

THAT'S CLOSE ENOUGH!

Captain Tom Dwelle's DFC-winning mission to save an Army convoy

BY JAN TEGLER

Captain Thomas A. Dwelle had no interest in the Distinguished Flying Cross or any of the U.S. Air Force's other air medals by the time he'd spent a few months flying the Douglas A-1E Skyraider in South Vietnam.

"At least once a month, sometimes twice, we'd stand out on the ramp and some general officer would come through to pin medals on a guy."

"I thought, 'Screw this.' I'd rather be flying!"

Stationed at Bien Hoa Air Base, 16 miles northeast of Saigon in South Vietnam, Dwelle was a pilot with the 602nd Air Commando Squadron, a unit that had been activated secretly in 1964 at Hurlburt AFB, Florida to train Air Force pilots to fly the A-1E. Adapted from the U.S. Navy's AD-5, the twin-seat E model was known by pilots as the "Fat Face" Skyraider.

Officially, the 602nd was sent to South Vietnam to train Republic of Vietnam Air Force (VNAF) pilots to fly the Skyraider, but their real purpose was to fly counterinsurgency missions "to win hearts and minds," Dwelle says. They flew close-air-support (CAS) missions day and night to support U.S. Army, special forces units, and the Vietnamese Army as well as search and rescue missions to recover downed American airmen.

Initially, the Skyraiders were marked with the yellow and red stars and bars of the VNAF. Air Commando pilots would fly in the right seat when instructing Vietnamese pilots but would move to the left seat for combat missions.

In the months before the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff formally approved the use of USAF aircraft for combat operations in South Vietnam in 1965, Dwelle and the other squadron pilots also flew with South Vietnamese "observers" in the right seat to give the Americans "plausible deniability."

Unable to fly or even speak English, the RVNAF observers were "guys that they got out of jail in some cases," Dwelle remembers. "They'd give them a flight suit and a parachute. If we crashed, he was the pilot and I was the observer."

If the Dwelle name is familiar, that's

During daylight hours, 602nd ACS Skyaiders would fly in four-ship packages, but at night it was too dangerous to put four A-1Es together in a flight so they worked in pairs, Dwelle says. (Photo courtesy Tom Dwelle via Byron Hukee)

likely due to the exploits of Tom and his family in air racing at Reno. In 1989 and 1990, Dwelle won championships in the T-6 class with his Harvard Mk. II "Tinkertoy" and finished second and third in the 2000 and 2003 Unlimited class championship races with his highly modified Hawker Sea Fury "Critical Mass," powered by a special 3350 radial, a hopped-up version of the engine he'd flown in the Skyraider.

But in late 1965, Dwelle's focus was on flying and fighting. Tom had previously flown F-86L Sabres and F-106A Delta Darts with Air Defense Command, including a nuclear-armed mission during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Now he would test his metal flying low and slow CAS missions.

Capt. Tom Dwelle looks ready for action at Qui Nhon Air Base in 1965. (Photo courtesy Tom Dwelle via Byron Hukee)



November 20, 1965, 2000 hours, 5,000 feet

"Boy he was talking fast," Dwelle recalls. "He said they really needed help: 'They're close, they're real close!'"

The man Dwelle is describing was a U.S. Army Captain with the 173rd Infantry Brigade. The Captain and a battalion-sized convoy of at least 40 Army vehicles were under attack, ambushed by Viet Cong forces on a road 40 kilometers from Qui Nhon.

The Cong were just south of the road, pounding the soldiers with rocket-propelled grenade fire that disabled the lead vehicle and the last vehicle in the convoy, setting them alight and pinning down the unit.

Dwelle was on alert that night at Qui Nhon Air Base, a strip along the central coast of South Vietnam, northeast of Bien Hoa. The 602nd rotated eight A-1Es and pilots to Qui Nhon for two weeks at a time, he explains, adding, "no brass, no rules, no supervision. It was good duty."

During the day, the 602nd's Skyraiders would fly in four-ship units but at night they'd fly in pairs.

"You can't work four airplanes at night amongst the mountains, under the flares in marginal weather with the enemy shooting at you and keep track of four people and all the terrain," Dwelle notes.

Dwelle and his wingman launched just after an emergency call from the Army convoy was passed to them via Military Assistance Command-Vietnam and the 173rd Infantry Brigade's headquarters. Supplied with coordinates for the area near the road, they headed northwest.

Ten minutes later, they were approaching the road, asking the Army Captain to confirm his location by shooting a parachute flare. The Captain responded, "No way! We're hunkered down. We've got mortars hitting all around us."

Dwelle told the Captain that he and his wingman would be overhead in three to four minutes.

"We're on the road on the other side (north side) of our vehicles," the Captain replied. "You see them burning on each end?"



