FLIGHTLINE

The Adventures of a Vietnam-Era AC-130 Crew Chief

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This book is dedicated to my father, Carroll C. Combs, and my mother, Constance M. Combs. Thank you for giving me life, love and a childhood filled with fond memories of family, friends, joy and laughter. I regret that my dad did not live long enough to see me grow into adulthood and become a husband and father modeled after his example. My mom lived a long and wonderful life and was able to read my early manuscript. She became a mother and a father to all four of her sons and did an exquisite job of parenting. When in doubt I will always ask myself, "How would Mom or Dad act?" I love you both forever!

WE WERE IN A SMALL VALLEY WITH RENEGADE TANKS and rocket propelled grenade launchers on both sides of us! I'm sure I was holding my breath as we moved from the taxi-way to the end of the runway. Wasting no time, the pilot brought our engines to full throttle and released the brakes. The C-130 practically jumped into the air! We were not "out of the woods" yet, but I was feeling better as we flew higher.

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Prologue

In the summer of 1996, the one-half scale Vietnam Veterans Memorial (known as the traveling wall) came to Washington State. Over that three-day weekend, I visited the memorial three times. I had always wondered where on the wall, were the more than fifty names of my comrades and friends. Like many veterans before me, the simple act of touching those names reawakened old memories and emotions. It was then that I decided to put some of these memories and feelings on paper. I have tried my best to highlight both the good and the bad memories. The story I have told is true. Let me apologize in advance for any mistakes I have made, for none is intentional. Some memories are like yesterday's news, they have never left my subconscious mind. Others began to flow as my story unfolded on paper.

It is difficult to express the entire scope of my experiences. I can vividly remember the sights, the sounds, the smells, the people and the places, but it is hard to adequately convey all of that in a short story such as this. Nothing can replace the experience of "being there." For those readers, parts of this story may ring true. For others without the benefit of the experience, I hope that at least a mental picture emerges to provide a sense of what it was like. My story is only one of thousands to be told. I sincerely hope you enjoy reading it.

Certainly no project such as this can be fulfilled without the assistance of others. I would like to thank my wife, Ruth, for her comments and suggestions during the early stages of development. I love you! A profound thank you goes to my family and friends, for giving their love

and support over the years. I send my enduring love to my daughter, Tracy. She was, of course, too young at the time to remember these events. Love to my son, Jesse, who placed time and talent into the formatting of this book. My children are my greatest achievements! Thank you Jason, for reading my manuscript, and thank you Tristan, Tanner, Ryder, Addison and Alexander for being born.

I remember a number of years ago when Jesse was in school and studying the Vietnam War. He asked a few questions, yet disputed that I was, in fact, a Vietnam veteran! Deep inside I knew then my story should be told, if for no other reason than to set the record straight.

This story is dedicated to all of those who played a part in my short career in the U. S. Air Force. To my instructors, who paved the way with their expertise and to the air and ground crews who shared many of my unique experiences. To the many professionals I had the privilege of working and flying with during these four years, especially those who became close friends. Finally with great pride and honor, to the lost crews of three AC-130 gunships, serial numbers 044, 043 and 490: Maj. Ramsower, Maj. Brauner, Capt. Castillo, Capt. Halpin, Capt. Miller, Maj. Stephenson, Capt. Wanzel, Capt. Young, SSgt. Caniford, Msgt. Paulson, SSgt. Pearce, A1C. Simmons, SSgt. Smith, Sgt. Todd, Maj. Ayers, SSgt. Cole, Capt. Danielson, Capt. Gilbert, Maj. Harrison, Sgt. Hunt, SSgt. Kunke, Sgt. Lehrke, Msgt. Mercer, SSgt. Newman, Capt. Birch, A1C. Fenter, Tsgt. Fuller, A1C Reaid, Maj. Walsh, Tsgt. Winningham, Capt. Hart, Capt. Kroboth, Capt. Lagerwall, Capt. Liles, and Lt. Mac-Donald, Maj. Meder. I am honored to have served with you.

