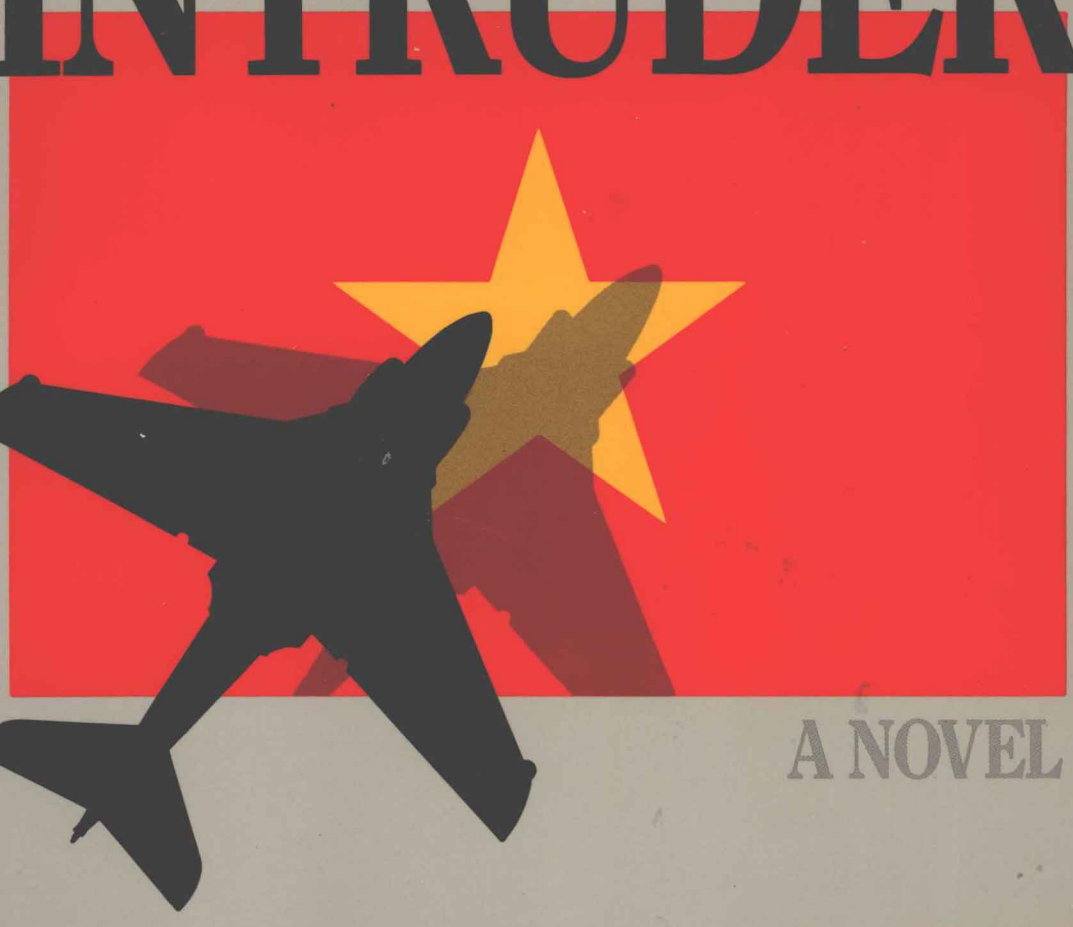
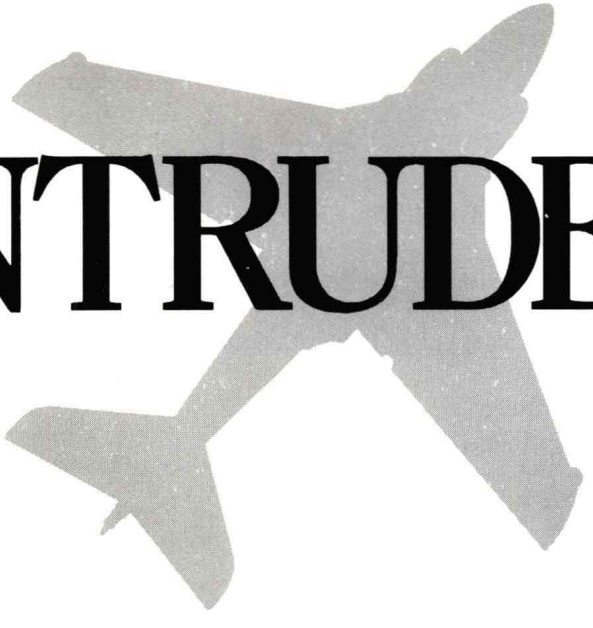
FLIGHT OF THE INTRUDER