Ground crewmen service a 602nd Air Commando Squadron A-1E at Qui Nhon Air Base. (Photo courtesy Tom Dwelle via Byron Hukee)



Tom replied, "Roger. Got that."

"I said, 'You're taking mortar hits?'" Dwelle remembers. "He said, 'Roger that! You've got to stop that!'"

"Roger that," Dwelle replied. "I can see two mortar pits on the south side." He could also see mortar fire hitting amongst the trucks in the convoy," Dwelle adds.

On night CAS missions, the A-1Es often had support from "flare ships," specially equipped C-47s that would drop multiple parachute flares over enemy positions to illuminate them. But on this night, the flare ship was delayed and the flight had no support from a forward air controller.

"We had no illumination, so we had to guess where the Cong were at first," Dwelle says. "They had small, man-portable 60 mm mortars and we figured they were sitting back a kilometer from the road."

Each of the A-1Es was carrying 12, 260-pound AN-M81 fragmentation bombs, with bodies constructed of spirally wound

half-inch square steel bar that would fragment upon detonation and "blow everyone away" Dwelle notes.

Both Skyraiders also carried white phosphorus bombs, known as "Willy Petes" by pilots.

"We each had two," Dwelle explains. "It's a 100-pound bomb with a stick of dynamite in the middle. It makes a huge airborne

Capt. Dwelle in his "office" over South Vietnam, flying a 602nd ACS A-1E in 1965. (Photo courtesy Tom Dwelle via George Mihai)

DWELLE RAPIDLY CAME UP WITH A PLAN ... "I'M GOING TO DIVE BOMB TO PUT MY FIRST WILLY PETE IN THE FIRST MORTAR PIT WITH THIS GUY AND AS I PULL OUT I'M GOING TO SKIP-BOMB THE OTHER ONE AND I'M GOING TO BE DAMN CLOSE!"



An A-1E pulls off a pass, having dropped a white phosphorus bomb known by pilots as "Willy Pete." (Photo courtesy Tom Dwelle via Byron Hukee)

602nd ACS Skyraider pilots were aggressive, willing to go vertical, low, and close to hit the enemy. (Photo courtesy Tom Dwelle via George Mihal)



explosion with phosphorus burning at 5,000 degrees."

Orbiting above the road at about 5,000 feet, Dwelle rapidly came up with a plan, telling his wingman, "I'm going to dive bomb to put my first Willy Pete in the first mortar pit with this guy and as I pull out I'm going to skip-bomb the other one and I'm going to be damn close!"

"As I pull up, I want you to make a run 15 seconds in the opposite direction," Dwelle added. "As soon as the phosphorus is out, you start into it as it hits the ground because everybody is going to start running."

He dived down low to drop the Willy Pete, then instructed his wingman to drop six frag bombs spaced-out one at a time.

"Fire them in a ripple overlapping both mortar pits. 1-2-3-4-5-6!"

The attack was successful and the Army Captain radioed, "Whoa! Good job! Good job!"

Dwelle did a quick reverse and dropped another stick of frag bombs in the opposite direction. But the North Vietnamese troops were still advancing toward the road. The Captain told Dwelle, "They're getting close!"

"I said 'Copy that!'"

Lights on!

Dwelle and his wingman made more bombing passes, diving from 5,000 feet down to 1,500 feet to drop more fragmentation bombs, one at a time, from opposite headings.

"I said, 'I'll start at one end (on the south side of the road), and you start at the other. We'll swap passes. As I pull up to the left, you come the other way!'"

With no illumination, the darkness around the dyke continued to make it hard to discern just where the enemy troops were as they moved toward the stranded convoy. Dwelle knew they had to put ordnance on the Cong uncomfortably close to the Army soldiers.

To give the Skyraider pilots the best chance of success, he took a big risk. He wanted the Cong to concentrate on the A-1Es, not the Army convoy, purposely drawing their fire.

"I told my wingman, 'I'm going to go in with my lights on and when they start shooting at me, you pick a target. You tell me and I'll turn the lights off [with the pinky switch on the lower left sub panel]. I'm going to pull up to the left and you come the other way. As you go down, you put your lights on, too.'"

"You can't order a guy to do this, but he did it," Dwelle recalls.

"Then I'll pick your target as you pull off. Boom, boom!"

THE ARMY CAPTAIN REPLIED THAT THE NORTH VIETNAMESE WERE STILL COMING AND ASKED DWELLE TO BOMB EVEN CLOSER TO THE ROAD.

The 28-year old pilot got an unexpected surprise as he pulled off his first pass.

"They fired some kind of missile at me," Dwelle remembers. "It could have been an RPG or maybe another mortar round. I don't know what it was but that damn thing went right past the left wing, right by the cockpit!"

He says the Army Captain immediately radioed him, "Jesus Christ! Did you see that?!"