ONE

Basic Training

"Mr. Combs is scheduled for Draft Induction on September 15th." With these words, my fate was sealed. It was mid April 1969. I was sitting in the downtown Seattle office of the Selective Service System attempting to gain a student deferment. It wasn't working! The overweight gray-haired lady looked at me and smiled. Her huge arm dropped my folder down on the table with a slap. She was enjoying seeing me squirm. There were others in the room with us, but I only remember her face. In a daze, I wandered out of the office and back to my car. What was I going to do? If I waited and did nothing I would be drafted into the Army or Marines. I didn't like the odds. I knew that thousands of American men had already died in Vietnam. These brave men were from all branches of the military. I was not eager to go.

In the days following, I looked into the Reserves, any Reserves - Coast Guard, Navy and Air Force. They all had a two-year waiting list. Bob Ittes was a high school friend of mine facing the same situation. I had focused on the Air Force as the best possible selection and tried to convince Bob. A few days later he and I talked with the Air Force recruiter in Seattle. Yes, we could go under the "buddy system!" We could join up and serve together the entire six years (four were active and two were inactive reserve). It sounded good under the circumstances, so we did. After a day of aptitude tests we were told to hang out and enjoy the summer. We could expect to start Basic Training in mid August.

I had discussed my options with my high school sweetheart, Denise. We both realized my enlistment meant I was going away for at least four years. She was against the war, and both of us knew people from high school who enlisted or had been drafted. Some of those guys didn't come home. We spent long hours talking about our future together, and her status changed from girlfriend to fiancé.

Denise and I were married in early June and set up house in a small Bellevue apartment. We watched like millions of people around the world as the United States landed a man on the moon. I felt proud to soon be a part of the U.S. Air Force. Somewhere in upstate New York, a huge outdoor concert was taking place. It was called Woodstock. As summer progressed, Denise worked, and I worried.

All too soon late August came around. Bob and I were scheduled for our physicals. What an experience that was! Anyone who has gone through it will know. All forms of life seemed to be gathered in that place... some real weirdos. Most of us, I think, were just scared. After the physical, those of us who had signed up were sworn in with a formal oath. Rather than go home for the night and fly out the next day, they "ordered" us onto a bus and we were driven to the YMCA in Seattle to spend the night. I had said my goodbyes already and stayed awake most of the night listening to fights and shouting and noise outside my dreary room.

Early the next morning, we were herded onto a bus and taken to Sea-Tac Airport for the flight to Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. The flight went smoothly, all things considered. The pilot announced a contest over the intercom system. A prize awarded to the person who could predict our arrival time in San Antonio. He gave us our altitude, heading, speed and distance, as well as head winds, etc. We all wrote our names and estimates on sheets of paper. I won! With a complete shot-in-the-dark guess, my estimate was the closest of everyone else on board the airplane. I received a deck of cards with the airline logo on them.

As we casually filed off the plane and into the terminal, I could hear shouts in the distance becoming louder and louder. It was the Air Force

DIs (Drill Instructors). We were told to get against the wall, shut-up and look straight ahead. Oh shit! They roughed us up just enough to let us know who was in charge. The DIs picked out a few guys with long hair and some with a smile or a smirk on their face. They shouted loudly at these guys right here in the airport lobby in front of astonished civilians. The people walked past briskly no doubt glad they were not with us. I watched them, wishing I could step out of line and walk away. We were ordered onto an Air Force bus and driven to Lackland Air Base. It was dark and close to midnight. We rode for about an hour in complete silence. It seemed like ten hours. Once on base, we were herded into what the DIs called "Hell's Kitchen."

"Look straight ahead, no talking," shouted the DIs. We were standing shoulder to shoulder, shuffling through the line. Approaching each section, our meal was thrown at our trays by scared Airmen. Each portion arrived with a smack. We sat four to a table, looking straight ahead, trying to eat. The DIs went through us with shouts of, "Hold your fork straight, sit up, and finish your food!" Any food on our trays had to be finished. We were given maybe three minutes to eat, and then forced back on the bus. We were taken to a newer two-story, large barracks complex and ordered out of the bus. They lined us up according to our height. We were in four lines of about fifteen guys each. Next, line-by-line we marched up to our barracks. Once we were inside, the instructor assigned us to individual bunks and lockers. One last shout came from the doorway, "Lights out!" I lay there listening to the unfamiliar sounds wondering what I had gotten myself into.