A NOVEL

Stephen Coon



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FLIGHT OF THE INTRUDER

STEPHEN COONTS

FLIGHT OF THE

To the memory of Eugene Ely, the first person to land an airplane aboard a ship, and all the men and women of U.S. Naval Aviation who died in the service of their country.

All the wide sky
Was there to tempt him as he steered toward heaven,
Meanwhile the heat of sun struck at his back
And where his wings were joined, sweet-smelling fluid
Ran hot that once was wax.

—Ovid, *Metamorphoses,*
translated by Horace Gregory

ONE

The starboard bow catapult fired, and the A-6A Intruder accelerated down the flight deck with a roar that engulfed the aircraft carrier and reverberated over the night sea. The plane's wings bit into the air, and the machine began to climb into the blackness. Fifteen seconds later the bomber was swallowed by the low-lying clouds.

In a few minutes the climbing Intruder broke free of the clouds. The pilot, Lieutenant Jake Grafton, abandoned the instrument panel and contemplated the vaulted stars. A pale slice of moon illuminated the cloud layer below. "Look at the stars tonight, Morg."

Lieutenant (junior grade) Morgan McPherson, the bombardier-navigator, sat on the pilot's right, his face pressed against the black hood that shielded the radar screen from extraneous light. He straightened and glanced up at the sky. "Yeah," he said, then re-adjusted the scope hood and resumed the never-ending chore of optimizing the radar presentation. He examined the North Vietnamese coastline a hundred miles away. "I've got an update. I'm cycling to the coast-in point." He pushed a button on the computer, and the steering bug on the pilot's visual display indicator (VDI) slipped a quarter-inch sideways, giving the pilot steering information to the point on the coast where the Intruder would cross into North Vietnam.

Grafton turned the aircraft a few degrees to follow the steering command. "Did you ever stop to think maybe you're getting too wrapped up in your work?" he said. "That you're in a rut?"

Morgan McPherson pushed himself back from the radar hood and looked at the stars overhead. "They're still there, and we're down here. Let's check the ECM again."

"The problem is that you're just too romantic," Grafton told him and reached for the electronic counter-measures panel. Together they ran the equipment through the built-in tests that verified the ECM was working. Two pairs of eyes observed each indicator light, and two pairs of ears heard each beep. The ECM gear detected enemy radar emissions and identified them for the crew. When the ECM picked up radar signals it had been programmed to recognize as threatening, it would broadcast false images to the enemy operator. Satisfied all was working properly, the airmen adjusted the volume of the ECM audio so that it could be heard in their earphones yet would not drown out the intercom system (ICS), over which they talked to each other, or the radio.

The two men flew on without speaking, each listening to the periodic bass tones of the communist search radars sweeping the night. Each type of radar had its own sound: a low beep was a search radar probing the sky; higher pitched tones were fire-control radars seeking to acquire a target; and a nightmare falsetto was a locked-on missile-control radar guiding its weapon.

Fifty miles from the North Vietnamese coast, Jake Grafton lowered the nose of the Intruder four degrees, and the A-6 began its long descent. When he had the aircraft trimmed, Jake tugged all the slack from the harness straps securing him to his ejection seat, then exhaled and, like a cowboy tightening a saddle girth, pulled the straps as snugly as he could. That done, he asked for the combat checklist.

Leaving nothing to chance or memory, McPherson read each item off his kneeboard card and both men checked the appropriate switch or knob. When they reached the last detail on the checklist, Jake shut off the aircraft's exterior lights and turned the IFF to standby. The IFF, or "parrot," radiated electronic energy that enabled an American radar operator to see the aircraft as a coded blip he could readily identify as friend or foe. Grafton had no desire to appear as a blip, coded or uncoded, on a North Vietnamese radar screen. In fact, he hoped to escape detection by flying so near the ground that

the radar return reflected from his plane would merge with the radar energy reflecting off the earth—the "ground return."

