.

The ground school here is not bad, and probably necessary. The plumbing and junk you find all over the inside of the venerable Goon are all torn into and

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explained in great detail. The students' experience ranged from no Goon time to those fully current. Should have two classes, maybe with a cutoff of zero to no Goon time in the last five years in one, and all those who have flown it within five years in another.

Also at Hurlburt you fire the M-16 and the .38 pistol and endure water survival—the former if you haven't had it before getting to Hurlburt, the latter if you have not been to Fairchild or gotten it in the normal course of events in your own command.

Completing the course at Hurlburt leads again to the road west. This time to England AFB, La., where you finally see your first flyable Goon! In my own case, I hadn't felt one tremble eagerly in my hands for five years. For some it had been much longer. For others a matter of weeks since they had flown the Douglas Racer. Here is where you find out (*D above*). Oh! If your arms have stopped aching, go and get 'em punctured again ... no, you're not through with shots yet.

The outfit at England has Goons, A-26s, C-123s, A-1Hs, A-1Es, U-10s, and O-1Es. In other words, it looks like World War II right there in the middle of Louisiana.

The instructors look like you twenty years ago, only I think they're smarter than we were. At least they go to bed at night, and there are no red eyes and jangled nerves in the briefing room in the morning. Also they fly as porcupines make love—very ... very ... carefully!

So off you go, with a Captain or Major who most likely was a base operations officer somewhere before he got to England. Most of ours were TDY from just such jobs. Highly competent and interested in helping the old duffers learn to fly the old beast a new way.

No time is wasted in preliminaries. You meet your instructor and start flying right now! Thirty landings in four hours is about par for the course for you and your flying mate. Dad, it is hot and muggy down thar in the pattern, and you look as though you had waded the river coming in from your aircraft. Depending on

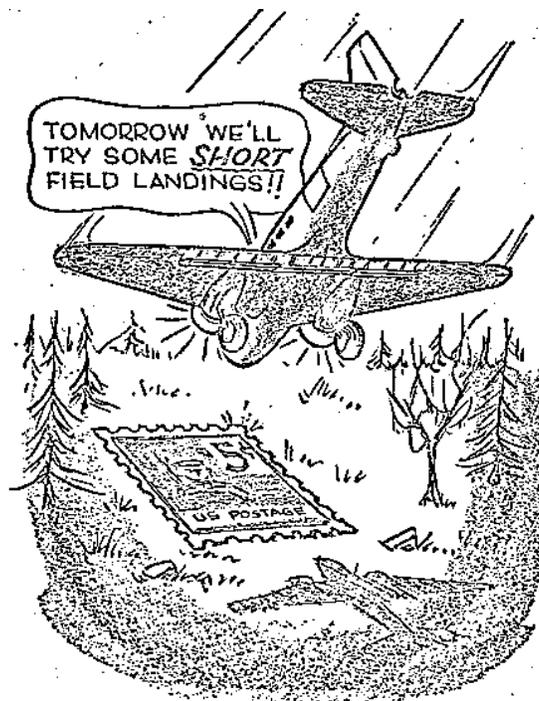
the program you're in and your individual proficiency, you'll get from twenty hours on up of the damnedest Gooney Bird driving you've ever done.

We called it dive bombing. It seems that most air-fields in Vietnam are surrounded by little people with weapons ... surprised? So was I, but they said I had to go anyway. Well, the traffic patterns our people fly over there are slightly modified from the type flown in the US. In the Goon you lumber up toward where you want to touch down, but keeping lots of altitude. Then you reduce your airspeed to ninety knots indicated by the usual devices and commence your dive. You can do this from any angle, direction, or attitude you're man enough for—just don't try it out of a loop ... remember the porcupines?

The first few times you'll float all the way to Texas, and then you'll land before you want to, and then, wonder of wonders, you hit the desired airfield. Not the runway but the field. There is a hidden advantage to this type of approach: Because it is power off, you can hear the crew chief and his student chattering in the back, the sharp indrawn breath of your flying mate, and the instructor chewing his nails off ... keeps your mind off your own troubles.

