

NARRATIVE - RESCUE MISSION - RECOVERING CASUALTIES FROM "C" Company, 2nd Battalion, 16th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division, by SSgt David E. Milsten.

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The mission started around 3 PM on the 11th of April - my bird was on primary and Fitts' was on backup. A company of 1st division troopers had been hit by light sniper fire and then got caught by some support artillery when they called in the heavy stuff to eliminate the snipers. Altogether, they had 9 or 10 critically wounded litter cases and around 15 ambulatory cases. They were in heavy jungle with the trees topping out at around 175-200 feet, and the nearest clearing for a heli pad was around 4 miles away. Our birds are the only ones in this whole area with hoists - so 38th sent us out to get them.

My bird went in for the 1st load - we were able to drop down in a small hole to around 100 feet from the ground. We made one stokes litter pickup and then moved away to allow the backup bird to go in. While they made the 2nd litter pickup, I transferred the guy we had from the stokes to a folding litter, and then we dropped back into the hole for another litter pickup. Two guys made a full load for us and for some reason Fitts elected to pick up just the one, so both birds flew to a small airstrip located around 8 miles from the hole (the strip was called BINH BA - located around 20 miles NNE of Vung Tau on the coast).

We unloaded our patients at a small receiving hospital there, and then decided to send both PJs down to start the Army out on our chain saws to try and get an area cut out big enough to set down in. Past experience (this was our 20th operation like this since last October) has also showed us that the loading process is much faster with a PJ on the ground to help organize things. We can only make 2 litter pickups per flight using our

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Stokes litters, but if the less severely wounded are capable of riding the penetrator up we can get 4-5 a flight. Normal procedure is to send a man down (if there are more than a couple of loads of casualties), get things organized, and then have his come back up on a 2 man penetrator pickup.

My bird had to re-fuel so Pits and crew went back to the hole first and Pits rode the penetrator down. He didn't take the saw down, so must have decided against trying to cut a larger area out. He sent a stokes litter case up to his bird, and from here on we tried to keep a regular shuttle going. One bird making pickups while the other was dropping off patients. His bird could only take on one litter case at a time (the HM can only handle one Stokes litter patient without the PJ aboard to assist) so they made the one pickup and flew out for the drop off point (5 minutes each way).

Pits had things going real smooth on the ground, so I stayed in my bird to help the HM. We picked up two litter cases and returned to the strip. Pit's bird was refueling, so we returned to the hole. We made another litter pickup and then Pits signaled for the penetrator. Instead of coming up with one of the wounded, he put two on the penetrator, even though they were pretty badly hit. We assumed that he was waiting for his own bird to return and go up to them - but we'll never know for sure. The other bird was waiting above the hole, so we moved out with our three wounded and they went in.

They started to send a stokes down, but Pits signaled for the penetrator instead. There were still a couple of litter cases on the ground, plus a dozen that could ride the penetrator up, so I think he planned to come up and then help the HM with the two litter cases. The HM placed the penetrator inside of the litter since the litter was already outside of the

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door, and started them both down. The litter was around 10' from the ground and Pits was just reaching for it when 2 30 caliber automatic weapons cut loose at the bird from the opposite side. The bird received 9 hits - not one was hurt but one or two of the hits did quite a bit of damage. A round tore through a bundle of wires and caused the throttle control to jam in the wide open position, throwing max power to the engine. They also lost partial rudder control and had some other touchy problems. The bird surged forward and up - the pilot couldn't do a thing but hand on and ride it out. The litter started dragging through trees and hanging up, so the HM called for a cut to keep the bird from being pulled down. Luckily, no one was on the hoist, so they were able to get free and escape from the hole.

We were halfway to the strip with our load of patients when we received word that the backup bird had been hit. We thought that they had gone down, so we dropped down and unloaded our patients and then bugged back to get the crew. They were still staying airborne, so we escorted them down and then returned to the hole to get Pits and more wounded.

Up to this time the area was supposedly "secure" - with 3 companies holding it. We tried to go in but the FAC ordered us away from the hole to enable our artillery to cover it and knock off opposition around it. We found out later that VC mortar rounds were walking in while we were making pickups, and they had just zeroed in on the area when the 30 cals cut loose and sprayed our bird. The VC mortar was eliminated, but the guys on the ground started drawing sniper fire again. We stayed in an orbit near the area, waiting for things to quiet down so we could go back in. By this time (5:30 or 6PM) a "B" model from Saigon had joined us to replace our downed bird. We stayed there until 8:30, ready to go in for pickups in the dark by then. Sometime about then the guys on the ground called in our artillery

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right on top of themselves - and the FACs sent us home for the night.

We still didn't have any idea of what was going on at the spot, but we were all set to return at daybreak and continue the pickups and get Pits back. A "F" model from Binh Thuy (down south) was on the way to assist also. We received a call from the Army and 38th early in the morning telling us that a LZ had been cleared during the night and that Army choppers were going in to get everyone out at once. We didn't find out until around 9 that the LZ wasn't cleared and the two birds went back (the second being Binh Thuy's). Our on-coming alert crew replaced mine, so O'Beirne went out as the PJ on this one, backed by Fullwood from Binh Thuy on the other. O'Beirne and crew arrived in the area, but our fighters were still blasting the surrounding area, so they had to go into an orbit nearby. The army set off a few dynamite blasts at the pickup point to clear trees for an LZ and then they decided to send in an Army CH47 Chinook first. It couldn't get in because of its size, so then the army called in our 43's.