The pilot keyed his radio mike. The voice scrambler beeped, then Jake spoke: "Devil Five Oh Five is strangling parrot. Coast-in in three minutes." "Devil" was the A-6 squadron's radio call sign.

"Roger, Five Oh Five," responded the airborne controller circling over the Gulf of Tonkin in an E-2 Hawkeye, a twin engine turboprop with a radar dish mounted on top of the fuselage. The Hawkeye also had launched from the carrier.

The Intruder was going on the hunt. Camouflaged by darkness and hidden by the earth itself from the electronic eyes of the enemy, Jake Grafton would fly as low as his skill and nerves allowed, which was very low indeed.

The pilot cast a last quick look at the distant stars. Flying now at 450 knots, the bird plunged into the clouds. Jake felt the adrenaline begin to pump. He watched the pressure altimeter unwind and shot anxious glances at the radar altimeter, which derived its information from a small radar in the belly of the plane that looked straight down and measured the distance to the ground or sea. He briefly wished that he could turn it off because he knew its emissions could be detected, but he needed this device. The pressure altimeter told him his height above sea level, but tonight he would have to know just how high he was above the earth. As he passed 5000 feet, the radar altimeter began to function and matched the readings of the pressure altimeter perfectly, just as it should over the sea. The pilot breathed deeply and forced himself to relax.

Dropping below 2000 feet, he eased the stick back and slowed the rate of descent. With his left hand he advanced the throttles to a high-cruise power setting. The airspeed stabilized at 420 knots, Grafton's preferred speed for treetop flying. The A-6 handled very well at this speed, even with the drag and weight of a load of bombs. The machine would fly over enemy gunners too fast for them to track it even if they should be so lucky as to make out the dark spot fleeting across the night sky.

Jake Grafton's pulse pounded as he brought the plane down to 400 feet above the water. They were below the clouds now, flying in absolute darkness, not a glimmer of light visible in the emptiness between sea and sky. Only the dimmed lights of the gauges, which were red so as not to impair the night vision of the crew, confirmed

that there was a world beyond the cockpit. Jake peered into the blackness, trying to find the telltale ribbon of white sand that marked the Vietnamese coast on even the darkest nights. Not yet, he told himself. He could feel the rivulets of sweat trickle down his face and neck, some running into his eyes. He shook his head violently, not daring to take his stinging eyes from the red gauges on the black panel in front of him for more than a second. The sea was just below, invisible, waiting to swallow the pilot who failed for a few seconds to notice a sink rate.

There, to the left . . . the beach. The pale sand caught his eye. Relax. . . . Relax, and concentrate. The whiteness flashed beneath them.

"Coast-in," Jake told the bombardier.

McPherson used his left hand to activate the stop-clock on the instrument panel and keyed his radio mike with his left foot. "Devil Five Oh Five is feet dry. Devil Five Oh Five, feet dry."

A friendly American voice answered. "Five Oh Five, Black Eagle. Roger feet dry. Good hunting." Then silence. Later, when Devil 505 returned to the coast, they would broadcast their "feet wet" call. Grafton and McPherson knew that now they were on their own, because the Hawkeye's radar could not separate the A-6's image from the earth's return without the aid of the IFF.

Jake saw moonlight reflecting faintly off rice paddies, indicating a break in the overcast ahead. The weather forecasters were right for a change, he thought. Out of the corner of his eye the pilot saw flashes: intermittent flashes in the darkness below.

"Small arms fire, Morg."

"Okay, Jakey baby." The bombardier never looked up from his radar scope. His left hand slewed the computer cross hairs across the scope while his right tuned the radar. "This computer is working great, but it's a little . . ." he muttered over the ICS.

Jake tried to ignore the muzzle flashes. Every kid and rice farmer in North Vietnam had a rifle and apparently spent the nights shooting randomly into the sky at the first rumble of jet engines. They never saw their targets but hoped somewhere in the sky a bullet and an American warplane would meet. Big morale booster, Jake thought. Lets every citizen feel he's personally fighting back. Jake saw the stuttering muzzle flashes of a submachine gun. None of these small arms fired tracer bullets so the little droplets of death were everywhere, and nowhere.