At 4:30 in the morning, the lights came on and the DIs started rumbling through blaring a referee's whistle. This became the routine for the next six weeks.

We were given haircuts, uniforms and physicals. I was not prepared for the very hot shaver that crisscrossed my head in seconds. The barber had been using this shaver all day, and he seemed to enjoy the added discomfort placed on each recruits' head.

We walked a straight line into a building early one morning, going in one end and out the other. I could see the others coming out now, as I

was going in. Some of the recruits where bending over and throwing up. Others were rubbing their arms. Shots! We were given injections on both sides by medics in white uniforms as we shuffled through. Some of the doctors used needles while others used an air gun. I made it through okay, but not everybody did.

We learned how to march in formation and we underwent PT (physical training) for hours every day, in the 105-degree Texas sun. The Air Force had set up a flag system to tell us if it was too hot to do our PT. Yellow meant caution. Red was supposed to mean no physical activity. To our Drill Instructor, Red was Green. We ran, then marched and exercised for hours near the tiny shadow of that red flag almost every day. If we were the only Flight remaining outside in the Texas sun that day, then the better off our Flight would be. Usually, we stayed long after the other Flights had left. Our drill instructor did make us strong and proud.

"Smoke 'em if you got 'em." The DI announced one morning. These six little words would make me a smoker. Occasionally, the DIs would allow the smokers to break from formation and sit on the grass to enjoy a brief smoke break. Those not afflicted with the deadly habit had to stand at parade-rest and remain in formation. Smokers carried their cigarettes in a pack-size blue box. The box had adjustable straps allowing the user to discreetly attach it to the ankle. (We could not make use of our pockets as we were expected to maintain a smooth uniform profile.) After bumming some cigarettes for a couple of days, I purchased those blue boxes for my own use, along with a pack of Half-n-Half cigarettes. This brand was pipe tobacco in cigarette form and very strong. I purchased two boxes at the Base Exchange. The extra box would be used to carry my razor and soap. Cigarettes were on one ankle and soap on the other. I know it sounds odd but we did this for a very good reason. Each recruit had a locker next to his bed in the barracks. In each locker we were expected to keep socks, underwear, soap and various other items neatly lined up with no dust or wrinkles etc., which would result in demerits and a severe chewing out by our DI. Someone came up with the idea of having 'show' pieces in the locker unused, while the actual utensils were kept in the box strapped to our ankles. This way when the DI inspected

our razor for example, it would always be clean and spotless. So, we marched daily in the heat with our toiletries and cigarettes firmly attached to our ankles hidden by our fatigue pants. Some guys carried extras to keep socks and underwear in as well. If you were to listen real hard, you could probably have heard the distinct rattling sound near the ground as we marched past.

We had classroom instruction on Air Force history and the uniform code of military justice. All of our personal belongings had been taken away (including my deck of cards). We slowly became a single unit known in the Air Force as a "flight."

The Flights became a squadron and a squadron became a wing, etc. I tried to stay clean and not make waves. The DIs were in my face regardless but less so than the others. Then it happened. One afternoon after marching throughout the grounds, we were given two minutes to run upstairs, change into our PT shorts with canteens and back down and in proper formation. As always, it's a mad dash of sixty guys going to the same place, doing the same thing. I got back in time and was breathing a sigh of relief as the DIs were walking through the formation and shouting at a few unlucky souls who forgot to remove rings or watches. To my horror, I glanced down and discovered my watch still on my wrist. With a subtle move (I thought), I slipped it off and held it in my closed fist. The DIs walked up and down our flight and came to the front and asked if anyone else still had on jewelry. I kept quiet and stared straight ahead. I should have known by his questions that he knew, but I did not.

