CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 40 *CutBank 40*

Article 10

Spring 1993

Phantoms at Wounded Knee

Woody Kipp

Woody Kipp

Phantoms at Wounded Knee

The two F4-B Phantom jets came in low, real low, at about two hundred feet, probably traveling at somewhere around five hundred miles per hour. For the twenty months I had spent as a combat engineer on the outskirts of the DaNang air base in Vietnam, as a member of a Marine Air Wing, the fighter bombers had always been on my side. Now we were not on the same side.

On February 27, 1993, it will have been twenty years since members of the American Indian Movement, in concert with a grassroots organization named the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization, took control of the village of Wounded Knee, S.D. The takeover of Wounded Knee village was the result of a century of maniacal oppression by white society; it was the first armed resistance by natives since the Seventh Cavalry revenged Custer's debacle and wiped out nearly four hundred members of Big Foot's band in 1890. My daughter, Dameon, was born the evening—at approximately the same time in the evening—that the village was overrun.

That term, overrun, is used deliberately. It is a term I became familiar with while reading the military newspaper, *Stars and Stripes,* during my stint in Vietnam. To hear that a village or an outpost had been overrun by the Viet Cong was bad news. Ultimately, though, that's what Wounded Knee was about, being overrun; native people being overrun by white people.

We—myself, another Blackfeet who during the Wounded Knee siege would not talk to reporters and still does not want his name mentioned in print concerning Wounded Knee, and Rudy Thunder Hawk, a Lakota from Pine Ridge reservation—were in the bunker when the fighter bombers came over that cloudy af-

ternoon. At the low altitude and high speed I could appreciate the terror the North Vietnamese must have felt being on the receiving end of the sleek, dangerous planes that carry more than a million dollars worth of radar in their nose cones. That's what was claimed in 1965 in Vietnam, and those were 1965 dollars. The price today must be absolutely astounding.

1965 was the year I went to Vietnam. I was nineteen years old and believed we were fighting communist aggression. I went to school first grade through twelfth grade in Cut Bank, Montana, and we learned a lot about how communists were trying to take over the world. Dangerous bastards, them communists, it was parroted in the backwater town of Cut Bank. Cut Bank sits at the edge of the Blackfeet Indian reservation where I am an enrolled member.

Like all border towns, Cut Bank had some ideas about Indian people that later had a lot to do with what I would come to think about American society in general. Cut Bank's wealth had come from the land that had been wrested from the Blackfoot Confederacy, land that had wealth the Blackfeet knew nothing about, oil and gas, rich arable land that produced bumper crops of wheat and barley, land that had felt the great weight of the migrating buffalo herds pass over it and that now supported the domesticated breeds of European cattle.

In Vietnam the attitude of Cut Bank was evident in the arrogance of the American soldier toward the Vietnamese people. The Vietnamese, like the buffalo-culture Blackfeet, were a non-technological people, and the Americans had utter contempt for the ways they lived. At some point during my time in Vietnam I realized that this contempt and hatred for the Vietnamese people was the same hatred and contempt that had moved without conscience throughout the American West for the past century.

A specific instance can be culled from the 60 days I spent in the 3rd Marine Amphibious Force brig a few miles outside the city of DaNang. I had been imprisoned for what the Uniform Code of Military Justice called "fraternizing with Vietnamese nationals." I did fraternize. She was about 25, with long black hair and the extrordinary dark and light beauty of the half-breed French-Vietnamese. We fraternized regularly. One night we were particularly careless in our fraternizing and were picked up by the military police as we zig-zagged down the street of Hoa Phat village—Marines called the village Dog Patch—drunk on Johnny Walker Red that had come from the Air Force side of the DaNang airstrip; fly boys were crazy over the Marine K-Bar combat knives and would trade us whole gallons of whiskey to obtain one for a souvenir.

While in the 3rd MAF brig, we were sent to load the cement chunks of an old French bunker that the Americans had knocked down for whatever reason—probably to give us something to do under the rubric of hard labor, which sentence had been pronounced upon us. We loaded the cement chunks, many of them weighing over a hundred pounds, onto the back of a six by six; then we all climbed aboard and rolled a joint of Vietnamese marijuana. While we were loading the cement chunks, the ubiquitous Vietnamese children had come close to watch us and, ultimately, covertly, out of sight of the guards who were our keepers for the day, make a deal. We traded two military field jackets for some smoke. We could always go to company supply and get another field jacket but they didn't give joints out there.

The guards varied, some not giving a damn whether we smoked a joint while we were away from the brig area. There were some others who would only let you drink from your canteen of water when they told you to drink. They had authority in the form of

shotguns. The guards on this day were liberal, letting it be known that we had to smoke it all up before we got back to the brig area. The brig area guards were all hard core. They would check inside your mouth, your armpits, between your ass cheeks, in your ears, to make sure you hadn't concealed some smoke inside a gum wrapper for later use inside the brig.