Patches of moonlight revealed breaks in the clouds ahead. The pilot descended to 300 feet and used the moonlight to keep from flying into the ground. He was much more comfortable flying visually rather than on instruments. With an outside reference he could fly instinctively; on instruments he had to work at it.

Off to the right antiaircraft artillery opened fire. The tracers burned through the blackness in slow motion. The warble of a Firecan gun-control radar sounded for a second in his ears, then fell silent.

A row of artillery fire erupted ahead of them. "Christ, Morg," he whispered to the bombardier. He picked a tear in the curtain of tracers, dipped a wing, and angled the jet through. McPherson didn't look up from the scope. "You got the river bend yet?" Jake asked as the flak storm faded behind them.

"Yep. Just got it. Three more minutes on this heading." McPherson reached with his left hand and turned on the master armament switch. He checked the position of every switch on the armament panel one more time. The dozen 500-pound bombs were now ready to be released. "Your pickle is hot," he told the pilot, referring to the red button on the stick grip which the pilot could press to release the weapons.

Again and again fiery streams of antiaircraft shells spewed forth like projectiles from a volcano. The stuff that came in the general direction of Devil 505 seemed to change course and turn behind them, an optical illusion created by the plane's 700-feet-per-second speed. The pilot ignored the guns fired behind or abreast and concentrated on negotiating his way through the strings of tracers that erupted ahead. He no longer even noticed the flashes from rifles and machine guns, the sparks of this inferno.

A voice on the radio: "Devil Five Oh Eight is feet dry, feet dry."

There's Cowboy, Jake thought. Cowboy was Lieutenant Commander Earl Parker, the pilot of the other A-6 bomber launched moments after them. Like Jake and McPherson, Cowboy and his bombardier were now racing across the earth with a load of bombs destined for a target not worth any man's life, or so Jake told himself as he weaved through the tracers, deeper and deeper into North Vietnam.

"Two miles to the turnpoint," the bombardier reminded him.

An insane warble racked their ears. A red light labeled "MISSILE" flashed on the instrument panel two feet from the pilot's face. This time McPherson did look up. The two men scanned the sky. Their

best chance to avoid the surface-to-air missile was to acquire it visually, then outmaneuver it.

"There's the SAM! Two o'clock!" Jake fought back the urge to urinate. Both men watched the white rocket exhaust while Grafton squeezed the chaff-release button on the right throttle with his forefinger. Each push released a small plastic container into the slipstream where it disbursed a cloud of metallic fibers—the chaff—that would echo radar energy and form a false target on the enemy operator's radar screen. The pilot carefully nudged the stick forward and dropped to 200 feet above the ground. He jabbed the chaff button four more times in quick succession.

The missile light stopped flashing and the earphones fell silent as death itself.

"I think it's stopped guiding," McPherson said with relief evident in his voice. "Boy, we're having fun now," he added dryly. Grafton said nothing. They were almost scraping the paddies. The bombardier watched the missile streak by several thousand feet overhead at three times the speed of sound, then he turned his attention to the radar. "Come hard left," he told the pilot.

Jake dropped the left wing and eased back slightly on the stick. He let the plane climb to 300 feet. The moonlight bounced off the river below. "See the target yet?"

"Just a second, man." Silence. "Steady up." Jake leveled the wings. "I've got the target. I'm on it. Stepping into attack." The bombardier flipped a switch, and the computer calculated an attack solution. The word "ATTACK" lit up in red on the lower edge of the VDI, and the computer-driven display became more complex. Symbols appeared showing the time remaining until weapons release, the relative position of the target, the drift angle, and the steering to the release point.

Jake jammed the throttles forward to the stops and climbed to 500 feet. The Mark 82 general-purpose bombs had to fall at least 500 feet for the fuses to arm properly; they were equipped with metal vanes that would open when the weapons were released and retard them just long enough to allow the plane to escape the bomb fragments.

The needle on the airspeed indicator quivered at 480 knots. The stick was alive in the pilot's hand. Any small twitch made the machine leap. Jake's attention was divided among the mechanics of instrument flying, the computer-driven steering symbol on the VDI, and the

occasional streams of yellow and red tracers. He felt extraordinarily alive, in absolute control. He could see everything at once: every needle, every gauge, every fireball in the night. With his peripheral vision, he even saw McPherson turn on the track radar.

