

April 19, 2011

To: The families of John Charles Jacobs and Charles Stephen Franco

Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is James Metcalf and while serving in the U.S. Air Force, in the Republic of Viet-Nam I had the privilege and honor of serving with Captain John Jacobs who was the Air Liaison Officer, and my direct supervisor, while attached to the 1st Australian Task Force. While I was not personally acquainted with Captain Charles Franco I worked with him via radio communication on a daily basis while he was flying his missions.

On 24 May 1966 I was assigned to the ALO/FAC section of the 505 Tactical Control Group in the Republic of Viet-Nam as a member of a Tactical Air Control Party, (TACP). Upon arrival at the Bien Hoa Air Base I first met Captain Jacobs who was not only a Forward Air Controller, (FAC), but also the Air Liaison Officer, (ALO), responsible for coordinating the air support resources between the U.S. Air Force and the Australian Task Force.

As mentioned, Capt. Jacobs was not only a Forward Air Controller, but the ALO and as such was responsible for supervising the three man TACP unit of which I was a member in addition to the group of FACs, (including Capt. Franco), under his command. We were to be embedded with the Australians, operate the base camp radio control station and to accompany the Australians on combat field operations. We maintained radio contact with the FACs, relaying the support requests and the FACs would then control and direct the actual air strikes.

We were not close personal friends, primarily as the FACs were Officers and I (and the other two Combat Controllers) were enlisted men and Capt. Jacobs in particular was the Officer in Charge so there was the normal separation between Officers and the enlisted ranks. However, our unit was rather unique in that they relied heavily upon us when in the air for communication and coordination. While the radio operators generally did not personally know all the FACs we knew them via the air support operations and recognized each of them by their voices on the radio as they maintained contact each day on their assigned missions.

Capt. Jacobs, as the ALO, in addition to his supervision of the FACs also made frequent trips to the Australian Base Camp at Nui Dat to not only coordinate with the various Australian Commanders but to see to our needs as he was our direct supervisor. Capt. Jacobs was a man that not only had remarkable command presence but a caring and sensitivity towards the men he supervised. He was very highly regarded and developed great loyalty in his subordinates. I greatly admired and respected him.

The FACs billeted in Vung Tau at the American Hotel. When any of the enlisted members of the TACP unit were out of the field Capt. Jacobs arranged for us to stay at the Officer's hotel; like I said, he took care of his troops.

One day I was in Vung Tau for a few days of R&R and he offered me a ride on a scheduled reconnaissance flight he was making. Obviously I accepted and it remains a fond memory. Nothing exceptional happened on that flight but not only did it serve to further my personal capabilities and understanding of flight operations but it truly furthered our personal bond, not simply as a subordinate and supervisor but as fellow soldiers. I felt very honored that he cared enough to treat me as a comrade. He was a very good man, and I might add, one hell of a good pilot, smile.

I, and the other two members of our TACP team, were embedded with the 1st Australian Task Force and while our duties extended to the entire Task Force, we were particularly close to the members of the 5th Royal Australian Regiment (5RAR) as we lived and operated among them.

I remember the day, 7 June 1966, that Capt. Jacobs and Capt. Franco were reported as missing. I was not on duty at the radio station that day but recall clearly the emotions and questions that arose as we had no idea of what may have occurred nor their possible location. When I was reassigned later that year, it remained a mystery but an event that would never be forgotten by me. In fact, in 2002 I went to Washington D.C. and took my Granddaughter, who was then 14, to the Viet Nam wall. We found the names on the wall and I explained to her what had happened. We shared a moment of silence in their honor. She remembers it to this day.

Earlier this year I was privileged to develop communications via email with Edmund "Ted" Harrison, who served with 5RAR, 1st Australian Task Force during my tour of duty there. He is now the webmaster of the 5RAR website which documents the history and service of the Regiment, <http://www.5rar.asn.au> . I related to him the tragic day when Jacobs and Franco went missing and he advised that it was his platoon that made the recovery. Ted was not present that day as he had been previously evacuated due to an injury received but provided me with the details as he knew them. He further provided the link on his website of the crash scene <http://www.5rar.asn.au/gallery/birdog.htm> . He later sent me a copy of that photograph without the copyright overlay and it is attached herein.

Ted further advised that the 5RAR Intelligence Officer, Robert J. O'Neill, now a noted military historian, authored a book "Vietnam Task, the 5th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment," which details the Vietnam history of the Task Force in Viet Nam, the events and operations during the time the Regiment was in Viet Nam. Pages 48 and 49 describes the events leading up to the crash and the subsequent finding of the crash site.

The narrative follows:

" ... During this week the other units of the Task Force began concentrating at Nui Dat. The Headquarters flew in on June 5th and began to take over control of the Fifth Battalion from the American brigade which departed from Nui Dat on June 8th, having rendered us most vital assistance. In helping the Australian Task

Force to become established, the Americans had suffered 23 killed and 160 wounded.

