

Air cav story follows this brief summary

CLOSURE: A Vietnam Story

By Mike Austin

On April 2, 1972, near the demilitarized zone (DMZ) of Vietnam, a U.S. Air Force forward air controller (FAC) pilot, using the call-sign "Bilk 34," broadcast an urgent radio plea over the emergency-only "Guard" frequency that was routinely monitored by all pilots flying in the Southeast Asian theater. The request was for assistance in rescuing any survivors of an EB-66 radar surveillance aircraft that was just shot down.

The plane had been struck by a surface-to-air missile fired by the North Vietnamese Army near Cam Lo. A general alert warning the possibility of further SAM attacks in that vicinity was also issued on guard, noting the time in minutes after the hour at the end of his message. A single chute had been observed to open, followed by a desperate call for help, so at least one survivor was confirmed.

Flying his model UH-1H Huey helicopter near Quang Tri to observe the three-day-old invasion by the NVA, Army Lieutenant Byron Kulland answered the call as "Blue Ghost 39," his official title while in the air. Byron was a short-timer "slick" pilot with F Troop, 8th (air) Cavalry, 196th Light Infantry Brigade.

Copilot Warrant Officer John Frink had only arrived in country a few weeks before but certainly understood the risk of such an impromptu rescue attempt in the midst of concentrated enemy forces. So did crew chief Specialist Ron Paschall and door gunner PFC Jose Astorga.

There had been little reconnaissance of the area since up to 45,000 NVA attacked March 30th from the west out of their sanctuaries in Laos and from across the Ben Hai River, only 12 miles north of them. This was nothing less than a desperate crusade by Hanoi to conquer the South once and for all, taking advantage of the American withdrawal that was nearly completed. As a general rule, only aviation units, along with a handful of Marine and Army ground advisors, were left to help the South Vietnamese military defend their country. By 1972, nearly all U.S. ground troops had gone home for good.

The situation changed almost hourly. No one was sure how far south or east the NVA had progressed. Certainly, they were in Cam Lo. To make matters worse, fighter jet air cover was unavailable from the Air Force. They would have to rely on a single Cobra helicopter gunship, or Snake, for protection on the quick snatch extraction.

It was also getting late, and the weather was closing in. Still, they decided to try anyway. After all, any one of them could be in similar straits at any time, given the uncertainty of the moment.

Without hesitation, Byron descended toward Ai Tu combat base (Quang Tri) to drop off the civilian news correspondent he had been hauling around. Then he departed northward at full power, heading toward the town of Dong Ha. Bilk would vector him to the survivor's last known position from there. Captain Mike Rosebeary followed closely behind in the Snake.

Kulland made a hard left turn and dropped to a scant fifty feet of altitude to hug the Cua Viet River as it twisted west from Dong Ha. The crew began to hunt for the airman evading the enemy somewhere below.

But immediately after crossing the river, ground fire raked both helicopters. Rosebeary's ship was shot up so badly, the emergency panel lit up like a Christmas tree. As senior officer, he wisely ordered a retreat and headed for the coast, losing his engine along the way. Luckily, a Jolly Green Giant search-and-rescue (SAR) chopper, sent up from Da Nang to assist in the rescue, was there in minutes to pick up the two-man crew unhurt

Back on the lone Huey, Kulland had tried to turn and escape with Rosebeary; but his ship began trailing heavy smoke from fifty-one caliber hits on the engine. Astorga's M-60 machine gun jammed while attempting to suppress the fire. A round exploded against his chest protector or "chicken plate" as it was known at the time. Another shattered a leg, knocking him unconscious.

Then they crashed hard.

Astorga woke in a daze to find the crew chief Paschall pinned in the wreckage. Crawling to the front, he found the two pilots still strapped in their seats. Frink was conscious, but Kulland appeared to be dead.

Frink then threw two survival vests to Astorga and indicated they may have to leave the others behind if they couldn't get Paschall out quickly. Astorga helped Frink out of the aircraft then crawled away with the vests while Frink tried to

get to Paschall. After dropping the vests a safe distance away, Astorga crawled back to the ship to try and help rescue Paschall.

Just then, the NVA rushed in firing madly at the ship. The Huey exploded, killing Frink and Paschall instantly. Weak from injury and loss of blood, the door gunner tried to crawl away again but was easily captured. He survived and was transported to Hanoi as one of America's last prisoners of war, coming home a few months later in the 1973 POW exchange.