Once you have mastered the dive-bombing approach you can then try it at night, also from various directions, with everyone in the aircraft helping you find the runway once you start that diving turn. And of course they also have you do this on one engine. Then they start taking runway away from you by saying things like, "See that first taxiway there just past the numbers?" "Yeah," you'll say. They say, "That's all the field usable today." Again you say, "Yeah," and pretty soon you are making acceptable VN landings

(Continued on page 43)





with minimum exposure to ground fire and minimum time in the pattern.

Soon you graduate, and now we'll just pack the B-4 bag and get on over there and get to work. But you notice your orders have a rather peculiar phrasing. They don't say you proceed to Vietnam. They say proceed Clark AFB, P.I., for more training and transportation of the remains to Vietnam.

I arrived at Travis *saying* I'd had my last bout with the shot people. Fourth tip: **HAVE YOUR SHOT RECORD CHECKED CAREFULLY. AT TRAVIS THEY CHECK AGAIN, AND NO SHOTTEE, NO FLIGHTEE!** Yes, I needed another at Travis.

You get on that big contract jet and find yourself Clark, which is one of the most beautiful bases I have seen. You start surviving by reviving at the club before you start class the next day. This should be a lead-pipe cinch for a Fairchild graduate, you say to yourself. One day of lectures and then off to the hills for three days of jolly companionship and hiking.

Well, fine, but in that day of lectures they tell you the primary purpose of the school is to dispel all those fears you got from Frank Buck and Tarzan. If you don't know who *they* are, this article isn't meant for you anyway—go on back and fly your F-4C.

The snake house out behind the school will soon ease all those old fears and give you a set of brand-new ones! They've got a female python out there at least eight miles long, and they call her Charlene

Thought she was Charlie for a while, but another python corrected them.

After they have filled your head with how safe it was there in the jungle, you get a good night's sleep and off to the hills on the morrow. The time we were there in September it was rather damp. It rained every minute of every day, and that means you get a pocho on top of you. You've got two choices. One—wear the poncho and soak in your own sweat; two—don't wear your poncho and let that good clean rain soak

food and water, and these lads show you how to find it and use it. They know their business, and the little Negritos who go along are marvelous guides. You'll learn a lot, particularly the first day and a half. Personally, I feel that's enough out there.

Helicopter hoists, etc., are considered valuable by some thrill seekers (yes, you ride up and down on one from a real chopper)—to each his own. When all has been accomplished you head back to Clark and a bath and cold beer. You are through roughly (or roughly through) eight weeks of school and are now the best trained so-and-so in SEA.

How did all of this affect an "over-forty" steel-desk jockey after the long hiatus?

Let me try to sum it up for both of us. I have written this down as I remember it without trying to analyze or interpret, leaving that until we could both see what came out.

Naturally there is a certain amount of reluctance to go back twenty years or more and do what we all did when we were kids. Where are the kids whose turn it is today? Well, one of the answers to that is that most of them have never flown props. The kids are flying the '105s and F-4s. So where do we get the old heads? From behind the bulletproof desk.

Having faced these facts, we realize the wisdom of the fight the Air Force put up for so many years for proficiency flying. We see now what was meant by a pool of flying talent that could be tapped when needed and would be readily trainable to fill combat flying roles not normally needed in peacetime. Here we are, friend, hundreds of us doing just that!

Now, how do the old legs, wind, and mind take to all this hill-running and shooting thirty landings in four hours, etc? Good question. You are younger, meaner, leaner, and more alert when you finish. You get a kick out of staying with the youngster over the next hill—by God, you're ten yards ahead of him . . . how about that? Sure, you even write threatening letters home to your frau! Yessir, a new man.

It's a long road from desk to left-seat Goon duty in Vietnam—attitude is everything. Just like thunderstorm flying, if your attitude is right you'll come out the other side and the sun will be shining!—END

