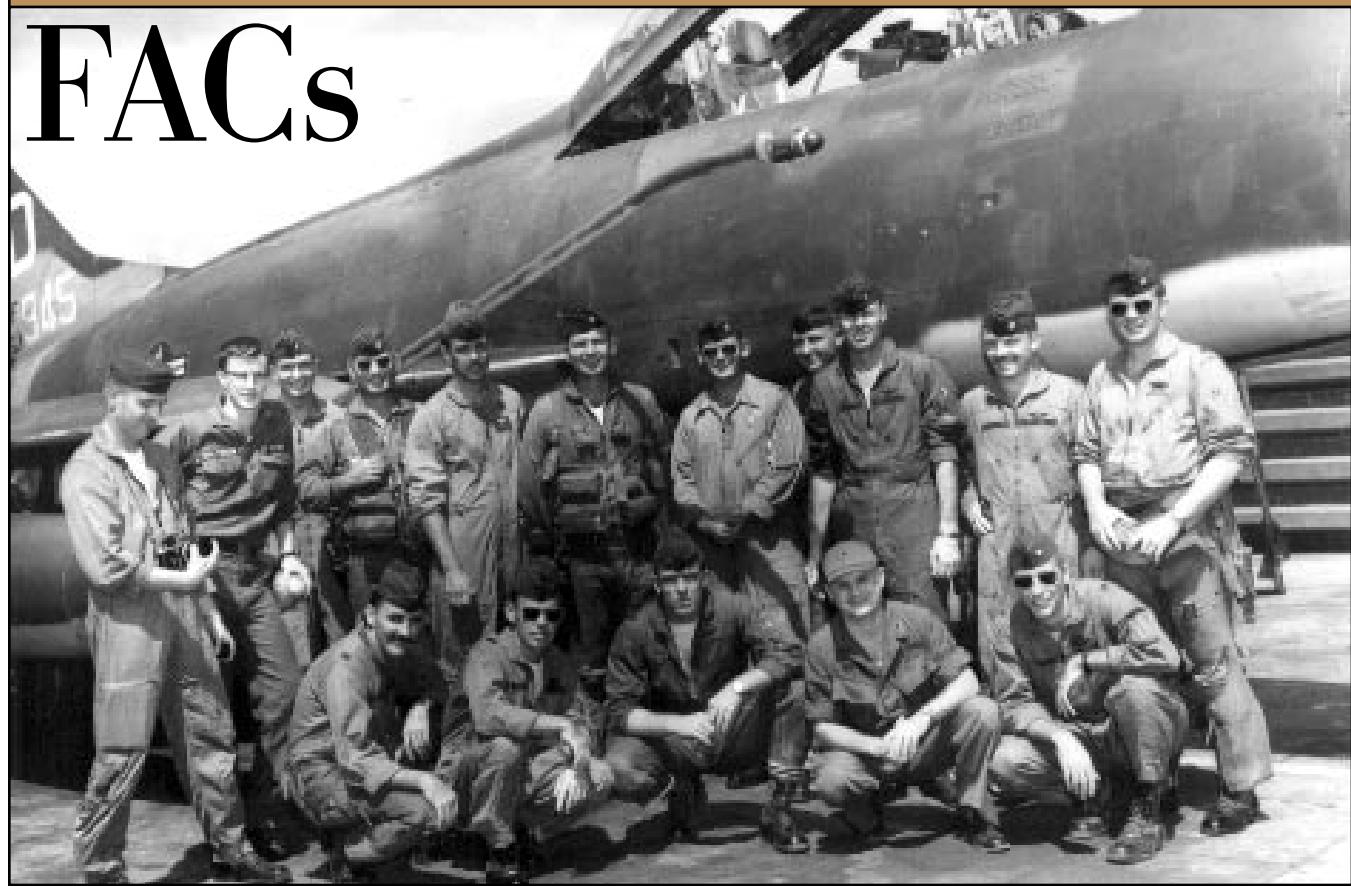


Finding and marking targets was dangerous business, as Charlie Neel and Guy Gruters learned firsthand.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE MISTY FACs

By Rick Newman and Don Shepperd

Photo courtesy of Don Jones



The Mistys in 1967 pause for a photo in front of an F-100F. Guy Gruters (standing, third from left) and Charlie Neel (kneeling, second from left) were on a top secret mission that year when they were both shot down over the South China Sea, only a few hundred yards from the shore of North Vietnam.