That is how my friends and fellow soldiers met their fates on Easter Sunday 1972, while searching for a man known to them only as BAT 21.

More sadly, theirs was only the first in a series of catastrophic episodes, killing many more pilots and crew, before the largest rescue mission in the history of the United States Air Force ended successfully with a Navy SEAL floating BAT 21 down a river in darkness to freedom. Like others that would follow, Kulland's crew died doing the most noble thing warriors could be asked to do: risking their own lives so another might live.

In the long years since this tragedy occurred, seldom a day goes by that I do not think about it and draw some inspiration from the act. In large part, it was the memory of Blue Ghost 39's crew and that of six others we had to leave behind in a string of similar tragedies, that eventually drove me back to Vietnam.

On September 4, 1993, I held my wife, Lynn, for a long moment at the Philadelphia airport before departing alone on an odyssey into my past. We kissed and wished each other well. I thanked her again for being so insistent all these months that I stop talking about it and just go back to Nam to find whatever it was I was still looking for, if that were even possible.

Now the day had finally arrived, and I was nervous and relieved all at once to be getting underway. I dried her tears with my sleeve and walked to the gate, choking back tears of my own.

By the time my plane touched down on Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport thirty hours later, I was too strung out to care that a Russian MiG-23 was taxiing beside me, blowing the weeds low that grew through cracks in the poorly maintained runway with its hot exhaust.

Numbly, I passed through immigrations and customs to meet my guide...only he wasn't my real guide, he explained over a Heineken in the sultry bar. I would meet him when I flew up to Da Nang that afternoon. Wasn't I the one who sent the fax requesting to meet with former enemy soldiers? Yes, I had expressed an interest. Good, he said, because I would be glad to know my permanent guide was a former VC.

He smiled, waiting for my reaction. I had only asked to meet with them, not live with one for two weeks! Too tired to care, I boarded the aged Russian airliner for the short hop to central Vietnam...

No one was waiting at Da Nang.

I decided to hang around the terminal building in the sweltering heat and humidity that was everything I remembered and more. Even the brutal summer in New Jersey hadn't prepared me for this. I needed a cigarette, but there was a sign on the wall stating "For your health, please do not smoke in the building," which struck me as ironic coming from a nation that had been at war 40 years this century alone. So I walked out to a rock garden, with a pond full of goldfish in the middle, to have a smoke.

I stood watching a couple ancient MiG fighters doing touch-and-goes on the same parallel runways F-4 Phantoms once rocketed down as they headed for targets in I Corps, Laos, and North Vietnam. Many never returned. A red flag with yellow star flapped on the pole where Old Glory once hung. Across the flight line, I could make out the name "Vikings" on a sagging hangar.

I was trying to sort all that out when an old NVA officer (all soldiers wear that uniform there today) walked out and stood a few feet away from me, pulling a cigarette from his pocket. We glanced at each other before turning our attention back to the MiGs.

I began to size him up out the corner of my eye. In his 60s, at least, he was almost certainly fighting when I was there in combat. The medals that hung from his chest were tarnished and old. "If my aim had been a little better back in '72, you might not be standing here now," I thought to myself, taking another drag.

Of course, that implied if his aim had been better...

Would I ever completely get over the war and stop the hating, I wondered? Certainly there was a difference between "getting over it" and "forgetting about

it." I would never forget, nor would I ever apologize for fighting against communist aggression.

We watched until the last jet taxied off the active, never directly acknowledging the other's existence. At the same time, we started back toward the terminal. He reached the door first, then stood back holding it open for me. I smiled, he nodded, and we went our separate ways inside.

There, a man was scurrying around, obviously looking for someone. He spotted me easily, the only non-Asian in the place, and rushed over. "Are you Mister Michael Austin from the United States?" he asked.

When I replied in the affirmative, he began to apologize so profusely for being late that I was getting embarrassed. It was okay, I tried to reassure him. And stop being so damn formal. No big deal, okay?

He grabbed my heavy bags, including the seventy pound duffel full of gifts I was carrying on behalf of some Vietnamese friends in Camden to deliver to their relatives in Dong Ha. I stopped him and showed him how my new piggy-back suitcase was also a luggage cart, lifting the handle and strapping on the duffel and camera bag. He seemed to enjoy pulling the contraption behind him, while others staggered under the weight of their hand or shoulder carried items.