"Airman Basic Combs front and center!" Oh shit, I've had it. I took one step back and executed a crisp left face. I then walked to the end of the row, turned right face to the front and saluted the DI just as we had been trained to do. "Airman Combs, what is in your hand? He boomed. "Sir…my watch, sir!" I replied. (Sir was always the first word out of our mouths.) He berated me in front of the rest of our flight and screamed in my ear, for not owning up to his earlier question. The instructor snatched my watch from my hand slipping it into his pocket. I was ordered back in formation and we all marched out to the PT field to join up with the other Flights.

After running our two miles around the track, our instructor who was standing with a group of other DIs, ordered me over to them. As I stood at attention before them, my instructor berated me again as other DIs joined in. As part of our punishment, those of us who had forgotten to remove rings or watches were ordered to forego lunch and remain in the field. We were ordered to pick up rocks. We were told by the DI that he would come back in an hour, and of the four of us, whoever had the biggest pile could rejoin the flight. The other three would remain another hour and the process repeated. An hour later the DI came out, judged our four piles of rocks and declared one to be the largest and that recruit left. Another hour went by and out he came again and declared another winner and left. Now only two of us remained and the rocks were getting scarce. Both of us started removing rocks from the other two piles and ours grew dramatically. After three hours in the sun, the DI returned and said we were tied (mine was much larger). We were forced to drop and do thirty pushups in the hot dusty field before our DI was satisfied. We were told to rejoin the group and our punishment was ended. A week later, the DI ordered me to report to his office. After saluting and moving to parade rest, we locked eyes. The DI reached into his drawer and slowly pulled out my watch. Dropping it onto his desk, he said I had handled my punishment well and could now have my watch back. I reached down and immediately slid it onto my left wrist. Everything was nice-nice for a few moments when out of the blue, he offered me the squad leader position. I declined the promotion and he flew into a rage! In a small way, I felt I had gotten back at him.

****

"You are all going to Vietnam," the DI announced one day, sending ripples of doom through us. We were tested on aptitude to see what career we were best suited for. We fired the M-16 rifle and I hit twenty-nine of thirty, earning a marksmanship ribbon. Not bad, I thought, since I had never fired a real gun before!

We grew as a tight-knit group and became a team helping each other with our lessons and marching formations. We completed the obstacle

course including a gas chamber, where many of the guys coughed and puked. The course was a lot like the back woods of Washington. I was eager to do well on the obstacle course and did. I had been running and climbing through the woods most of my twenty years. I didn't set any records, but I passed up many of the guys in my Flight. Towards the end of our six weeks we started singing in cadence as we marched. My pride as a member of the U.S. Air Force grew.

We were given a day pass to roam the base at will, so Bob Ittes and I went roller-skating and we really felt alive. For weeks we had been under constant supervision. Just being able to walk somewhere alone was a special treat.

One night we were crowded into a room and watched the new Selective Service lottery system on TV. I probably would have been called up under that system as well.

The DIs were warming up to us little by little as we progressed. One afternoon, we were told we would have a GI party. I actually thought he meant chips and punch to reward our efforts. Instead we marched upstairs to the latrine and were given toothbrushes. We spent hours on our hands and knees making the latrine shine. The DI barely gave the room a glance when he poked his head through the door and told us to knock off for the day. He didn't even look! Some party that turned out to be, I thought.

Just when I thought we had escaped the dreaded KP duty, our DI came charging through the barracks one morning picking various recruits, seemingly at random. As he pointed to me he shouted for us to "fall out!" About twenty of us marched in the morning cold to the kitchen and turned over to the mess sergeant. To him we must have looked like criminals or misfits because he treated us as such. He never spoke, he shouted. We were ordered to perform various tasks and driven all day by this supreme asshole. My first task was to break up about one hundred pieces of chicken lying in huge vats. They were cold… almost frozen and produced edges that cut my hands. I did this for two hours. Then the sergeant grabbed two of us by the collar taking us to the front of the mess hall. He continued to shout at every one as we passed by. I was to pass out trays as the first large group of Airmen began to pass through for

breakfast. After the first meal we had to clean tables and scrub the floors. Prior to lunch, I had to (believe it or not) peel potatoes. Like the chicken, the potatoes were very cold. Working with them for hours I began to lose the feeling in my hands. I ducked out every so often and hid in one of the stalls of the latrine. I knew if the sergeant-from-hell came in he wouldn't know who was in the stall. He did come barging in a couple of times, but never looked at who was inside. I managed to avoid about an hour's work this way. Hey, my hands hurt.

