

## **A Month of Living Dangerously**

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### **Lessons in superior airmanship and survival skills during the Vietnam War**

***“Fighter pilots have ice in their veins. They don’t have emotions. They think, anticipate. They know that fear and other concerns cloud your mind from what’s going on and what you should be involved in.”***

– Buzz Aldrin, former military fighter pilot and NASA astronaut

By May of 1965, Lt. Paul Ilg was well on his way to becoming a seasoned combat pilot over the skies of Vietnam. Launching from the deck of the USS Midway with Attack Squadron 22 (VA-22), Paul had already flown more than 20 missions over enemy territory during the Navy squadron’s first two months on Yankee Station.

But today’s mission was an easy one – a multi-aircraft formation flight heading into Naval Air Station Cubi Point for some well-deserved R&R in the Philippines. It was a 12-plane formation with Paul flying the next-to-last aircraft. Yawn.....Get me a beer.

Tucked into the formation, Paul’s world suddenly went from ordinary to extraordinary as the final plane converged “too hot” and slammed into the underside of the young lieutenant’s fuselage.

“I was unable to see number 12 approaching because I was focused on flying formation on the other 10 aircraft,” said the 82-year-old Paul. “My first thoughts were to maintain control and not hit anyone else in the formation.”

Unsure of the damage to his Skyhawk, Paul saw his fuel gauge instantly drop to only 200 pounds, barely enough gas for a few minutes of flying. Luckily, two of the other planes in the formation were configured as tankers and one immediately joined up.

“I was losing fuel at an amazing rate,” said Paul. “I didn’t realize what the reason for the fuel loss was until Bill Newman, flying one of the two tankers in the formation, joined on me over Midway and told me the vertical stabilizer from number 12 was wedged into my aircraft.”

Plugged into Bill’s tanker, the duo quickly lined up on approach to the Midway. Paul had only one attempt for a perfect landing. There were many things that could still go wrong: overshoot the ship, run out of fuel, loss of flight controls or even catch fire. Paul, however, remained singularly focused on getting his wounded aircraft back on the flight deck.

“I wasn’t overly concerned about running out of fuel because if the engine quit, I would eject,” said Paul, a native of Lowell, Mass. “Maybe I should have been, but I wasn’t concerned about the fire hazard. The flight deck firefighters were ready.”

Paul separated from Bill’s tanker on final approach only two and a half miles behind Midway’s pitching deck. He was committed.

“I was all elbows getting gear and flaps down, and maintaining the ball as I slowed to approach speed,” said Paul.

Paul made a textbook pass with his plane’s tailhook grabbing the Midway’s number two arresting wire. His aircraft burst into flames on touch down, but the engine, out of fuel, quickly flamed out and the fire extinguished on its own.

“Great, no swimming today,” reflected Paul once he knew he had safely trapped on Midway. “I always had a great appreciation for the A-4. It’s like putting on a backpack and it goes wherever you want it to.”

A Distinguished Flying Cross would be later awarded to Paul for his superior flying skills and saving the aircraft, but his adventures while on Yankee Station were far from over. In only a few weeks, his metal would be tested beyond what he had ever imagined.

In early June, the young naval aviator had volunteered for a routine reconnaissance mission or "road recce" over northeast Laos. He had been on a similar mission previously with no enemy contact.

"I had flown the same mission ten days prior with no sighting of trucks and anti-aircraft fire," said Paul. "The previous mission probably dulled my anxiety."

This day would certainly be different. While flying at 3,500 feet over Route 65, 10 miles east of the town of Xam Nua, Paul felt a tremendous jolt. His aircraft had been hit by anti-aircraft fire (AAA) and immediately started an uncontrollable roll to the left. He was barely able to eject before his plane was inverted. The automatic ripcord release on his parachute failed, and he rocketed towards the ground.

"No time to think. Auto response was to go after my manual ripcord," said Paul. "My chute was stuck in the trees, but my feet reached the ground."

The enemy had seen Paul eject and they immediately began searching for him. After getting on the ground, gathering his gear, and treating a wound on his wrist, he had his first close encounter. Hiding under some bushes, two armed soldiers came within 15 feet of his position.

"They thrashed around the area, yelling back and forth, for about two hours," said Paul. "I thought it was all over three times while on the ground and that was one of them."

Paul began to move slowly and quietly to get as far away from his landing site as possible. By nightfall, he came out of a tangled growth of trees near an enemy encampment. He had a critical decision to make – proceed through the campsite or go around.

"As bizarre as it sounds, my survival escape route was a heading of 190 degrees," recalled Paul. "The bivouac area was right in my path and too large to make it around before daylight the next day, so I waited until things quieted down and went through the middle of the bivouac area."

The next morning, aircraft from the Midway began circling overhead as part of a rescue combat air patrol (RESCAP) looking for their downed comrade. If nothing else, the RESCAP drew attention away from Paul's position. "It was a very welcome sound," said Paul. "Little did I know then what the next 34 hours would have in store."

After evading for nearly a day, Paul was finally able to assess his situation. He knew he had to consider his options that best set him up for a rescue attempt and avoid being captured.

"Evading enemy soldiers and getting further away from the AAA to enable rescue," said Paul. "I think crossing the bivouac area was fortuitous because the enemy search was focused on the other side of the bivouac area. That was reinforced when I did see some soldiers who didn't appear to be searching."

Paul knew, however, that he was far from being rescued and he prepared to spend a second night evading the enemy. In the early morning hours, he once again spotted some soldiers nearby after seeing their flashlights. Lying as still as possible in a bamboo thicket with his knife across his chest, Paul again thought he might be captured. After a few tense hours, he was able to doze off even while being chilled to the bone by rain.

The morning of the third day, Midway aircraft were back in the skies near his position, once again taking enemy anti-aircraft fire.

"I was able to communicate with the air wing aircraft overhead and soon thereafter talked to Air America," said Paul. "When contact was made he told me I was too close to the AAA for rescue. He told me to move

further south to get over a ridgeline away from the AAA.”

Air America was owned and operated by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and supported covert operations in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. It was also frequently used to launch search and rescue missions for pilots who were shot down. Paul continued communication with the rescue coordinator as he made his way to a position suitable for a helicopter to fly in to pick him up.

“There was no planned time for pick up as everything was pretty fluid,” said Paul. “When I thought I was far enough away from enemy fire, I let the coordinator know.”

Late in the afternoon, Paul came to an area that wasn’t as heavily wooded. He climbed a fallen tree to get some altitude and alerted Air America.

“They brought the helo in from the backside but couldn’t see me,” said Paul. “I fired three flares but still no visual on me. Finally, I directed the helo overhead by its sound. They finally saw me, and I donned the horse collar they dropped for the ride up (to the helicopter).”

That early in the war, he may have spent the longest time on the ground after being shot down and was still rescued. Even after 56 years, he still reflects on his month of living dangerously, especially his 47 hours of evading enemy capture in Laos.

“I reflect not with darkness, but with thankfulness, that I was not made to endure the POW situation that so many of my friends had done,” said Paul, who was awarded the Bronze Star. “I think often of squadron mates who were excellent aviators and continued very successful careers and more sadly of those that didn’t make it back.”

Paul served in the Navy for 31 years and retired in 1991 as a Vice Admiral.