He looked a little too young to have fought in the war. Instead of the propaganda spewing former communist guerrilla I was expecting, Tru's demeanor was so disarming and exceedingly polite, I had to question him immediately about his past involvement in the war. To my relief, I found he was merely a child during the conflict. But he had been a communist soldier later, drafted out of college in 1979 to fight against the Chinese when they invaded Vietnam's northern provinces.

After 6 plus years in uniform, he returned to complete his degree in international business. He now hated the army and felt only slightly less loathing for government policy but was nonetheless a model citizen I was sure. It was just the type of personality he had.

In the days ahead, my initial judgement prevailed and Tru proved to be a trusted friend as well as gracious host. Between him and my driver Tan, I was treated to an incredible journey back in time. Tan had once been a truck driver with the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) stationed on the same base at the same time as me at Marble Mountain, also known as China Beach. We hit it off almost immediately.

The trip to the Rocket Belt southeast of Da Nang the following day was electrifying, starting with Hill 55 and the Arizona Territory or "VC Holyland" as Tru called it. I dusted off an empty sandbag I found on Hill 55, apparently blown to rags by something big during the war. Tru took it and carefully placed it in the ruck he was carrying to save for me.

We walked out to the river bank and stood in open sunshine. It was a pleasant day and very quiet. Neither the drum of helicopter rotor blades, the throaty roar of deuce-and-a-half trucks, the thump of distant artillery and bombs, nor the short, vicious cracks of M-16s or AK-47s could be heard anymore. Only birds singing, children playing, and a dog barking once in a while from the nearby village.

Directly in front of me stood the old Liberty Bridge that once connected An Hoa combat base to the outside world across the Song Thu Bon River. Built in 1967, the vital link was defended fiercely, first by Marine and later Army units stationed in the AO. A particularly savage battle happened in March 1969, when a full battalion of NVA overran the Marines. Ultimately, they had to request artillery fire from Hill 55 into their own compound to beat back the assault.

Now unimportant to anyone, the bridge stood derelict, just a bunch of river pilings holding up so much war decay, waiting to collapse under the weight of time. Whole sections of road surface were missing, as well as the guard railings, cannibalized by the locals for building materials, I supposed. A sturdy hooch was probably better than a bridge, in peace time, anyway. So long as they put it to good use, I didn't care one way or another. A floating bridge was now used a few kilometers upstream, Tru said. He seemed puzzled by my intense interest in the pathetic wood skeleton.

Looking around, I spotted the place I had been ambushed two times in two months while flying a Huey gunship on a night reconnaissance mission dubbed Nighthawk. It was only a couple miles away, just this side of the horseshoe bend in the river, where two dry stream beds met forming an oval. The sight gave me a slight chill even on this warm afternoon.

Nighthawk had been a formidable weapon indeed, designed exclusively for close combat fire support at night. On one occasion, we had to place our fire within thirty feet of a squad of U.S. soldiers under attack in order to save them from being overrun. And it worked beautifully. Crewed by two pilots and four gunners, it boasted a fifty-caliber machine gun, two M-60's (one of the M-60

gunners also doubled as the "light man"), and the main weapon, a minigun capable of firing 4,000 bullets each minute, 67 a second.

The VC quickly learned how we flew the mission...low and slow at maybe two hundred feet above the ground at fifty knots, while shining a multi-million candle power xenon search light around. So they devised an ambush scheme using a small campfire as the bait each time, understanding we would be compelled to fly over for a closer look at such a late hour. We were both a force to be feared and an irresistible target to them at the same time.

After lighting the fire, eight or ten of them would then set up in a ring approximately two hundred meters wide and wait for the chopper to circle overhead, spotlight ablaze. Then they'd open up with rocket propelled grenades (RPG) first, hoping to finish us off then and there. Fortunately, the grenades always missed us, but their explosions on the ground became the signal for them to open up with withering automatic weapons fire.

For us, it meant extinguishing the light and returning fire as we escaped the immediate area. Specialist Jose Garcia, a second-tour gunner from San Antonio, quickly hosed the rings down with minigun each time, effectively silencing their guns in a minute or less. But a minute is still a very long time in the heat of a firefight, and we took multiple hits.

From the vantage point of the recovery or "chase" aircraft always circling at a safe altitude above us, the strings of multi-colored tracers flying up to a point resembled a Christmas tree; so that's what it was called, a Christmas Tree Ambush. Our search light became the top ornament on the tree.

