

A FLIGHT TO SA DEC

In later 1967, I was one of two 199th RAC pilots assigned to Kien Phong Province. Our aircraft, Bird Dogs, were based at Cao Lanh, and I seldom went beyond the province except to Vin Long on Company business and Long Xuyen to visit our Platoon Headquarters. One day, I met a visiting Navy Lieutenant who expressed an interest in flying over our area. He was stationed at Sa Dec which was located in another province down the Mekong River between Cao Lanh and Vin Long. I agreed to pick him up at Sa Dec later in the week to do the requested VR flight.

Never having landed at Sa Dec, all my information about the strip came from an airfield directory. As I remember, it was a long, narrow, one-lane road running across rice paddies. To land, you circled the field and guards at each end would lower gates to stop traffic. As I recall, you could only turn around at the ends because it was so narrow. The road was apparently heavily traveled which required road guards to block off traffic.

At the appointed time, I arrived and circled the field. I could see the guards lower the gates and traffic come to a halt. I landed and taxied down to the gate, picked up my PAX, and with some difficulty was able to turn around for a departure in the opposite direction.

As I began my take off, I saw a large crowd of people and a cyclo(Rickshaw) moving in my direction. The guard at the other end had apparently opened the gate. I quickly ran through my options, none looked good. Stopping at this point would have blocked the road and trying to communicate with the guard at the other end would have required me to leave the aircraft and walk to the other end of the strip. A decision had to be made and soon.

The crowd was approaching fast, but I thought we could beat them to the lift-off point. At maximum power, we rushed toward the oncoming horde. I was beginning to have some doubts about the outcome. The Cyclo and walkers kept up their pace and I was closing on them fast. The people began to move to the side using what little space they had to avoid me but the Cyclo, with driver sitting tall in the saddle, was not giving up any space. He, like me, had made his decision and was sticking to it. I pulled back on the stick at the last minute -- praying it would fly. People were whizzing by on each side; then, out of the corner of my eye I saw the Cyclo flash past. I think the leading edge of the wing missed his head by inches while the wing strut almost caught the edge of the buggy he was pulling. With inches to spare we were off and running. Once I stopped shaking I told the back seat that after the flight I would drop him off at Cao Lanh and find him another way to get back to Sa Dec.

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Swamp Fox ?