

# A TINS

by [Bruce E. Carlson](#)

## Prelude

I have taken an excerpt from my "forthcoming" novel (unless my editor rips it apart) to tell this TINS. The names are changed to protect the innocent. Check with Hargelroad, he remembers. However, ole Kev is actually trooper Brucie and Johnny is/was my best friend and the greatest observer that every served in the scouts. God rest his soul! I hope that you enjoy it and recognized that it is in a novelised form. I find that I am too lazy to rewrite it as a "proper" first person TINS.

Better yet, I hope that you will tell all your friends about your preview of the next "GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL" :--)))

~~~~~`

Lowering the nose of his little Red Bird and pulling in an arm load of power, Kev made for the next hill top. This rapidly accelerated the little Red Bird up to thirty or forty knots making them a more difficult target. Then, rolling to the right, his side of the helicopter, he pulled in maximum power and began a zoom climb to the top of the hill. Bam! Bam! Bam! Five, ten, maybe fifteen rounds of fifty-one caliber anti-aircraft went off no more than a dozen feet from them. Horrified, Kev and Johnny felt the hot muzzle blast banging on their legs. The two of them didn't exchange a word. No words were necessary. They knew it. The future had become fact and no F-4's were close by to save them. Abruptly and rudely, the bad guys had transformed them into three dead men flying in a little helicopter! It was only a matter of seconds before the heavy anti-aircraft rounds tore the three of them into hundreds of bloody little pieces.

"Break - Break. All Cav aircraft immediately break down the valley to the south! Hit the deck! Heavy caliber anti-aircraft. White Birds do not engage! Number two, follow the White Birds out the valley at best possible speed. I repeat. White Birds do not engage. Everyone on the Yellow Scarf net, Get the h--- out of here! I'll join you guys later." The way Kev saw things, his wing man or the two White birds would get themselves blown out of the sky if they tried to help him. Terrified, Kev wasn't trying to be a hero. However, he accepted that the grim situation was his problem. He had stumbled into the anti-aircraft trap like a rank and raw rookie. Anger replaced fear. This was the second time in a couple of weeks he had stumbled into a trap. Kev was supposed to be the hunter and not the hunted. "Well . . . ," he thought to himself. "It will only be my problem for another second or two." "Join them later. Now, that's a laugh."

Just as suddenly as it had started, it stopped. Unexpectedly, the fifty-one had stopped firing! Finding that they were still very much alive and well, the three young men in the little helicopter were surprised and shocked. A heartbeat later, the reason for their reprieve began to become clear to them. It appeared, that if they stayed below the crest of the hill, they were safe. At least, they were safe for the moment. The bad guys couldn't

depress the muzzle of the heavy, anti-aircraft, machine gun low enough to shoot at them. If nothing else, the Mexican stand off, of sorts, gave them a moment's breather. However, they were well aware that their good fortune wasn't going to last all day. If nothing else happened to ruin their day, they would run out of fuel soon enough. Drawing upon his deep pool of leadership skills, Kev came up with a big fat blank. He didn't have a ready answer for the potentially fatal, problem they were facing.

Later that night, Kev wrote in his journal about how he initially felt when the fifty-one opened fire on him. Never let anyone say that when he was totally terrified, that Kevin Paul Johnson was too proud to ask for help. Most likely, I had involuntarily deposited a smelly dark brown coating inside my skivvies. However, I decided not to address the odorific problem of brown and smelly skivvies. Putting first things first, I didn't figure that I would be the first man to die in combat with a big brown load in his britches. Keying the intercom, I mentally crossed my fingers that someone on this helicopter was a whole big-bunch smarter than I was or that I had been. "Anyone have a brilliant idea or two that you would like to share with me? If you happen to have one, now is a really good time to do so! Because, I am afraid that the minute that we make a break for it and head down the valley, that gun is going to have a clear shot at us. I promise, when they're done with us, it ain't going to be a very pretty picture. By the way, let's keep this little piece of information just among the three of us guys. Between you, me, and the lamppost, I think that we're in some very deep s---. Whatever happens, though, I don't want the other guys coming back to try and get us out of this mess."