After dinner I was assigned wash duty. As the recruits finished their meal they were to gently drop their trays with us through an opening in the wall. That is what we were taught and that is what I had always done, but not these guys. As I turned from the sink, I got hit in the shoulder by a flying tray! A group from another flight passed through and thought it would be funny to give us grief. They tossed the trays through the window aiming at us. Food was flying all over as well and these guys were just laughing as they ran out. I noticed they had a stripe on each arm. That meant these guys were done with basic and about to ship out. Where are the DIs when you need them? It was one of the longest days of Basic Training for me. After that I developed a new respect for the poor souls who were on KP. As I passed through during my meals, I went out of my way sometimes to offer an encouraging word to those who were enduring their own day in hell. The mess sergeant was unmatched in his ability to arouse anger in some. Others he drove to tears. He was a colossal jerk. Fortunately, our six weeks of Basic Training were coming to an end, and our follow-on assignments were forthcoming.

"I am going to be a jet mechanic," I said as my orders arrived. Others were also getting their duty assignments to whichever technical school handled their specialty. My buddy Bob was going to be a mechanic on reciprocal engines, the old piston type. The school for both of us was at Sheppard Air Force Base in Wichita Falls, Texas.

We had a group picture taken of our Flight with our DI proudly at our side. He was a dead ringer for Hoss Cartwright of "Bonanza" fame. We were promoted from Airman Basic to Airman and could now sew on a stripe. We had our last haircut (we had one each week) and said our goodbyes, as we all scattered to the winds of technical schools. A handful

of us were going to Sheppard AFB and we gathered with other newly minted Airmen for the bus ride north. I plopped down on my duffle bag next to an Airman from another Flight and introduced myself. His name was John Forsberg and we were both assigned to the same school. Little did I know that this was the beginning of many long and exciting adventures together.

TWO

Technical School

"PING!" WHAT WAS THAT? "PING!" WE HEARD IT AGAIN. We had arrived at Sheppard AFB and in the hot Texas sun had the windows of the bus down all the way. "Hey, ping, yeah, you guys in the bus, Welcome to Sheppard." Ping was the sound of our hair growing back and the nickname of those of us fresh out of Basic Training. Judging by the length of hair on the heads of our welcoming committee, these guys had not been here long. We were assigned barracks and settled in for the night.

Each morning, my new group (jet mechanics) would assemble together outside the squadron orderly room for roll call. Our breathing was visible in the chilly morning air. Once all the names were called, we marched the five or six blocks to the flight line hangers. With no DIs around, we were marched by our squad leaders, and marching was jazzed up with a turn of the shoulder, a hoo-ahh response to their orders or a skip step when turning, etc. It was actually kind of fun. We also sang in cadence and had some pretty ripe lyrics.

"This aircraft gentleman, is a C-130A," said the instructor early one morning. Now I saw for the first time, the aircraft that I would be trained to maintain. It was huge! The aircraft had four turboprop engines. These were jet engines that through a reduction gear, turned three-bladed props on each engine. The C-130 wingspan was over 132 feet. The airplane was just less than 100 feet long. From here on the ground it was about

40 feet up to the top of the tail. The C-130 was a powerful four-engine transport and was used by the Air Force for a multitude of rolls. They could take off and land on dirt strips, the instructor told us. They were used to retrieve space capsules or drop commandos across enemy lines. Some were outfitted with skis to land in snow and ice. And yes, the instructor added the C-130 was being used heavily in the Vietnam War.

Tech school was a fourteen-week course that covered absolutely every facet of maintaining a C-130. Our classroom was a big hangar that was converted for our use. The Air Force had provided us with elaborate mock-ups of the systems we would learn about. Our training would provide us with hands-on knowledge of the electrical system, fuel system, hydraulics, avionics, engines, pneumatics, landing gear and airframe. We also made use of the "A" model C-130 parked on the ramp outside the hangar.