The day was hot sunshine as we started to cross a rice paddy. The road had been built up by Navy Seabees to handle the heavy military traffic that ran day and night. From the roadway to the rice paddy was a drop of approximately fifteen feet. A burly red-headed Marine was sitting in the front of the load of concrete chunks, looking ahead as we traveled over the rice paddy. Suddenly he reached down and grabbed a chunk of concrete that must have weighed at least fifty pounds, bringing the concrete chunk to arm's length over his head and coming down with the chunk over the side of the truck. I was sitting on the side over which the chunk of concrete disappeared and immediately leaned over to see what the Marine had thrown the chunk at. An old Vietnamese man and his bicycle were tumbling down the side of the built-up roadway toward the rice paddy. Some of the Marines guffawed. Some, when they realized what had happened, sat silent, knowing that the act was uncalled for, that it had nothing to do with the war, that it was an overt act of racial hatred.

I knew that attitude. That attitude was in Cut Bank. It was the same attitude that had made me ashamed of my folks because they were Indians and materially poor, living in a white man's town. Though I was employed by the United States government to fight what they called communist aggression, the aggression of racial hatred for a pastoral people who were hated because of their race, their color, their beliefs, would have much to do with why I was in Wounded Knee a few years later.

In Vietnam we loaded bombs twenty-four hours a day, three eight-hour shifts with Rough Terrain fork lifts, hydraulic M-60 cranes and bent backs. As a combat engineer I didn't have to take part in the hand-to-hand battles that the grunts did. However, the bomb revetment, we all knew, was not the safest place to work. In the next revetment to the bomb revetment was the fuel dump for the jet fighter bombers. Tens of thousands of gallons of JP5 jet fuel was stored there. JP5 is more volatile than gasoline; the Viet Cong knew it was more volatile than gasoline; once Lance Corporal Seeley made the wry observation that if the Viet Cong ever hit the fuel dump with mortars or rockets it would be *sayonara* fuel dump, *sayonara* bomb dump, *sayonara* jarheads. Nobody refuted his observation but the looks he received were enough for him not to mention it again.

Later, when my friend, John Pinkerton, arrived in Camp Pendleton, California, from DaNang, he told me that during the Tet offensive of 1968 the fuel dump had been hit by rockets. Our building that housed heavy equipment was more than a mile from the fuel dump. The building was flattened by the concussion. I was very happy to be in California and not DaNang when that happened.

And now, here, on the plains of South Dakota, the fighter bombers that I had kept fed day and night were being sent to look for me.

The Blackfeet man who must, by his request, remain nameless, had been in Vietnam, so the fighter bombers were not a new sight to him. But Thunder Hawk hadn't been too far from the Pine Ridge reservation. When the noise of the jets subsided and they disappeared in the west, he turned to us with an astonished stare.

"Looks like they're going to bomb us," he said.

The nameless Blackfeet told him the planes didn't have bombs

attached. He explained that these were fighter-bombers, with the bombs attached outside, under the wings, visible.

"They're just trying to psyche us out," said the Blackfeet. "They didn't have bombs or cannon loaded on 'em." Psychological warfare. In Vietnam the military played upon the superstitions of the Vietnamese people, dropping playing cards from airplanes by the tens of thousands over what were suspected Viet Cong strongholds. One kind of playing card was dropped—the ace of spades. The ace of spades is considered extreme bad luck by Vietnamese. The other way was to tack the ace of spades to trees along jungle paths thought to be used by Viet Cong. The psychological warfare of sending the fighter bombers over Wounded Knee didn't have much effect; whoever sent the planes didn't understand the level of commitment that had been made by the people who came to Wounded Knee. We knew that, militarily, we could be wiped out before Bob Dylan could finish singing "The Times They Are A Changin'." We knew that. Psychological warfare doesn't work too good on Kamikaze pilots. When people are ready to die for what they believe, it is hard to threaten them with the forces that are totally in the realm of the living who want to go on living.

The Phantoms made another pass a few minutes later, higher this time, the pilots calculating, figuring the Indians wouldn't be so shocked the second time; the second time they might turn their deer-hunting rifles to the sky and fire.

The word had been out since the previous evening that by five o'clock today if we hadn't laid down our arms and surrendered the federal troops were moving in. As the day wore on five o'clock was on everybody's mind. The Phantoms accentuated what five o'clock meant.

At about two o'clock in the afternoon an Indian came to our bunker, telling us to go to Crow Dog's tipi one at a time. I went

first, walking the half-mile leisurely, knowing the federal troops in the nearby hills, scrunched down in their armored personnel carriers were undoubtedly watching me as well as the rest of the camp, knowing, too, that with their high-tech Starlite scopes they could even monitor us in the dark.

Crow Dog's tipi and sweat lodge sat at the bottom of the hill directly below the Wounded Knee Catholic Church. Behind the church lies the mass grave of the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890. Crow Dog, along with several other of the male members of the occupation force were at that minute taking a sweat bath, purifying themselves, calling upon the Great Mystery for deliverance from these white devils He had created. During my early years in the movement I had concluded that all white people, given their actions since they had landed on this continent, surely were possessed by the power of Satan himself.