The Que Son Mountains loomed to the south. Staring through binoculars at the jagged skyline that was still imprinted on my mind twenty-one years later, I remembered all the hunter-killer missions our air-cav teams used to fly out there, telling Tru a few war stories in the process. He seemed fascinated hearing them, asking lots of questions. This time, he was speaking as a former soldier himself.

I told him that, at one time or another, I had covered its entire length, all the way from the terminus near the coast, right up to the Laotian border where things really got interesting. The mountains were used heavily as a tentacle of the Ho Chi Minh Trail by the NVA to infiltrate the An Hoa basin below Da Nang. Our

scouts usually found something worthwhile to shoot at, or were shot at themselves, just about every time we went into the Que Sons.

"I must have fired a zillion rockets in those hills," I told Tru, shaking my head in amazement to see it again.

I had also experienced my first B-52 Arc Light up close there. We were sitting on the helipad at LZ Baldy, waiting to pull a bomb damage assessment (BDA) for the Air Force as soon as the strike ended. The side of the mountains rippled with powerful explosions, shaking the very ground below our feet. It was awesome. Like the biggest Fourth of July celebration one could imagine, with God playing kettle drums in the background for effect. But we didn't find anything that day except smoking craters ringed by pulverized flora and fauna. As the saying went, B-52s didn't leave bodies. Only tiny pieces of bodies.

A short distance west, smack in the middle of the river, lay Football Island. Its name was given by the Marines for its distinctive "pig skin" shape. However, seeing it again invoked painful memories of a search and destroy mission that went awry there one day. When it ended, three people lay dead, two by my hand, after the Vietnamese ground commander radioed us to shoot them. A quick burst of minigun and they were gone or "greased" as we used to say.

The ones I shot both turned out to be women. The ARVN ground troops reported finding VC identification papers on them, but I never saw anything to substantiate the claim. And they were carrying no weapons. I still believe they could have been just frightened farmers fleeing the ground troops as they progressed through the village, giving it the Zippo treatment by setting all the hooches on fire.

The third, a man swimming across the river, was shot point blank by a scout hovering overhead after the ground commander refused our offer to capture him alive for interrogation. Again, no weapons were found.

I could almost see him floating past this bridge again. He was face down, arms outstretched, enveloped by a visible tear drop stain of blood pointed downstream as the slow current carried him on the solitary journey to the South China Sea.

I've often blamed the ground commander for his harsh judgement, but that's just the way it goes sometimes in war. Men can make mistakes. Of all the people I killed, these were the only question marks, I told Tru. He nodded like he understood, and we turned back for the car.

One of the roughest parts of the trip emotionally, however, came later, when I visited My Lai (properly called Son My), site of the infamous massacre.

I knew all too well what happened there in March 1968 and originally told Tru I had no desire to visit the place. Besides, there was still so much to see in my old area of operations before we traveled north to Hue. But, at his uncharacteristic urging, I agreed to go at the last moment, under protest, as an excuse to see the Chu Lai area again.

Once there, however, I was taken by the somber beauty of the memorial. And enraged at the thought we were even capable of such an act. "We expected that from the VC, but that's not how Americans were trained to fight," I told Tru, venting a rage and shame that had been festering twenty-five long years. Again, he offered a sympathetic shrug.

Next day, we traveled north to Hue. I was surprised how the Citadel still bore the scars of Tet 1968. In fact, I almost expected to see a flak-jacketed Marine or sandal-clad Viet Cong jump from the dark recesses of a blown out building. Time had stood still in Vietnam, preserving one of the greatest battles of the war. Tru described the enemy's month-long occupation of the city, when thousands of Hue citizens were executed by the North Vietnamese for suspicion of being collaborators with the Saigon regime.

"They were shot, hung, hacked to death, burned or buried alive. Some were weighted down with stones and drowned in the river."

As at My Lai, we were both appalled at the inhumanity, regardless of who was responsible.

Technically a communist and my former enemy, Tru was also one of the most decent and understanding men I could hope to meet. That evening, we sat quietly at the edge of the Perfume River in Hue, sipping beer as we watched the sun set on the western mountains. Tru joined me in a toast to the six Blue Ghosts, all from the scout platoon, who were killed there June 11 and 12, 1972.

I'd always considered scouts among the bravest men I ever knew, and these were the essence of that breed. They perished in three separate crashes, some while trying to save others or just to retrieve the dead. That was all important back then, bringing home the dead. This time we failed, though, and had to leave them all behind.