After the second week, my wife, Denise, and brother, Mick, drove down from Seattle. Wives were allowed now that Basic Training was over, and what a welcome sight. We found a small duplex apartment a few miles from base and set up house. Mick flew back to Seattle and left us his '67 Mustang to use. How many brothers do you know that would do something like that? Man, I was hot stuff!

This simple act changed everything. Not living in the barracks meant not marching to class each morning. Having a car meant I could drive to the hanger and park. After class I simply drove away watching in my rear-view mirror as the rest of the guys lined up for their march back to the barracks. Sorry guys. Yes, a few of my friends hitched a ride now and again. The Mustang was definitely status. Each morning as I drove through the main gate, the uniformed guard saluted me! I began to have a life again.

We had friends over for dinners and weekend parties. Some Airmen in my class were married as well, although we were definitely the minority. They also brought their wives to stay. On base it was all military spit and polish, but off base it was more relaxed. Finally, I could enjoy home cooked meals, TV and my stereo. I bought a debut record of a new sounding group called Santana. The Latin percussion knocked me out, and "Soul Sacrifice" was my favorite song.

Our little duplex also had the distinction of resting no further than ten feet from two sets of railroad tracks. Sleep did not always come easy those cold Texas nights. Trains rumbled by at all hours day and night.

Here in tech school the emphasis was on neatly starched fatigues. The squad leaders held daily inspections looking for reasons to write us up for extra duty. I didn't want to play dorm guard so I looked the part. On weekends Denise would go through bottle after bottle of spray starch, making my uniform stand in the corner...alone. Everyone tried to out-starch the other. It sort of got out of hand after a while, but we did look sharp.

School was interesting and challenging. We had tests every Friday. I looked forward to each week's lessons, and I became knowledgeable of just about every square inch of a C-130A aircraft. Throughout the aircraft, virtually every nut and bolt was safety wired. We learned right away that when we tore something down and rebuilt it, to make sure it stayed together; we were to safety wire everything. This connected the bolts to each other in a way that a loose bolt would only tighten the other as it loosened. By being interconnected like this, no individual bolt could loosen itself more than one half of a rotation. It was clever I thought and of course it worked! The whole airplane was a master of engineering. I was impressed and proud to be a part of it.

We spent a week learning all about the ground power units, the B-1 hydraulic stands, towing equipment and all the extra support materials needed to maintain this airplane. These would become the tools of my trade.

Sheppard was also home to a squadron of Vietnamese Air Force or VNAF pilots in training. These young Vietnamese would soon be their countries first line of defense. They kept mostly to themselves. However, on occasion they would come through our hanger and participate in maintenance exercises. Of course, they spoke little English, and we spoke no Vietnamese.

One day, as we were on a break outside the hangar, a Huey helicopter landed and came nearby to refuel. Something went wrong, and before we knew it, the chopper exploded into flames! The two pilots were killed

instantly (they shouldn't have been in the chopper during refueling to begin with). I believe they were VNAF pilots. They became casualties of a war thousands of miles away. Back in the classroom we talked about safety and what can go wrong if we don't pay attention. The Huey explosion got my attention for personal reasons.

My oldest brother, Jack, was an Army pilot. He had just completed a combat tour flying Hueys in Vietnam. He earned The Distinguished Flying Cross and a Purple Heart among others for valor, flying into hot LZs and evacuating wounded GIs. He will forever be a hero to me! Jack, his wife Dianne and their little daughter Angel were stationed on an Army post nearby. One day he called to say he was coming up to see me; we were going to spend the weekend together. I arranged to meet him at the base bowling alley, and I was sure to stay indoors, as I was not quite sure if I was expected to salute him or not. He was a Captain in the Army and I was unsure about the proper protocol in these situations. Would he expect a salute or would he scoff at me if I did? Maybe he would think I was mocking him if I executed a crisp one. As it was, he showed up out of uniform and he was just my big brother. What a relief!