It was a true odd couple walking out to the F-100F on the tarmac at Phu Cat AB, South Vietnam, on Nov. 8, 1967. Air Force Capt. Guy D. Gruters was a hulking athlete—six feet three inches, 205 pounds, almost all muscle. At the Air Force Academy, he had been a member of the Judo Club, and he was as aggressive in the cockpit as his fearsome visage suggested. Yet Gruters was also quiet and religious and gentle as a lamb when not flying.

Capt. Charlie Neel, on the other

hand, was small and scrappy, so short that, when he applied for entrance to the Air Force Academy, he had put layers of clear tape on the bottom of his feet to boost his height by one-sixteenth of an inch in order to reach the minimum requirement. Squadron mates liked to joke that Charlie was the only pilot who had to get a 10-yard running start to jump onto the first rung of the aircraft cockpit ladder. Yet Charlie always managed to leave an impression.

Their mission was top secret. Gruters and Neel were part of what was known as Operation Commando Sabre, formed at the direction of 7th Air Force in the summer of 1967. At that time, the group's membership numbered only about 12 aviators and a couple of intelligence officers. It quickly became known as "Misty," the call sign the pilots used, chosen because the Johnny Mathis song by that name was a favorite of the unit's first commander.

Misty had been developing a repu-

tation for aggressive, dangerous, and highly successful flying. The Mistys were forward air controllers, flying extended sorties of four hours or more over the Ho Chi Minh Trail that snaked from North Vietnam through Laos and into South Vietnam and Cambodia. (See "The Ho Chi Minh Trail," November 2005, p. 62.) The Misty airmen were looking for any scrap of war materiel being moved south. When they found targets, they would "mark" them with white phosphorous "Willie Pete" rockets, then call in attack aircraft with the invitation to "hit my smoke."

This particular job used to belong to pilots flying slow-moving prop airplanes such as the O-1 "Bird Dog," but, as the North Vietnamese air defenses thickened, the slow movers were getting blown out of the sky. Fast movers were needed, and that marked the birth of the Mistys.

Volunteers Only

Even so, the job was still risky. Maj. George E. Day, who formed the unit and was its first commander, had already been shot down and captured. (See "The Strength of Bud Day," December 2005, p. 50.) Aircraft routinely returned to Phu Cat filled with holes from anti-aircraft artillery fire. Because of the great danger, all the pilots in the small unit had to be volunteers.

Yet the risk of the venture seemed to be paying off. While other units had been turning in vague, probably embellished bomb-damage reports, the Mistys had been able to document truck kills, road closures, and other successes by the dozens.

For the Nov. 8 flight, the diminutive Neel would be in the front seat flying the airplane. As he climbed in, he pressed the electric seat control and cranked it up as high as it would go. In the back, Gruters did the opposite, adjusting the seat to its lowest position. Still, his helmet barely cleared the Plexiglass canopy. As the "guy in back," Gruters would be handling the maps, scouting for targets, and shooting any pictures he could get with the 35 mm camera he carried.

As was often the case, the North Vietnamese jungle looked peaceful and serene from 4,500 feet. The morning fog lingered in a few valleys, but, otherwise, the view was unusually clear. The two pilots peered into the foliage below, scanning the terrain for targets along the trail.

Suddenly Gruters blurted out from the back seat, "Did you see that?" "What?" asked Neel.

"I don't know," replied Gruters, "but it was something different. A bunch of big low humps covered with what looked like camouflage. Both sides of the road."