People have an incredible variety of responses to danger and fear. Some like Charley Bird, as Kev had discovered months ago, freeze up. Others, and Kev had occasionally done so himself, got twitchy and highly excitable. Some, and Kev truly envied those people, become cool as a cucumber fresh out of the ice box. The largest number of folk, grimly grit their teeth, bear down, and do the best that they can. These people are usually hesitant to acknowledge their fear. Generally, Kev acknowledges his fear. At times, he seemed to embrace it as something evil with which he must compete. While he was competing with his fear for ultimate control, he usually got a little mouthy and sarcastic. Finally, when he had come up with a plan of action, he then boldly challenged his fear and the source of his fear. This was when ole Kev was at his best and at his worst. The problem was that he could become brave to the point of being foolhardy.

Two quick circuits around the crest of the hill and Kev won the battle for ultimate control. With that critical battle won, his fangs came slashing out of both sides of his mouth. Uncontrolled, they smashed their way straight through the worn metal floor of the cockpit. He was mad as h---. However, what was worse in his eyes, he was professionally embarrassed by stumbling into another trap. "By God!" He said to himself. "If, I'm going to die, then by C-----, I'm going to die on my terms, and on my terms alone!" Pride and ego are a two-edged sword. It got Kev into trouble. He decided that it was time to cut with the back edge of the sword.

Kev's fight with the anti-aircraft gun suddenly became very personal. The heavy gun had surprised him and scared him almost to death. Its profound threat to unarmored

helicopters had deprived him of his Cobra gun cover. He knew that the Snakes would probably be "dead meat" if they took on the gun trying to protect him while he was busy escaping. Ole Kev had never lost a Snake. He was proud that no Snake had taken as much as a single hit protecting him. Foolish to others, possibly, it was an important part of his protective instincts. Kevin Paul Johnson wasn't going to allow anyone to change that score card. The bad guys had broken up their smooth team work and this made Kev mad. Using but a handful of bullets, a crew of three to five bad guys had forced the Cav to run from the valley. Embarrassing to Kev, it was running its tail tightly tucked between their collective legs. Suddenly, the hot blood, began throbbing and pounding through his veins. This surge of pride and emotion gave Kevin Paul Johnson no choice. It was time to even the score!

Savagely, he stabbed at the intercom button and spoke in a coldly calm voice. "Here's the hot skinny, guys. I'm really p----- off! We're going to take that SOB out! Now, guys, give me a couple of good ideas." Johnny immediately responded. "I'm with ya boss. That SOB just scared me out of ten years of life. He's got exactly what's coming to him." A third voice, belonging to Pete, issued a low groan of dismay over the intercom. "Dear God, help me. I am going to die with two homicidal maniacs!" A second or two passed without a brilliant idea being tossed into the arena. The mike clicked. A quiet and hesitant voice spoke. "Somehow, I just know that I'm going to regret this. What do you guys think about a mini arc light?" Just as Pete had instinctively feared, two enthusiastic voices greeted his hesitant suggestion by sounding their total approval. Muttering something to himself about two homicidal maniacs who were determined to get him killed, Pete grimly went about tightening up his crash harness.

One of the most awesome, if not always the most effective, weapons employed in Viet Nam was the B-52 "arc light" attack. The big old eight-engine B-52, first entered the Air Force inventory in the early fifties. Boeing specifically designed her to deliver nuclear weapons over a vast distance. The Air Force had not designed the majestic old bird for the type of war that the political types had dictated for Viet Nam. Nevertheless, she could haul an impressive tonnage of conventional bombs. Trying to develop a devastating area weapon, someone thought of modifying some older B-52's. By adding some wing pylons and modifying the bomb bays, the grand old girl could drop something in the neighborhood of thirty, seven-hundred-and-fifty pound bombs. Unseen and unheard at thirty-thousand feet, she could drop all these bombs in a single continuous string. When these conventional bombs struck the dark jungle at night, the flash of them exploding, rolled across the ground below. It looked like a welder's electric arc was being struck upon the face of the earth.