We had a great weekend together. He took me flying in a helicopter trainer. I had absolute confidence in his flying abilities and he amazed me with his command of the chopper's controls. We flew around for fifteen or twenty minutes before venturing over to an old Army airfield a few miles away. Below us I could see a couple of dilapidated hangers and a small control tower. The grass was growing along the unused runway, and old used equipment was strewn about. Here at 150 feet above the abandoned airstrip he taught me how to hover. I kept pulling us up higher and backward. My hands gripped the controls tightly, and I was keying the mike button! Jack got me to relax and I settled in to fly and hover that little helicopter. At least I flew for a short time. My pride and confidence swelled.

The next day, Jack and I took a tour of the Bell helicopter plant located a few miles away. I saw how well the chopper was built. I was impressed with how the workers treated us, once they knew Jack flew their product in combat. The tour guide was quick to express my brother's accomplishments

as we continued our tour of the factory. Everyone was shaking Jack's hand. I came here impressed with the aircraft, but left much more impressed with my brother! We were given a flying demonstration of the new Cobra helicopter. I had not seen the aircraft before and was blown away by its style, power and agility. It was a weekend that I'll never forget!

The weeks in class went by swiftly. Denise and I enjoyed our first Christmas together away from home. I was now close to being a full-fledged jet engine mechanic in the United States Air Force. Soon, orders came down for our next duty assignment. I was going to Dyess AFB in Abilene, Texas. (I began to wonder if I was ever going to get out of Texas.) Bob, my "buddy," was not. So much for the "buddy system," I thought. He was sent to Norton AFB in California to work on T-29s. It would be years before I would see him again.

Upon graduation, we drove that little Mustang back up to Washington to return it to my brother. Somewhere in New Mexico, we backed into a fire hydrant and poked a hole in the back of Mick's pride and joy. It got worse.

Hundreds of miles later, in the mountains of Colorado around midnight, we crested a large peak and had just started down the other side when the lights went out! It was pitch-black, and we were traveling at fifty miles an hour! I still had power, but no lights at all, including brake lights to warn the semi truck that was now bearing down on us from behind! The truck roared past, swerving at the last minute to avoid us. He offered no assistance. I had no choice but to speed up to keep him in sight. I tried to use his taillights as navigational aids. We were now racing down an icy Colorado mountain in the dead of night with no lights to see or be seen by. I was able to use the semi's taillights for a few dangerous miles.

Finally, we came across a small gas station that thankfully was open at this late hour. We pulled over and I got out of the car. I was shaking. I soon discovered that the poke from the Mexican hydrant had pushed on the TV that I had packed in the trunk. It was resting nicely against a bundle of wires. The wires soon wore through and shorted out, causing the lights to go out. I taped the wires and replaced the fuse. We were back on the road in minutes. I was wide- awake!

We eventually reached Washington and the safety of home. I dreaded showing Mick his newly remodeled Mustang. To his credit, he was calm and very understanding. What a relief! We had a week or two of leave and I roamed around Bellevue in my crisp new uniform with one stripe and two ribbons (National Defense and Marksmanship). I was damn proud! The war was still going on, of course, and the peace marches were getting more out of hand each week. Being in uniform was not necessarily a good idea. At one restaurant, a fellow walked past me and simply whispered, "asshole." I was feeling patriotic at a time when it was dangerous to do so. This was my own hometown, and now I was made to feel unwelcome.

Before long, it was time to make the drive back to Texas. My brother, Jack, had taken a job flying Lear jets in Puerto Rico. He offered his clean '67 Chevy wagon at a bargain price to keep it in the family. I jumped at the deal. Denise drove the station wagon, while I drove my 1960 Corvette. We went hundreds of miles out of our way so I could avoid poor roads and protect the custom paint on my car. My younger brother, Maurie, rode along with us, alternating cars every few hours to keep us company. While riding with me, he would make up stories with sound effects on an old tape recorder. We soon discovered that a short burst with the microphone held outside the window, at seventy miles an hour, made great sounds of explosions. We took our stories to new heights. Sometimes I was laughing so hard I had tears in my eyes and had difficulty seeing the road. We spent hours this way, and Maurie unwittingly helped calm my nerves about my next duty assignment.