"Ground lock." The bombardier noted the indication on the track radar and reported it to the pilot with an affectation of amazement. The damn track radar often failed. McPherson was glued to the radar screen, his entire world the flickering green light. "Hot damn, we're gonna get 'em."

He feels it too, Jake thought. With the track radar locked on the target the computer was getting the most accurate information possible on azimuth and elevation angle.

On this October night in 1972, Devil 505 closed on the target, a "suspected truck park," jargon for a penciled triangle on a map where the unknown persons who picked the targets thought the North Vietnamese might have some trucks parked under the trees, away from the prying eyes of aerial photography. Trucks or no trucks, the target was only a place in the forest.

The bomb run was all that existed now for Jake Grafton. His life seemed compressed into this moment, without past or future. Everything depended on how well he flew Devil 505 to that precise point in space where the computer would release the bombs to fall upon the target.

The release marker on the VDI marched relentlessly toward the bottom of the display as the plane raced in at 490 knots. At the instant the marker disappeared, the 500-pound bombs were jettisoned from the bomb racks. Both men felt a series of jolts, a physical reminder that they had pulled a trigger. The attack light was extinguished when the last weapon was released, and only then did Grafton bank left and glance outside. Tracers and muzzle flashes etched the night. "Look back," he told the bombardier as he flew the aircraft through the turn.

Morgan McPherson looked over the pilot's left shoulder in the direction of the target, obscured by darkness. He saw the explosions of the bombs—white death flashes—twelve in two-thirds of a second. Jake saw the detonations in his rear-view mirror and rolled out of the turn on an easterly heading. Without the drag of the 500-pounders, the two engines pushed the fleeing warplane even faster through the night, now 500 knots, almost 600 miles per hour.

"Arm up the Rockeyes, Morg."

The bombardier reset the armament switches that enabled the pilot to manually drop the four Rockeye cluster bombs still hanging under the wings. "Your pickle is hot," he told Grafton. He put his face back against the scope hood and examined the terrain ahead.

Grafton kept the engines at full throttle as he scanned the darkness for an antiaircraft artillery piece he could destroy with the waiting Rockeyes. It would have to be fairly close to his track and firing off to one side so that he could approach it safely. He referred to this portion of the mission as "killing rattlesnakes."

Somewhere below, a North Vietnamese peasant heard the swelling whine of jet engines approaching, first faintly, then rapidly increasing in intensity. As the whine quickly rose to a crescendo, he lifted an ancient bolt-action rifle to his shoulder, pointed it at a 45-degree angle into the night above, and pulled the trigger.

The bullet punched a tiny hole in the lower forward corner of the canopy plexiglas on the right side of the plane. It penetrated Morgan McPherson's oxygen mask, deflected off his jawbone, pierced the larynx, nicked a carotid artery, then exited his neck and spent itself against the side of the pilot's ejection seat. Reflexively, Morgan keyed his ICS mike with his right foot, gagged, and grabbed his neck.

Jake Grafton looked at the bombardier. Blood, black in the glow of the red cockpit lights, spurted from between McPherson's fingers.

"Morg?"

McPherson gagged again. His eyes bulged and he stared at the pilot. His eyebrows knitted. He spat up blood. "Jake," he gurgled. He coughed repeatedly with the ICS mike keyed.

Jake tore his eyes from McPherson and thought furiously as he checked the instrument panel. What could have happened? Without noticing he had drawn the stick back and the aircraft was up to 700 feet over the delta tableland and exposed on every enemy radar screen within range. He shoved the stick forward. "Don't try to talk, Morg. I'll get you home." He leveled the plane at 300 feet and was once again hidden amid the ground return.

Jesus! Jesus Christ! Something must have come through the canopy, a piece of flak shrapnel or a random bullet.

A whisper: "Jake . . ." McPherson's hand clutched Jake's arm, then fell away. He raised his hand and again clutched at Jake, this time more weakly. Morgan slumped over, his head resting on the scope hood. Blood covered the front of his survival vest. Holding the

stick with his left hand, Jake struggled to unfasten McPherson's oxygen mask. Blood spilled from the rubber cup. Black stains covered the sleeve of his flight suit where McPherson's hand had seized him.