As we dug ourselves in around Nui Dat the Viet Cong were not sitting idly by. Each night they began to creep up to our positions to see where we were, where the wire was sited and how effective it was. They waved lights about on poles in attempts to locate our machine guns by drawing their fire. However, no one fired unless they had a man within very close range and the machine guns were under orders not to fire at all unless a heavy attack came in. This probing was normal procedure for the Viet Cong in preparing a large scale attack and it tended to confirm an intelligence report which we had received that 274 Regiment was planning to attack our position on a night around June 12th in order to throw us out of Phuoc Tuy and restore their loss of face amongst the local people.

In October 1966 we captured the diary of Nguyen Nam Hung, Deputy Commander of 274 Regiment, who had commanded the group of reconnaissance teams which probed us in early June, so I can relate both sides of the events which occurred at that time.

Hung had set off from his base in the Hat Dich area on June 4th in order to examine our position. He formed a small base to the north of us on June 6th, from which his men made their patrols. . .

They saw the Americans depart on June 8th and he recorded that several of his men were wounded by our sentries as they probed our defences. The Regiment moved down from its base and concentrated near Nui Nghe, three miles to our north-west, on June 9th, where they awaited Hung's report.

Just as Hung reached them in the late afternoon, an American light observation aircraft which had been supporting us during the day made a low sweep over Nui Nghe on its way back to Vung Tau.

Possibly the crew had noticed a tin roofed hut at the foot of the hill and were investigating it. However, fire from 274 Regiment brought the aircraft down in thick jungle at the foot of the eastern side of Nui Nghe. After discussion with Hung, the commander of 274 Regiment decided that it would be more profitable to ambush the crashed aircraft than to attack us in our defended camp, so the regiment lay in wait for us for the following two days.

However, we had no knowledge that the aircraft had crashed until we received a radio request the following morning from the Americans asking for their aircraft back. Nobody knew where it had crashed and aerial searches produced no evidence as the jungle was too thick. Consequently, the battalion was unable to send out the recovery team to assist any survivors, which would have been sent had the location of the crash been known. Thus the battalion was very fortunate, for had a company fallen into the Viet Cong regimental ambush it would have had a very hard time to hold its own until relief could have been sent to it.

The crashed aircraft was finally discovered by A Company in January 1967. They said that it was invisible from thirty yards away and that it was by chance that the aircraft had been found. The pilot had been killed on impact. He had been shot through the leg and probably this injury had caused him to crash. The observer had been able to climb out and the small pile of empty cartridge cases beside his skeleton testified that he had held the Viet Cong off until his ammunition had run out. They had then shot him through the back of the neck.

The final outcome of this incident was that our occupation of the Nui Dat area was completed without serious challenge, and the Task Force base was rapidly built into a fortification, which even a divisional assault would find difficult to enter. The Viet Cong did not leave us entirely alone however, for two members of D Company were killed and three were wounded on June 11th when a patrol was hit by artillery fire on the south-western side of the Task Force perimeter. But these incidents achieved nothing more than to keep us on our guard and to strengthen our resolve to push the Viet Cong deep into the jungles where they could harm neither the civilian population nor ourselves. Once established in our base, we were free to begin consideration of how we could most rapidly remove the Viet Cong from central Phuoc Tuy and the planning for the next operation was commenced."

There was a very close bond between the Australians and the attached Americans. The Forward Air Controllers (FACs) were among the most respected for their daily courage and professionalism in supporting the ground troops. To a man, they were held in the highest esteem. You can be very proud of your soldier. I would like to direct you to a special tribute to Jacobs and Franco on the 5RAR website. I will type the poem here but please visit the website for a proper viewing: <http://www.5rar.asn.au/poems/wall.htm>

### **Names on the Wall**

On the 24th May 1966 the 'Tigers' of 5 RAR had landed at Nui Dat, Phuoc Tuy Province in South Vietnam to set up their base camp. An American light spotter plane (code named 'Bird Dog') was attached to the Australian Task Force to help locate possible enemy positions. These pilots were feared by the Viet Cong because of the former's ability to quickly call in air strikes upon them if spotted. In one sense they were the equivalent of the 'Coast Watchers' in that they were so revered by the Allies and hated by the Japanese during the Second World War.

On the 7th June 1966 one FAC (Forward Air Controller) pilot, John Jacobs, and his observer companion, Charles Franco, set out from Nui Dat in their Cessna and set a NW course towards nearby Nui Nhge. This mountain's slopes were gouged by deep ravines between innumerable rugged spurs, entirely covered in dense rain forest.