An A-1E drops two 500-pound napalm bombs over the jungle of South Vietnam. (Photo courtesy Tom Dwelle via Byron Hukee)

Need caption



Right: An A-1E armed and ready to go at Qui Nhon Air Base, loaded with a mix of 100-pound white phosphorus bombs, 250-pound general purpose bombs, and either 750- or 500-pound GP bombs. (Photo courtesy Tom Dwelle via Byron Hukee)

Bottom right: Another A-1E at Qui Nhon with a different combat load, including M1A4 fragmentation clusters outboard and 250-pound bombs inboard. (Photo courtesy Tom Dwelle via Byron Hukee)



"In my best John Wayne voice I said, 'How could I have possibly missed that?' I could hear my wingman saying, 'Wow!'"

The gamble had worked, giving a good indication of where North Vietnamese troops were.

But the Army Captain replied that the North Vietnamese were still coming and asked Dwelle to bomb even closer to the road.

Dwelle says the Cong kept advancing, "Thinking we would not bomb any closer to the friendlies."

Close Enough!

Dwelle and his wingman still had one fragmentation bomb each. He told his fellow pilot, "Hold off. I'm going to get close. For better or worse, this one's on me."

Pulling back up to 5,000 feet, Dwelle radioed the Captain. "Alright, I don't like

"I MADE THE PASS AND PULLED OFF AS THE CAPTAIN KEYED HIS MIC TO SAY 'CLOSER!' I HEARD THE FREAKING BOMB GO OFF FROM HIS RADIO. I THOUGHT OMG I'VE KILLED THEM!"

this but I've got to do it. We're going to get you out of this. So hunker down! You tell your guys to get down as low as they can because it's going to be right on you just on the other side of the road."

He pushed the nose of the big Skyraider over and lined up as close to the south edge of the dike as he dared.

"I called, 'Ok, you've got five seconds. Bombs away, now! 5-4-3-2...'"

"I made the pass and pulled off as the Captain keyed his mic to say 'Closer!' I heard the freaking bomb go off from his radio. I thought OMG I've killed them!"

"Then the Captain said 'Jesus Christ! That's close enough!'"

With the North Vietnamese reeling, Dwelle told his wingman to "Arm em' up!" That meant strafing with the A-1E's four 20 mm cannons, which could fire exploding rounds at a rate of 50 per second.

"That's half the rate of a 20 mm Gatling gun," Dwelle notes. "We always had 800 rounds. They were awesome!"

He says the two pilots laid fire down "no more than 20 or 30 feet from the guys, right along the road."

"We did many gun passes, which isn't very smart, but we kept at it and the party was over."

Young and Bulletproof

Despite intense ground fire from .50 caliber machine guns and small arms as well as the mortars, Dwelle says he doesn't recall either of the two A-1Es taking any significant hits.

"Nothing serious in any case," Tom remembers. "We just taped the wing up top and bottom between sorties. When you could see more tape than aluminum on top of the wing they would rotate another A-1E from Bien Hoa. We only had eight airplanes at Qui Nhon and we had to keep up to strength."

Dwelle served a year with the 602nd from February 1965 until February 1966,

racking up 270 combat missions. The 602nd lost 39 of its 100 A-1Es and 33 pilots during that year. After rotating home, he returned to flying F-106s with the 456th Fighter Interceptor Squadron at Castle AFB. He also continued to work in counterinsurgency at the Pentagon, relating what he'd learned in Vietnam.

Dwelle helped build the brief for President Lyndon Johnson on the YF-12A, the prototype interceptor version of the Lockheed A-12/SR-71 developed during the 1960s as a possible replacement for the F-106, participated in the Rand Corporation's round table discussions (which laid out requirements for the attack aircraft that became the Fairchild A-10 Thunderbolt II), and became chief of the live exercise branch of NORAD.

He returned to combat in Vietnam, flying F-4E Phantoms from Udorn Air Base with the 4th Tactical Fighter Squadron for six months until near the war's end.

Reflecting on the November 1965 mission, Dwelle says he doesn't know if anyone else ever turned on their lights at night to draw fire, but "sometimes you have to hang it all out for the troops."

Now 84, Tom and his family own 10 aircraft, including the two T-6s and "Critical Mass" recently converted back into a largely stock 3350-powered T Mk. 20 Sea Fury. He still flies frequently, jumping into the Aeronca L-3 Grasshopper his family gifted him this year, enjoying going low and slow over Auburn, California.

"As bizarre as this sounds, we had a lot of fun living out on the edge ... why else would you do it?"

We were "young and bullet proof," Dwelle says. "Good thing!" →



Tom Dwelle with his hopped-up, 3350-powered Hawker Sea Fury "Critical Mass." He flew the Unlimited class racer to second and third place finishes in 2000 and 2003 at the Reno National Championship Air Races. (Photo courtesy Tom Dwelle)