

There are Good Guys and there are Bad Guys

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My name is Mike Coyle. I worked at FTD and its offspring, through the stand up of NASIC, from 1974 to 2006. I was an all-source scientific and technical fighter aircraft analyst through most of that time, eventually becoming a Branch Chief and later leading the development of NASIC's UAV analytical capabilities. I went to Iraq with other people from NASIC in 2003 looking for weapons of mass destruction and delivery systems. When I got back I was asked to head up our fledgling efforts to support Homeland Defense and Counter Terrorism customers, which I did until my retirement. Looking at some of the other vignettes posted to the NASICAA website led me to think about sharing one of my motivating moments. I hope you will see why.

I was in Vietnam from July 1968 to June 1969. I was assigned to Swift Boats out of Cat-Lo, which was a tiny village a couple of miles north and inland from the better-known city of Vung Tau, just north of the Mekong Delta. When I first reported there and started working on the boats they were almost exclusively used for coastal patrol north and south of Vung Tau. We intercepted fishing boats, trawlers, and some cargo ships to look for contraband. These patrols were routine interdiction operations to try to stop the shipment of men and supplies along the coast and the Swift boats did it because bigger Navy ships could not operate in some of the shallows.

In October of 1968 all Swift Boat operations in Vietnam were changed to include inland waterway interdiction. This meant we were being sent into the Mekong Delta and its rivers, canals and wandering waterways on three-day patrols. It also meant that we were going to be in and among the people of South Vietnam for long stretches. In the rivers, we not only boarded and searched boats (and there were literally thousands of boats on the Mekong and its byways on any given day) we traded for fresh food and even bought things now and then. In short order, we became a fixture on the rivers and a presence that quelled things like Vietcong "taxation" all along the transit routes from field to market and from town to town in what has been called the "Breadbasket of Southeast Asia."

I could go on about how much the Vietcong tried to rid their backyard of us. We were in a firefight about once a week for the next nine months but the thing I want to get across in this "vignette" is the suffering that we saw inflicted on the people by the Vietcong. We saw villages burned out. People strung up and disemboweled or burned alive as a message to those who would buck the local Cong. We also saw our own guys staked out along the river as a warning to us now and then. And I, personally, came to hate the enemy and look for ways to kill him. I saw the evil that was the fruit of their politic and I consciously decided that if I was going to die it was worth dying to fight these bastards.

I didn't die and when I came home I was angry with the people around me, particularly young people, who had no clue as to what they and some of their teachers were advocating. I got out of the Navy after a year and a half and went to school to become an

aeronautical engineer. On campus I avoided almost everyone except a handful of older guys who were going back for continuing education and a few vets. To this day, I have no idea what bands were on the top of the charts in the late 1960's and early 1970's because I was just repelled by the whole culture I found myself in.

Luckily for me, I stumbled onto a possible job opportunity with an outfit called FTD about the time I was ready to graduate in 1974 and subsequently went to work for them. I had job offers from Boeing, Gates Learjet, Cessna and Pratt & Whitney when I graduated. I took the offer at FTD for the main part because it looked like it might be a way for me to use what I had learned to keep on fighting the bad guys.

I once wrote about the fact that my education didn't really prepare me for the work I needed to do inside FTD. I won't belabor that subject here except to say that out of all of the different customers I worked for in my job as an all-source aircraft analyst, I personally decided to focus my attention on the fighter pilots of the Fighter Weapon School and on the 64th and 65th Aggressor Squadrons and their affiliates in Green Flag and Red Flag operations and at least one special unit, the 4477th TES at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada. And, over the years, I made the acquaintance of a lot of great men. I liked and respected them and they put up with my various efforts to get them the information they said they wanted. And at least one later commented that he thought I was a "fighter pilot's analyst" which is still the highest accolade I ever received.

I am telling you all of this as background for something that happened to me in 1980 that I think every one of you ought to hear about if not experience, first hand.

Because of my relationships with various pilots and the appreciation some had for my efforts in their direction I was invited to attend a weeklong tactics analysis conference in Berlin in 1980. And for basically that same reason I was offered a chance one night during the conference to go for a helicopter ride with my boss.

I guess you know, or should know, that in 1980 Berlin was a divided city inside of East Germany. The Berlin Wall divided East Berlin, which was the Soviet Sector of the city, from West Berlin, which contained the American, British and French sectors. Today the "Fall of the Wall" is identified as marking the end of the Cold War but it was still there in 1980 and the Cold War was always waiting to turn into WWII. West Berlin was an island of freedom in a Communist sea.