The unfortunate troops who found themselves at the receiving end of an arc light, usually never knew what hit them. Once, in a beer soaked discussion, the Scout pilots agreed that an arc light was almost unfair. Without sound, sight, or other warning, suddenly the earth would heave up and explode. The theory held that they would so stun anyone who survived that they would be unable to offer any meaningful organized resistance for a long time. Most of the people in the Cav believed that, generally, an arc light only made kindling wood and tore up the earth. Having seen one from the air, the concentration of

fire power nevertheless deeply impressed Kev. In full daylight, he could clearly see the bright welders arc being struck by the exploding bombs.

Sometime, long before Kev joined the Cav, an enterprising Scout got the idea that the little Red Birds could copy the big boys. Most likely, after a case or two of beer, the idea of the mini arc light was born. In practice, the lead scout would fly, at twenty to thirty knots, over a bunker complex, small base camp, or other suspected enemy concentration. As they passed over it, they would drop as many fragmentation grenades as possible. Over time, the Cav style mini arc light became well refined. The most important innovation was the placing of a couple of open hooks in the door frames. After their pins were straightened out, the frag grenades would then be suspended upon the hooks by their rings. When the time came to drop them, the hooks allowed the crew members to rake the grenades out like bunches of grapes. Just as a static line opened a parachute, the hook pulled the pins and released the spoons on the grenades. In fact, they came to a point where a good lead bird could put twenty-five to thirty grenades into the area roughly the size of a football field. It wasn't a B-52 strike. No one pretended that it was. However, for anyone on the ground, who wasn't well protected, it was just as devastating. Furthermore, it did serve to save the Snakes' rockets which cost one-hundred and twenty-five dollars each.

The well-hidden fifty-one had trapped Kev. He had no Snakes, no rockets, no wingman with a mini-gun, and he was quickly running out of fuel and time. Other bad guys would soon be moving into position to shoot at him as he circled the hill. However, Kev had now unsheathed his fangs. He had not done, nor was he going to do a rational cost analysis of their next move. By this point, Kev was well beyond doing a rational analysis of anything. This does not mean that he was caught-up in a berserker's blood lust. Yet, Kev and Johnny's blood was pounding fiercely in their veins. They were going to kill that fifty-one cal. anti-aircraft gun! The whole meaning of life was that straightforward to them. Pete, on the other hand, did not share their lust for the kill. However, he trusted them. Best of all, he knew that when Kev's fangs were drawn, they would win. Not only would they win and tell tall tales about it later. When they counted their day as finished, they would have put a serious hurt on the bad guys.

One and a half turn around the hill and the three of them were set to go. Safety pins had been straightened out on every fragmentation grenade in the little helicopter. Johnny then keyed the intercom first. "All set boss. I've got fifteen hanging on hooks with straight pins and four with pins pulled in my hands." Pete quickly chimed in. "I've got eight on hooks and four in hand, with pins pulled." Kev acknowledged both and added, "Pete set me up with eight on hooks. If nothing else, I do believe that we are going to be going for the record on this one, guys." During the couple of minutes which had passed since the fifty-one opened up on them, Kev had eventually gotten their airspeed up to ninety knots. He felt confident that this would give him enough airspeed to make their attack and begin their escape. Making a quick mental check, he decided that everything was set for them to even the score.