The unusual formation described by Gruters was a dead giveaway. Misty operations had taught them both that anything so odd looking—so out of place—in the middle of the jungle had to have some connection to the men and weapons flowing down the trail. They also had learned to play it cool. Instead of swinging around quickly for another look and setting off a swarm of anti-aircraft gunfire, the pilots decided to keep moving away from the target and come back later.

Best to whistle past the graveyard nonchalantly, thought Neel. Maybe the "gomers"—the bad guys—will think you're just passing by.

When they came around for another pass, Neel flew low—really low—and as fast as possible, to get a good look at the humps and then scramble up and away. With the sun higher, the humps produced fewer shadows and less contrast and were harder to spot. But that first glimpse had helped them know what to look for, and sure enough, there they were—dozens of mounds in the earth that had to be fuel tanks, or bunkers, or huge storage containers of some type, almost completely buried on their sides. Grass and shrubs were thrown on top of them as camouflage. The humps lined both sides of the road, with trees swaying over them, providing more cover.

Could This Be It?

Neel and Gruters were flying near the

spot on the map where the trail split into different directions. Intelligence analysts in Saigon had been wondering for months where trucks coming from the North refueled on this part of the trail, and this could be the place. Gruters called in the find to a command and control aircraft, flying in safer skies to the west, and asked them to scramble or divert any available fighters for an impromptu, high-priority attack mission.

If the target turned out to be what they thought it was, it was big enough to justify several hours' worth of bombing.

That done, Neel and Gruters began searching for the inevitable AAA emplacements. On one side of the target area, the two pilots spotted three triple-A batteries, each packing six 37 mm guns. On the other side, they found two identical batteries. That came to a total of 30 guns—a formidable menace to the aircraft. They knew that other, better-hidden anti-aircraft weapons would probably join the fight once the bomb droppers came rolling in. These were serious defenses, they thought, erasing all doubt that there was something very hot below.

Soon, there came onto the scene four Da Nang-based F-4 Phantom fighters—part of a unit known as the "Gunfighters." The Phantoms were laden with bombs. Moreover, another four were on the way. Neel and Gruters would lead the strike, firing smoke rockets at the targets to mark them for the bomb droppers.

Gruters contacted the fighters on the radio and briefed them. "Gunfighters, this is Misty one-one. We've got what appears to be a large fuel storage area on both sides of a north-south road. Lots of guns on both sides. Two sets



Visible beneath the wings of this F-100F aircraft are rocket pods, each of which carry seven phosphorous rockets. The phosphorous smoke was used by Misty crews to mark targets over enemy territory.

Photo courtesy of Don Jones

of 37s on the east side, three on the west. Best bailout is to the east, feet wet." The final two words meant "over the ocean."

From his vantage point in the F-100's front seat, Neel took over. "I'm rolling in for a mark," he told the others. "Keep your eye on me. I'll put down two smokes. Anywhere between the smokes on both sides of the road is OK. Alternate the bombs on both sides. Expect secondary explosions."

Starting the assault on the target, Neel jinked left, then right, to throw off any AAA gunners tracking his airplane. He pulled the nose sharply down toward the target and fired two 2.75-inch white phosphorous smoke rockets. They hit the aim point exactly, and dense smoke gushed up from the ground. It was a perfect mark for the fighters.

Then, Neel pulled out and away hard, with the F-100 fighter rotating into a steep climb. Both pilots groaned as high G-forces crushed them into their seats.

"You're On Fire!"

They were gaining altitude when a sickening "thump" echoed from the belly of the fighter. The aircraft shuddered and several warning lights flared on the instrument panel. One warned "fire," and the other "engine overheat." Acrid smoke and fumes filled both cockpit areas. They had been hit, probably by an unseen 37 mm gunner directly beneath them.

The nearby Phantom pilots spit out urgent radio calls: "Misty, you're on fire! Get out!"

"Don't listen to them, Guy," Neel said. "Let's stay with it to the coast."

The two pilots weren't about to bail out into the hostile nest of North Vietnamese gunners and other angry troops that they had just attacked. There was a chance they could make it to the water and eject feet wet, where a rescue should be far easier.

