

SMITTY AND THE COLONEL

by [Mike Sheuerman](#), Panther 15

Last night I was watching an old war movie - THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN - the story of the RAF's valiant fight with the Luftwaffe to keep Germany from invading England. The movie brought to mind one of the funniest incidents that happened during my tour with the 361st Pink Panthers in '71-'72.

David Smith, AKA Smitty, was a red haired barely 19 year old WO1 when he joined the Unit in the summer 1971. He was a good aviator and made A/C in a little over four months. He turned out to be a great combat pilot and became a Mission Lead very quickly. This is the story of one of the missions he ran.

The 361st was formed with one principle mission - the escort of lift ships carrying Special Forces recon teams into and out of LZs in places where we did not fly. The mission was somewhat classified and the tactics for flying the mission were developed by the Unit members as they flew it. After some trial and error the "Old Guys", the original members of the Unit, decided that the low birds, a fire team of two Snakes, would set up a low level racetrack gun pattern no higher than 5 to 10 feet above the trees in order to protect the Slicks as they approached and departed the LZ. Lead would fly inbound at 60 knots. When he was nearing the LZ he would call "zero 2" indicating he was turning outbound in two seconds. His wingman would then turn inbound to cover his break. Lead would fly outbound at 120-130 knots to get into position to then cover his wingman when he called "zero 2." Once the pattern was established Lead would call the first Slick down into the racetrack. The Slick would fly in front of the inbound Snake at 80-90 knots till he reached the LZ. Once he had dropped or picked up the team members he would execute a 180 degree pedal turn and fly back out the racetrack. It worked really well. We were able to give the Slicks great cover and seemed to take fewer hits.

Now this was a "prized mission." Other Units wanted it. Woody liked to say "Hey, let them have it and we can all go to Bangkok." One day in early to mid 1972 the Unit was notified that a "special unit" from one of our Sister Services was coming up to work with us, learn the mission and possibly take it over. Our Unit was instructed to show them the ropes. On the night before this was to take place, eight of the prettiest helicopters you have EVER seen flew into Camp Holloway. They were shiny as a new penny. Now, it's been 35 years but I seem to remember they were brand new N Model twin engine Huey gunships. Every pilot was at least a 1LT but most were Captains with a few Majors and one Lieutenant Colonel in command. They wore really fancy flight suits and looked really pretty too.

The next morning 19 year old WO1 DAVID R SMITH, Panther 25, was Panther Lead. He took his flight of four Snakes north to Kontom for the daily briefing at CCC (Command and Control Central). The pretty aircraft went along, also. After the briefing, the Colonel asked to meet with Panther Lead to finalize the mission planning. When 19 year old WO1 DAVID R SMITH reported to the Colonel in charge of the shiny helicopters, the Colonel refused to listen to him. He informed 19 year old WO1 DAVID

R SMITH that he was a COLONEL and expected to work with the ranking Officer in the flight. WO1 DAVID R SMITH informed the Colonel that he was the Panther Air Mission Commander for this mission. The Colonel told 19 year old WO1 DAVID R SMITH that he would only deal with the ranking officer in the Panther flight and to send that officer to the Colonel immediately. Smitty saluted and sent his front seater, a Captain, very new to the Unit, to see the Colonel. The two of them would talk and the Captain would come talk to Smitty. Smitty would tell the young Captain what the flight was going to do and the Captain would go tell the Colonel. This went on all day.

The Panthers inserted the first of two teams in an LZ southeast of Leghorn. The mission went flawlessly. However, the Colonel found fault with how the mission was run, especially the low altitude at which it was conducted. He said the aircraft flew too low and would not have time to recover if it lost an engine. Smitty tried to explain, through the Captain of course, the reasons for the low flight pattern but the Colonel would have none of it. He would show the young WO1 and the rest of the Panther flight the "correct procedures to be followed in the insertion of troops."

The Colonel briefed his flight and off they went to insert the second team. The Panthers would observe this from above. To say the least, it was a cluster #@%. The visiting unit flew a figure 8 gun pattern high above the LZ. They expended most of their ordnance on LZ prep. The Bad Guys had a field day during the attempted insertion. Six of the shiny new helicopter received battle damage and the team could not be inserted. The Colonel had nothing to say. An alternate LZ was selected by Covey and the Panthers inserted the team without firing a round.

That night in the Holloway Officers Club they showed THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN. The Colonel and his officers were the guests of the Battalion Commander and his staff. The Panthers were seated in their usual place to the left of the stage as you face it. At the end of the movie, after the Luftwaffe was defeated and the German invasion thwarted, one of the senior British officers said something like "We won this fight with a lot of 18, 19 and 20 year old pilots who fought and gave their all for England" or something like that. From the Panther group assembled to watch the movie, in a strong, clear and LOUD voice came these words "If that Colonel had been in charge of fighting the Battle of Briton, they'd be speaking German over there now instead of English." The Colonel leaped to his feet and yelled "WHO SAID THAT? WHO SAID THAT?" When no one replied he and his officers stormed out and the Holloway Officers Club erupted in laughter.

Next morning the eight helicopters, now not so new and not so shiny and riddled with new bullet holes, departed Holloway to the east never to be seen again. The Panthers kept the Mission.