"OK, guys. Here's the straight scoop. With just a little luck, they have had great

difficulty tracking us by sound only. I'm going to red line the power and then zoom-climb the hill to the crest. I want you guys to be ready for the hairiest helicopter ride of your life. When I start the climb, I am going to pull back hard on the stick. I promise that it will feel like she is going all the way over on her back. As we crest the hill, I am planning on facing the opposite direction from which we have been going. Hopefully, that'll cross them up. If they are where I think they are, when I crest the hill and level my wings, we'll be right on top of them. We're going to dump our little basket of eggs right on their heads before they even figure out where we came from. I'll call the drop. Remember, don't drop till you get my command! Everybody set?" Pete clicked his mike button twice in acknowledgment. Johnny responded. "Let's do it. Let's fix this b-----." "Ready . . . ? Now!"

Without consciously thinking about it, Kev knew that it was time to find out if he were as good as he thought. Trusting his flying instincts and spatial awareness, he went for broke. Holding his breath, Kev yanked the collective stick to the upper stop, pulled the control stick all the way to the back stop, and about half way to the left. Groaning and shuddering, the airspeed quickly began to bleed off and ole Rocinate began climbing like an express elevator. Kev had no idea what the instruments were indicating. Looking over his left shoulder, and through the rotor disk, Kev was watching the side of the hill which appeared to be beneath him. He was trying to keep his orientation in relation to the hill. Hearing the low RPM warning in his earphones, Kev eased the upward pressure slightly on the collective stick till the beeper stopped. The forward airspeed bled off to almost nothing. Then, Kev pushed the control stick most of the way forward. Rocketing up the hill, it seemed to those inside her, that the little helicopter was upside down and standing on her tail. The clock stopped and Kev wished that he could have been on the outside watching. Hughes Helicopter never designed their little Loach to do the things that Kev had coached her into doing! He was making her fly like she was an F-4 cooking on both afterburners!

At the apex of his zoom climb, about twenty-five feet above the top of the hill, the laws of physics equaled out. The little bird stood still and became weightless for an instant. Kev then stomped in full left pedal, reduced the collective a bit, gave her hard right stick, and pushed the stick to the forward stop. He felt vindicated. His instincts had payed off in spades. An angry young man had turned the tables on the bad guys. The little Red Bird was once again the hunter to be feared. She had become the hawk who scented blood and was about to smash the mouse! For the brief instant, which once or twice in a lifetime seems to last for an eternity, the vengeful hawk was weightlessly suspended above her vulnerable prey.

Nose down, Kev had pointed ole 662/Rocinate directly at the menacing AA site. A separate part of Kev, who was observing the whole thing, marveled at what was revealed to his eyes. The little bird gave him a panoramic view of the bad guys. Pointing its muzzle about thirty degrees to his right was the fifty-one caliber AA gun. At last, the target was easy to see, no longer was it covered by camouflage. Fifteen foot long tongues of flame were jetting from its muzzle as it vainly spat forth death. Tasting the joy of a clean kill of pure vengeance, Kev was unconcerned. The little Red Bird was not

where the bad guys had expected it to be.

Suddenly, the clock began rapidly sweeping forward. The little Red Bird started to slowly swoop down upon the abstract figures in NVA uniforms. Somehow disinterested, Kev watched them as they were scurrying here and there seeking cover. Other distant men were cranking furiously at the traverse wheel of the AA gun. In desperation they were trying to bring it to bear upon the swooping hawk. Holding his eagerness carefully in check, and coldly looking at the scene before him, Kev knew they had only one chance to kill that big gun. The game clock had stopped ticking and only this play remained. One play would bring the game to its deadly conclusion. In Kev's mind, it was gamesmanship at its best. Winners take all and no consolation prize for the loser! It was the only way to play the game!

From the edge of his vision, he saw muzzle flashes. They sprouted from several AK-47's and were dotting the area. Shutting them out of his mind, he totally ignored them. Emotionally zeroed in on the kill, Kev bore down on the slow dive. Thumbing the mike button, he loudly hollered. "Now! Now! Now!" Jamming his left leg under the collective stick, he controlled both pedals with his right foot. Simultaneously, he transferred the stick to his left hand. With his right hand freed, he frantically raked off his eight fragmentation grenades. Everyone was doing his part. Vindicated, Kev had finished the hard part of the flight. Almost as an afterthought, he was adding his little bit to the rain of death showering down upon the AA site.