In back, Gruters said nothing, his silence signaling he agreed with Neel about the course to take. "Stow your stuff," said Neel. "Put your glasses in your pocket." Both pilots wore eyeglasses that, unless removed, could puncture their eyes during ejection. They pushed their helmet visors down, preparing to punch out. Neel coaxed as much altitude as he could out of the damaged aircraft for the short ride east to the water. "Come on, baby, hold together for us," he urged. "Don't blow yet!"

More warnings came over the radio. "Misty, you're really burning now. Big pieces are coming off. Eject! Eject! Before she blows!"

A 100-foot-long flame trailed the crippled aircraft. Their problems multiplied. Every gunner in North Vietnam seemed to be shooting at them now, hungry to kill a crippled American fighter. Most of the flak fell harmlessly behind, but some shells streaked past the canopy. The shock waves beat against the fuselage. The rounds were coming close.

The water was five miles away. "Oh, baby, just give me a few more seconds," Neel prayed. As the coastline passed underneath, the airplane's controls began to fade. Neel knew they would seize completely once enough hydraulic fluid

had spilled out. As the jet started to roll uncontrollably to the left, Gruters, in the back, yanked his ejection seat handles upward.

The canopy flew off. In the front seat, the blowing dust and debris suddenly blinded Neel. He felt the heat and saw the flash as Gruters fired his back-seat rocket. Neel struggled to hold the aircraft level, so he wouldn't slam into the rolling wings or fuselage when the rocket motor beneath his seat shot him out of the cockpit. But the "Hun" stopped responding. It was dead. Neel then pulled his ejection seat trigger.

Gruters soon found himself drifting peacefully toward the ocean. He checked his parachute panels—they were all intact. His inflated life raft hung 15 feet below on a cord. He activated his under-arm "water wings" that would keep him afloat despite the 90 pounds of gear he carried on every combat mission, stuffed into every available pocket in his flying suit, G-suit, and survival vest.

Meanwhile, Neel was unconscious. After he punched out, something—probably his 300-pound ejection seat—smacked his head and broke his helmet into two pieces that hung on either side of his head. He was out cold, descending toward the South China Sea, his parachute deployed, only a few hundred yards from the shore of North Vietnam.

Hot Targets

The pilots were still hot targets. North Vietnamese gunners ashore shot at them as they drifted downward. Bullets whipped past, reverberating as they cut through the air. None hit.

Neel awoke about 1,000 feet above the water, his head pounding. "Holy s—!", he thought. "Where am I?" He got oriented just seconds before he hit the water at what seemed like 50 miles per hour. He plunged 30 feet below the surface because he had not inflated his water wings. Moreover, he had failed to take a deep breath before entering the water.

He now had a long swim up, with his gear weighing him down like an anchor. "Dammit, I'll never carry extra s— again," he thought, as he struggled gasping, coughing, and spitting to the surface. He could breathe now, but he was tangled in a web of spaghetti-like nylon parachute shrouds.

The two pilots had splashed down about 200 yards apart, into waters full of sharks and deadly sea snakes. They clambered into the rafts after they



Trucks discovered in March 1968 by Mistys Lanny Lancaster and Don Shepperd north of Mu Gia Pass. The attacks that followed destroyed at least 60 vehicles.

disentangled themselves from their parachute lines. The water was choppy and they couldn't see each other above the wave tops, and they practically had to hug their rafts, since the air above them was full of lead.

Despite ejecting successfully from a crippled aircraft, and getting into their life rafts, they were by no means home free. They weren't far from a hostile beach and shore gunners continued to shoot at them, adding mortar rounds to the onslaught. The shells arced in and exploded menacingly close to the rafts. Hot metal fragments flew in all directions.

Neel used his radio to contact the F-4s overhead. He said, "Gunfighters, Misty one-one Alpha. They're shooting at us a lot. Do you have one-one Bravo in sight? Can you give us some help?"

One of the pilots responded, "We have you both."