The occupation was more than a week old by this time. During that time media teams had been barred from further entry to the Wounded Knee area. Some of the more daring journalists had made arrangements to be guided into Wounded Knee village by locals under cover of darkness. Some were foreign journalists, flown halfway around the world to capture the essence of this strange and highly incongruous uprising, American Indians armed with deer-hunting rifles challenging Uncle Sam to a duel on the prairies.

I waited for Crow Dog to finish his prayers in the sweat lodge and emerge to take care of the task for which we had been summoned: Crow Dog was going to paint us to die at five o'clock. Earlier, I had attended a rally at the federal building in Missoula, Montana, in support of the Indians in Wounded Knee. As I stood waiting to be painted I thought of the sign I had seen a teenage Indian girl carrying at the rally: *Better to die on your feet than live*

on your knees. In Missoula it had just been a militant slogan.

Many of the foreign journalists were waiting outside the sweat lodge, waiting for AIM leaders Crow Dog, Russell Means, Vernon Bellecourt, Clyde Bellecourt and Carter Camp to emerge with quotes for the publications back home, in Japan, France, England. A very pretty French woman journalist was close to the door of the sweat lodge when the door made of blankets was opened. Eager to see what an English journalist had termed "hocus pocus," the woman journalist leaned into the door for a better view. Traditionally, sweat lodges were participated in by members of the same sex, without any clothing whatsoever. This was a traditional sweat, all male, all nude.

The crush of journalists trying to see inside the sacred lodge pushed the French woman forward, causing her to lose her balance as she tried to protect the lens of her camera. She fell. She fell nearly under the knees of the man sitting directly inside the door, sitting with his legs drawn up. She had to fight her way out of the crowding journalists and once outside, she stood a way off, looking stern and a bit perplexed by her initiation into the sweat lodge ceremony.

I knelt before the buffalo skull altar in Crow Dog's tipi and he prayed in the Lakota tongue while he applied the paint. With my face painted for war I started back toward my bunker. The weapons used by the Indians in Wounded Knee were what are found on any reservation, what are found in most American homes where the men hunt: .22s, .30.30s, .30.06s, .270s and at least one .300 H & H Magnum that, somewhere, my nameless Blackfeet friend had acquired. I wasn't so lucky. My weapon, bought for forty dollars at a secondhand store in Missoula, was a snubnosed .38 caliber. A gun like that is only accurate for a few yards, so I figured the war was going to have to get into pretty close quarters

before I could participate. I longed for a rifle as five o'clock approached. I had accepted that we might die if the federal troops started moving in; if they moved I wanted to be able to shoot at them when they started coming; the .38 had seemed a good idea in Missoula—it could be concealed; but I wished for something I had heard a black Marine talk about in Vietnam when asked if he had ever engaged in hand-to-hand combat.

"Nope," he said, "I don't want none of that shit. I want to be able to bark over here and bite way over there."

The wild killing frenzy that had happened here in 1890 crossed my mind several times that afternoon. It was frightening and at the same time it was reassuring. The white attitude of killing Indians, Vietnamese, anybody who wasn't white, was why we were here. There were a lot of other reasons, too, but that was a main reason. The white attitude. The white technological power, a power so great the only defense against it is to declare yourself ready to die in an attempt to get the leaders of the white power to listen.

We were painted to die that day. There was no visible way of getting out of it once our faces had been painted. There was no way out if our faces hadn't been painted, unless we were willing to surrender to the federal marshalls before five o'clock, before the deadline. We held no illusions of winning militarily; the only victory we could imagine as five o'clock crept upon us was the thought that if we were killed the media would report what had happened to the world, and that world opinion of the atrocities committed against native people might work to bring about change in Indian Country.

The scenarios we imagined that day in the bunker were bleak. If the armored personnel carriers moved in it would undoubtedly be with their .30 caliber machine guns spitting death in all direc-

tions. In 1890 the cavalry had positioned Hotchkiss guns above the Lakota camp, mowing down people indiscriminately as they tried to fight back or flee. Maybe in the interim since the Phantom fighter bombers had appeared they had been loaded with 20 millimeter cannons at the air base. Possibly a helicopter assault; the people who had been designated to run the show, we found out later, were recent returnees from Vietnam, the smell of Viet Cong blood still strong in their nostrils.

Nixon was president and though he would fall from grace due to Watergate, he was the only president in recent memory who had given land back to Indians. He returned the Sacred Blue Lake to the Taos Pueblo in 1970, a small piece of land, yet one with great spiritual significance to the Taos Pueblo. At least he knew there were still natives in the country; unlike many of those he led who thought that John Wayne had exterminated the last wagon-burning hostile. We knew that with all of the media attention that had, worldwide, been focused upon the occupation, the decision would come from high up as to how the deadline maneuvers would be carried out.

In the final hour the accumulating fear turned to adrenalin and was fear no longer. When five o'clock came and the armored personnel carriers remained silent we began to look for the Phantoms. They didn't come and soon it was six o'clock. Then the messenger Indian came around and told us the deadline had been extended and that we would live for at least one more day.

The one day turned into a lot of days, the occupation lasting for seventy one days, during which time some men were killed and others wounded. It was the first time in the history of the United States that regulars in the U.S. military were used against a civilian population.

It was not a popular war. But it was a war.