With speed, building rapidly, Kev continued his dive down the other side of the hill to the valley floor. Turning and twisting, he began running for his life. Just as the rim of the hill flashed past him, the sweetest symphony his ears had ever heard rewarded his audacious flying. A rolling thunder of many small explosions silenced the booming base beat of the AA gun. It was a special thunder thumped out by more than thirty frag grenades of a Cav style mini arc light.

For the first time in the last five, or less, minutes, Kev allowed himself to breathe. They were part way down the valley doing one-hundred and eighteen knots and all remained quiet. If that AA gun was still operable, it had a clear shot at the fleeing Red Bird. It hadn't shot at them yet. They must have killed it. Relieved and exuberant, Kev keyed the intercom. "I think we pulled it off guys." Just as Kev finished on the intercom, a concerned voice finally got past the blood lust pounding in his ears. "Red Two-Eight, where in the bloody blue blazes, are you?"

"Oops! Sorry about that Blue Six. I got a little preoccupied and forgot to keep you informed. We're about half way out of the valley and will be at your location in no more than zero two. The three of us are just fine and we are awaiting the pleasure of serving your needs." With a well-earned, and justified, touch of pride in his voice, Kev added. "Oh by the way sir. We just killed the fifty-one! If you want to go back in and get it so we can take it home, we're ready to go." "Negative on that, Two-Eight. Big Boss Six decided that the valley was a little hotter than he was looking for. He told us to pack up our bags and call it an early day. We'll meet you back at the barn."

Later that evening, at the club, the beer was flowing by the gallon. The Cav pilots were getting a little rowdy as the Major sipped a beer at the little bar. Full of life and the spirit of adventure, Kev and Sven invited him to join them for a moment. Joining them at their table, the Major asked. "OK Johnson, shoot straight with me. Did you guys really take out that fifty-one?" Sobering slightly, Kev put on his straightest serious face and assured the Major that Pete and Johnny had taken it out. "I'm just the truck driver, Sir." Sven could take it no longer. "Sir. That's not the story that I heard. Pete and Johnny told me, and I quote. 'That was positively the best (many descriptive and colorful words) piece of flying that they had ever seen.' They should know sir. They've flown with all of us. Who would know better? They were right there when it happened. Those two guys agreed that Kev had delivered them perfectly for the mini arc light. Pete even added. 'That crazy SOB even added eight grenades of his own to the pattern while flying one-handed!'"

Full of cold beer, excitement, and young life, Sven was completely fired up. Nothing was holding his exuberance back. "Sir, I was thinking." Kev and the Major groaned in unison. They found the thought of Sven thinking amusing. Ignoring their unfounded disrespect of his intellect, he continued. "It's not fair that the Air Force pukers get all the great missions. I think that we should become the Army's first Wild Weasel' outfit. What the heck, Sir. All the necessary parts are in place. We mere mortal pilots can spend our time unmasking AA batteries. When we find them, we'll have ole Kev along to kill them for us."

Laughing and shaking his head, the Major responded. "I don't know, Sven. The Air Force guys might just get a little upset if we use inexpensive little Red Birds to do a job that they need Fox 4's to accomplish." Going along with the joke, but also, with a generous helping of beer, a little enamored with the idea of being a Wild Weasel, Kev quickly spoke up. "Sounds like fun to me, Sir. I'll give it a shot, but only on one condition. That is, that we get to use ole Sven here for AA bait." The whole conversation was getting to be too much for the Major. Laughing, he excused himself with his own semi-serious comment. "I'm going to go now. If I stay here any longer, you two brainless idiots will talk me into something that we'll all regret when we sober up."