The contact with the F-4s was a tremendous relief. It meant the Air Force knew they were down and a rescue was under way. One of the F-4s quizzed Neel about the incoming fire. "Where are they shooting from?" he asked.

"Just put something on the beach about 100 yards inland, right opposite us, and I'll talk you into where I think it's coming from," Neel replied.

The Gunfighters bombed the shore area. Smoke obscured the coastline and the firing began to subside. The first set of F-4s left to get gas from a tanker and were quickly replaced by a new flight of four that continued bombing along the beach. Neel listened anxiously on his radio for the rescue helicopters, as the waves and winds pushed both rafts rapidly toward land.

"Hey, That's Me!"

An F-4 rolled in on Neel. He thought it was just making a friendly "keep-up-the-morale" pass to signal that they saw him. The aircraft got closer. Uncomfortably close. The nose of the airplane was pointing right at him, when it suddenly launched two pods of 19 rockets each. The rockets screamed just over Neel's head, their black exhaust blocking his view of the F-4. The airplane pulled out so low it almost hit the water, kicking up ocean spray that blinded Neel in his tiny raft. The aircraft's shock wave tossed the raft like a cork as Neel hung on for dear life.

Neel howled curses into his radio. "Hey, ... that's me in the raft! You're supposed to rescue me, not shoot me."

His rant was interrupted by important



Photo courtesy of Don Jones

A Misty F-100F is refueled by a KC-135 during a mission over Vietnam. The Mistys flew aggressive, dangerous, and extended sorties over the Ho Chi Minh Trail, looking for war materiel moving south.

news. A transmission came over the radio from one of two "Jolly Green" rescue helicopters: "Misty, this is Jolly. Two birds coming in toward your position now. Get ready!"

A Jolly Green splashed down right behind him in a high-speed water landing and taxied toward the raft. Neel slipped out of his parachute harness as the water spray kicked up by the helo's rotor wash stung his eyes.

A pararescue jumper reached out while the helicopter was still moving, grabbed Neel by the collar of his flight suit, and in one motion yanked him out of his raft and into the chopper. The other Jolly Green picked up Gruters, and the two were reunited at the nearest Air Force base.

On the ramp at Da Nang, they were met by some of the F-4 pilots. Neel asked about the "imbecile" who had nearly killed him with rockets and almost pancaked into the water. It turned out that the Phantom pilot was an old friend, Jerry Nabors. Just after Neel and Gruters had hit the water, the F-4s spotted about a dozen North Vietnamese sampans racing out of the mouth of a river to capture the downed pilots. The F-4s sank four of

the sampans near the shoreline, but one had slipped through the air attack unnoticed until it was less than 100 yards from Neel's raft. Neel couldn't see it because of the choppy water, but Nabors could. He blew the sampan out of the water at the last minute, firing from point-blank range, saving both pilots from almost certain capture.

Gruters was badly hurt, and he was whisked to a Navy hospital. Neel was OK, but he had developed a whopping headache, no doubt the result of the bang on his head during ejection.

Up in North Vietnam, meanwhile, the huge stash of valuable fuel, or ammunition, or whatever it was that Neel and Gruters had originally spotted, was gone but not destroyed. Once the two pilots had ejected, the rescue effort had quickly overtaken the strike on the storage containers. The North Vietnamese always had alternate plans when storage areas were discovered, and they promptly moved the containers to new locations.

By the next morning, when other Mistys went to check out the find, there was no sight of the humps Neel and Gruters had seen the previous morning. It was as if they had never existed. n

*Rick Newman is a former defense correspondent for US News & World Report and a longtime contributor to Air Force Magazine. Air Force Maj. Gen. Don Shepherd retired in 1998 as head of the Air National Guard. He is a CNN military analyst, provides commentary on ABC radio, and flew as Misty 34 during the Vietnam War. This article was adapted from their book, *Bury Us Upside Down: The Misty Pilots and the Secret Battle for the Ho Chi Minh Trail* (Ballantine Books: 2006).*