They went in and managed to go all of the way down. O'Beirne loaded 3 critically wounded on and then had to stay on the ground while they flew the wounded out. HULs started coming in to help carry out the wounded, and a CH47 finally made it in too. A USA captain told O'Beirne that Pits had got it the night before and showed him where Pits was laying. Up until this time we all thought that Pits was okay - we recieved a false report from the Army after the VC had been pushed away the night before that they had moved to a different spot and that Pits was still okay. O'Beirne got busy helping evacuate the wounded, in fact he pretty well ran the show since most of the Army guys were just standing around like they were lost. O'Beirne would locate a wounded trooper, call for stretcher bearers to carry him to the choppers, and got every one else busy looking for wounded and carrying them out.

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After 30-40 minutes, they had all of the wounded out and our bird picked up O'Beirne and returned to Bien Hoa with the bad word about Pits.

They flew two wounded over to the 93rd Field Hospital near here, and as it turned out both of them (a Lt. and a SSgt) were with Pits the whole time including being right beside him when he was hit. The Sergeant's story goes something like this.

They were making a 3 company push, staying fairly close together, when his company started receiving sniper fire. Six of their guys were hit so they called in support artillery to eliminate the sniper fire. The first rounds came in all little too far to one side, so they asked for a correction. Unfortunately someone corrected the wrong way and a few rounds fell near the company. This is where they received their casualties and we were called in. Before they called us, the area was declared "secure" again and they had a perimeter defense set up.

He said that Pits came down the hoist and started helping them with the hoist loading, plus Pits worked on the wounded in between hoist loads. He kept on going strong up to the time that the bird received the 30 cal. fire. The fire came from pretty close, so it's my feeling that their perimeter defense was pretty thin.

At this time the sniper fire started again, in fact a few rounds had been directed at the 43 before the heavy automatics cut loose. Pits saw the bird drag the litter through the trees and take off, and the litter must have remained in their sight. Pits wanted to go out and get it back since it would be needed when the birds returned, or at least when the other one came back in. The Army Lt. wouldn't let Pits take the risk of getting hit climbing up to get the litter, and he decided to move out to another location, carrying the remaining litter cases with

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them. Pits was running around treating the wounded and organizing the cutting of litter poles ect. at this time. They started out with Pits helping carry one of the litters, but only got around 20-30 yards when the VC opened up on them.

The Sgt estimated they were hit by around 300 hard core VC. They had positioned themselves in trees with 30 cals and had at least 2 50 cals up there somewhere too. He didn't know how many were in the trees, but they were caught in heavy fire from both above and on the ground. In his words, "The lead was flying so thick that if you stuck up your hand it would have been shot to pieces." Most of the army troops had M14s and were firing in full automatic since they couldn't see the VC. Pits had his M16 plus his .38, but he spent most of his time at this point crawling around gathering clips of ammo from the dead and wounded and passed it around to the army troops. After doing this for awhile, he gathered up around 20 M16 clips or so and started shooting back himself. The Sgt didn't know how long Pits was returning fire before he was hit, but did notice that Pits was one of the few firing on semi-automatic, so he figured that Pits could see a few of them. A little later he noticed that Pits wasn't moving anymore, indicating that he had been hit hard instead of being just wounded. Pits was wearing his flack vest and had a hard helmet (he borrowed one from one of the guys we picked up - but the vest didn't stop anything. He had been hit 4 times as far as we could find out. They called support artillery right in on their own position and the VC pulled out around 8:30 PM. Pits was hit somewhere around 7:30, just before it got completely dark. There were 8 guys in Pits's little group in the heavy fighting - 2 made it out.

That is about everything I know about the operation. We have lost a good friend and he was one of the best PJs in the game. I don't think

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that there was anything that Pits didn't excel in as far as duty or anything else goes - as I'm sure you well know. He died doing his job, and if he would have known the consequences of going down that hoist it wouldn't have slowed him up a bit. We know thers army recovery operations are no picnics, but up until now we have been real lucky. Counting the 9 we pulled out with Pit's help on the ground, our outfit has pulled out 141 casulties since last October, and this is the first time we've ran into serious difficulties. This figure is only the army troopers we have pulled out - not our regular air crew recoveries or stuff like that.

I feel that it's not our job, but as long as there isn't anyone else to do it down here, we will continue to do it as long as the need exists. Loosing Pits won't show us down anyx as far as support of this type goes. I only hope that we don't lose anyone else. My PJ's are going to continue going down if they are needed (and only if they are needed) we all know what the risk is. It's just too bad that the army can't get helicopters over here (like the HH3) that are capable of recovering their own casulties from the jungle. The army "Dust-off" medical evac HULs are doing a great job, but they can only pick up casulties from landing pads - we're the only ones with the hoist capability. We could do a much better job with HH3s - picking up 10-15 at a time, but as long as we only have our 43s, we're stuck.

Incidently, the armor plating received several direct 30 cal hits, and the slugs didn't even dent the platting. The Hm would have been killed if it wouldn't have been for that plating.

If any of you have any questions about this, or about SEA - drop me a line. I'm usually slow at answering letters, but will put forth a "max" effort to answer youu

Dave Milsten