The main airport in West Berlin was known as Templehoff and about 7 PM or so we arrived at the airport and found our way to the Huey helicopter and its crew. By about 8 PM it was pretty dark and we were strapped in with the rotor turning. A little after that, the pilot added power and pulled on the collective and we started to rise vertically from the pad.

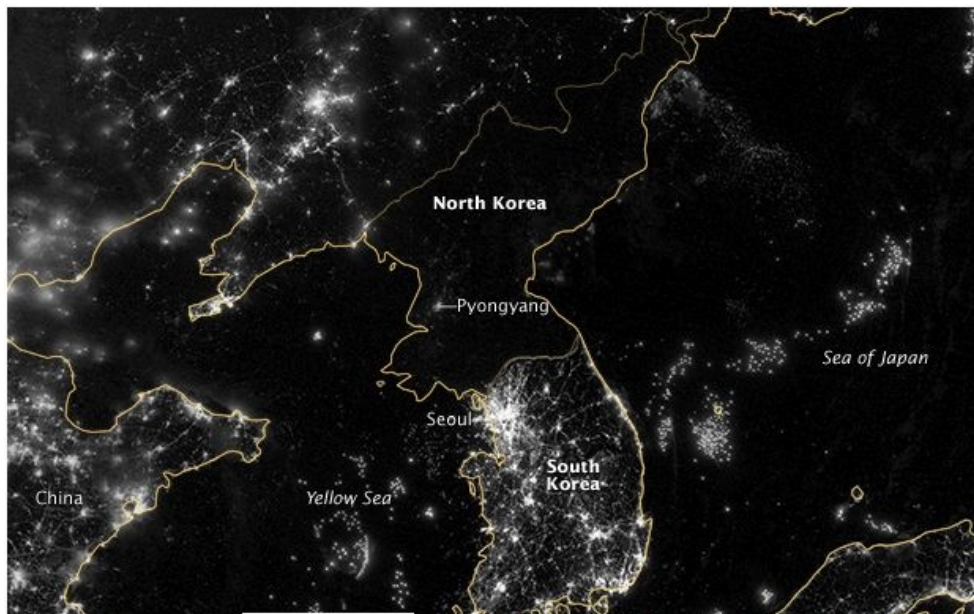
Because the airspace over Templehoff was so full of traffic and because it was so easy to drift in the dark, maybe into Russian controlled airspace, the pilot almost immediately started a "clearing turn". This simply consists of turning 360 degrees as you climb in

order to watch for other aircraft and to make sure you are directly over the spot you want to be over on the ground.

I was sitting on the right side of the chopper facing outward and the door was retracted. There was nothing between empty air and me and I was glad I had tightened my seat belt before we lifted off. The view of the airfield and city below us was exhilarating but as we did the clearing turn my door turned toward East Berlin.

The Berlin Wall, with its watchtowers, killing fields and searchlight-covered expanse marked the end of the lights below us. Beyond that frontier there was almost complete darkness only broken here and there by a single streetlight or two. And beyond that, looking off into East Germany, there were no lights at all. As a matter of fact, as we climbed higher, the demarcation between the lights and activity of the rough semicircle that was West Berlin below us and the land around it became even more marked. It struck me that J.R.R. Tolkien's fictional evil-enshrouded Moria would have looked like this from the air. I could feel the darkness of that vision and the repression and fear it represented in Germany and China and Vietnam and everywhere that Communism had sunk its claws around the globe. And the thought struck me that I wish I could have shown a movie of this flight to all those kids back in college to let them see exactly what some of them seemed to be championing - the extinguishing of the light and energy that we in the United States have, and that we have exported around the world.

Many years later National Geographic would publish montage nighttime satellite photography of parts of the earth. And one of those would be of the Korean Peninsula, where all the sparking night beauty of South Korea ended in a straight line on the 38th Parallel.



And, as I looked at that I remembered Berlin in 1980 and wondered if anyone else saw what I did. In the intervening years, working at FTD and on to the creation of NASIC I was asked by more than one person why I thought the work I was doing there was so important. And, my answer (when I gave one) was often accompanied by a mental vision of nighttime West Berlin turning below me in 1980.

It's something I would have never seen if I had not been working exactly the issues I was working and with exactly the men and women I was working with at the time. It cannot be repeated now (except for those satellite images of Korea). And, even if it could, it couldn't be seen through my eyes and in my heart the way it was that one night. But I thought I'd write it down and maybe let it sink in a little for our newer analysts and leaders who might be led to wonder if working hard against the enemies of our country is really worth it. It is. It is working for the light in a sea of darkness that wants to engulf and put out that light.

There are good guys and there are bad guys and not all things are shades of gray.

Mike