A battery of guns opened up ahead with short bursts of orange tracers that floated aloft: 37 millimeter. They were shooting generally off to the right, so Jake Grafton turned the plane slightly to fly directly over the muzzle blasts. He guided the plane into a gentle climb and as the guns disappeared under the nose, he savagely mashed the bomb-release pickle on the stick. Thump, thump, thump, thump; the Rockeyes fell away a third of a second apart.

"Take that, you motherfuckers!" he screamed into his mask, his voice registering hysteria.

He looked again at McPherson, whose arms dangled toward the floor of the cockpit. Blood still throbbed from his throat.

With one hand on the stick, Jake pulled the bombardier upright where the shoulder harness engaged and held him. He searched for the wound with his fingers. He could feel nothing with his flying glove on, so he tore it off with his left hand and probed for the hole with his bare fingers. He couldn't find it.

He glanced back at the instruments. He was rapidly becoming too busy, an error that he knew would be fatal for both himself and McPherson. The plane would not fly itself and certain death was just below. Raise the left wing, bring the nose up, climb back to 500 feet, then attend to the wounded man. He felt again in the slippery, pulsing blood of McPherson's neck. Finding the wound, he clamped down with his fingers, then turned back to flying the plane. Too high. Flak ahead. Trim the plane. He jerked his left hand from the stick to the throttles, which he pushed forward. They were already hard against the stops. He could feel the throbbing of the flow from McPherson's neck noticeably lessening. He felt elated as he wrestled the plane, thinking that the pressure on the wound might be effective, but the euphoria faded quickly. How could he possibly land the plane like this?

His head swiveled to the unconscious man beside him, taking in the slack way his body reacted to each bump and jolt of the racing aircraft. Jake pressed harder on the wound, pressed until his hand ached from the unnatural position and the exertion.

He remembered the hot-mike switch that would allow him to talk to the bombardier without keying the ICS each time. He released the stick momentarily and flipped it on with his left hand. "Hey,

Morgan," he urged, "hang in there, shipmate. You're going to make it. I'll get you back. Keep the faith, Morg."

He could feel nothing now, no pulse, no blood pumping against his fingers. Reluctantly, he pulled his hand away and and wiped it on his thigh before grasping the stick. He found the radio-transmit button and waited until the scrambler beeped. "Black Eagle, Devil Five Oh Five, over."

"Devil Five Oh Five, this is Black Eagle, go ahead."

"My bombardier has been hit. I'm declaring an emergency. Request you have the ship make a ready deck for recovery on arrival. I repeat, my bombardier has been shot." His voice sounded strong and even, which surprised him as he felt so completely out of control.

"We copy that, Five Oh Five. Will relay." The radio fell silent.

As he waited he talked to McPherson. "Don't you give up on me, you sonuvabitch. You never were a quitter, Morg. Don't give up now."

More flak came up. He pushed at the throttles again, unconsciously trying to go faster. They were already traveling at 505 knots. Perhaps he should dump some fuel. He still had 10,000 pounds remaining. No, even with the fuel gone the old girl would go no faster; she was giving her all now, and he might need the fuel to get to Da Nang if the ship couldn't recover him immediately.

Finally, the white-sand beach flashed beneath. Grafton turned the IFF to Emergency. "Devil Five Oh Five is feet wet." McPherson had not moved.

"Black Eagle copies, Devil Five Oh Five. Wagon Train has been notified of your emergency. Do you have any other problems, any other damage, over?" Wagon Train was the ship's radio call sign.

Jake Grafton scanned the instruments, then stole another look at Morgan McPherson. "Just a BN in terrible shape, Black Eagle."

"Roger that. We have you in radar contact. Your steer to the ship is One Three Zero degrees. Squawk One Six Zero Zero."

"Wilco."

The pilot settled on the recommended course, then flipped on the TACAN, a radio navigation aid that would point to the carrier's beacon. As the needle swung lazily several times he turned the IFF to the requested setting, the "squawk." The TACAN needle stopped swinging, steady on 132 degrees. Jake worked in the correction. He leveled off at 5000 feet and kept the engines at full throttle. The