The plane was apparently shot down by enemy ground fire and the sole survivor of the crash, Franco, was executed by a company of Viet Cong. An ambush was then set up by the enemy ready to eliminate the anticipated Australian search party. Patrol after patrol was sent out in the general direction of the plane's last known position but each search during that wet season of 1966 ended in vain.

A patrol did eventually locate the crash site in the dry season and the gruesome story of what had happened unfolded. The skeletal remains of the two airmen were sent back to the U.S. for burial. Their names of course appear together on the black granite wall in Washington D.C. This poem is a tribute to those two men.

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*Haunting symbols, confront those there,  
Who silently stand and simply stare,  
At long golden lists, carved on a black roll  
call.*

*A flower, a prayer or poetry,  
Is offered by those who can't see me,  
Because I'm just a name, on a black cold wall.*

*'Twas '66 when I had died,  
With a good mate present by my side,  
In support of Australian infantry.  
Tasked to fly low from the wire,  
Attracting enemy rifle fire,  
Anywhere within the province of Phuoc Tuy.*

*In my Cessna 'Bird Dog' spotter plane,  
We'd crisscross it time and time again,  
And 'send smoke' to any targets that we saw.  
As gunships and Phantoms strafed that spot,  
Running figures napalmed or shot,  
We'd then fly away to search for any more.*

*Oh how I loved the freedom there,  
In tropic skies with crystal air,  
Above the dusty roads or rusty mud.*

*Below, rows of rubber trees, or thick bamboo,  
Odd mountains draped in jungle too,  
Rice paddy fields and streams, dry, or in full  
flood.*

*'Twas the wet season then, it had been,  
Terrain seemed peaceful, lush and green,  
And yet there were signs one's eyes could not  
ignore.*

*Surface pock-marks filled with waters,  
Caused by 'arty' or maybe mortars,  
A stark reminder, that this indeed was war.*

*Whilst 'Tigers' stalked out from their lair,  
The Long Hais loomed ahead out there,  
This day the skies grew black, coming from the  
sea.*

*Banking o'er 'The Horseshoe', Dat Do in view,  
Long Son in turn, then Wolverton too,  
Heading north west for a hill, called Nui  
Nghe.*

*'Twas known to be a dangerous place,  
A hidden enemy staging base,  
Green tracers suddenly streaking, from the  
ground.*

*Radio smashed and pilot dead,  
Taking a direct to his head,  
Our engine stalled and we started gliding  
down.*

*Canopy of giant vines and leaves,  
Cushioned our swathe through snapping trees,  
Plane abruptly propped, upon the forest floor;  
Strapping my shattered bloody knee,  
And spurting femoral artery,  
Dazed, with Armalite, I crawled out through  
the door.*

*For I knew that it could not be long,  
Those NVA or Viet Cong,  
Would soon be here to proudly claim their  
prize;  
With all communications blown,  
As an M.I.A., location unknown,  
A few minutes left, to say my last good-byes.*

*Images flashed of wife and son,  
Now alone, left cradling pistol and my gun,  
I prepared to face the end, my pending doom;  
Aware no funeral there would be,  
For my companion, nor for me,  
The jungle would serve as our enclosing tomb.*

*Foreign voices getting very near,  
Vietnamese, I could clearly hear,  
So fired off my 'mag' at figures, just ahead;  
Suddenly, a flash, then nothing, not a word,  
The sounds of silence were all I heard,  
In total blackness, lifeless, for I was dead!*

*An ambush 'twas set, 'round this bait,  
Enemy laying there, three days in wait,  
Aussies searching, for this lonely hiding place;  
Yet failing time and time again,  
For months attempts carried out in vain,  
My plane had vanished, without apparent  
trace.*

*A platoon of 'Tigers' on patrol,  
Out scanning ravines upon that knoll,  
At last, spied the wreck and spent shells, all  
about;  
Having been I.D.'d from two 'dog tags',  
Our remains placed into 'body bags',  
And a chopper called, to carry us both out.*

*As Charlie Franco, when alive,  
I hailed from New York, just 25,*

*Perhaps today there's some, who may still  
recall?  
Yet, with John Jacobs, who I have mentioned,  
We've often pondered, often questioned:  
"Are we just two gold names, on a black cold  
wall?"*

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And I might add; No my friends, you are NOT just two gold names on a black cold wall, you were, and remain, our loved ones, our friends, and our heroes.

In closing I pray this letter will reach the living next of kin of these two brave men and I have received permission from Edmund "Ted" Harrison, my mate who is the webmaster of the 5RAR site to provide his contact information. He is very willing to handle any further inquires you may have and is still in contact with the officer who commanded A Company, Max Carroll, whose unit located the crash site. Also, Ted is going to attend a local reunion in Australia and will have the opportunity to speak to his old friend, Ray Bolitho, who took the photograph of the aircraft that is enclosed. Any inquires you may have will be most welcome.

Sincerely,

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