The memories stung like before as I mentally went through the list of names: Arnold "Dusty" Holm, Jim McQuade, James Hackett, Wayne Bibbs, Robin Yeakley, and Richard Wiley. I've often touched their names on the Wall in Washington, remembering each in turn.

I was flying about two hundred feet away alongside Wiley's chopper, piloted by Warrant Officer Tom Martin, when an anti-aircraft round slammed into the rear of their ship just below the exhaust pipe. I could see the flash of it, then Wiley leaning outside the door returning fire with his M-60, as he simultaneously strained to see how much damage there was to his aircraft. Suddenly, the engine quit; and they crashed into the tree tops, flipping over and catching on fire.

Setting up a "daisy chain" pattern with two other gunships to lay down continuous fire, I emptied every rocket, grenade, cannon shell, and machine gun bullet my Cobra carried (which was considerable) at the large NVA force we had inadvertently overflowed while crossing a ridge line near the Song Bo River. Some were running openly across a large meadow, trying to get to the tree line for cover. For every one that made it, two or three were struck down in the rain of steel and lead and high explosives. Just a hundred meters below them was Martin's burning ship.

Trying to buy more time for any survivors to escape, I started making dry runs on the ridge to keep the daisy chain unbroken until the other gunships were expended, too. I hoped my diving Cobra would keep their heads down awhile longer, that they wouldn't figure out I was out of ammo and bluffing.

It seemed to work. At least they weren't visibly moving or returning fire. We continued until low fuel forced us to return to Camp Eagle, but I never saw anyone climb out of the wreckage. Then as we turned to leave, the ship exploded. I was sick.

Imagine my joy later that day when I heard that at least one had made it out! Tom Martin was rescued by an Air Force SAR helicopter, again a Jolly Green, badly injured and burned, but very much alive. Miraculously, he had managed to escape his would be captors, moving a few clicks (kilometers) away from the crash before using his signal mirror to alert the Jolly Green's crew. He had been a grunt during his first tour and was probably saved by his jungle savvy.

Wiley had been pinned under the wreck, he told rescuers. Adrenalin pumping, he had tried to pry the Hughes OH-6 light observation helicopter (LOH) off his

gunner with a tree branch, but the limb broke. As he turned around to find another branch, the ship exploded killing Wiley instantly. He said he wasn't able to contact us because his survival radio had melted in the fire before he regained consciousness after the crash knocked him out.

He watched us fly away.

"We tried so damn hard to get you guys out, but you know how it was! The NVA simply overwhelmed us all in the invasion," I wanted to shout at their bones, defending the survivor guilt I still carried.

All except Tommy were still lying out there somewhere, just like Three-Nine's crew up near the DMZ.

The next two days were full up with visits to such war icons as Camp Carroll, Ai Tu combat base, and Khe Sanh. Walking around the small citadel of Quang Tri City, I thought about the last time I had seen it, July 1972, shattered and broken to rubble that was still smoking from an artillery and bomb strike as we arrived with a hundred slicks carrying elements of the ARVN Airborne Division and South Vietnamese Marines.

The NVA were holding this very position, the heart of the city. I flew with the lead aircraft to "prep" the landing zone (LZ) with rocket fire and cover the insertion. Inbound on the first rocket run, I remembered being scared shitless but was sure I had plenty of company that day.

Two U.S. Marine choppers, assisting from the Seventh Fleet, were shot down and more lives lost. Then an errant bomb fell on members of the Airborne Division, killing scores and blunting the attack to retake Quang Tri. It had been my last mission in Vietnam, before returning to the Land of the Big PX, and it had been for naught. The survivors were later extracted, and it would not be until September that the city was finally back in friendly hands.

A recently erected memorial stood at the center of the citadel. I walked over and scooped a hand full of dirt from the small garden surrounding it. Ever resourceful, Tru presented a plastic bag and began to dig more soil, placing it

inside for safekeeping. I wanted to bring a piece of the country we had fought so hard to save, home with me. The little bag quickly filled with some of the most expensive real estate in the world, in terms of human suffering and sacrifice.

At Carroll, only a stone monument marked the once great artillery base. I was surprised to see a couple dozen men emerge out of the jungle shortly after arriving. They were dressed in filthy rags and carrying picks and shovels, the tools of the present day scrap-metal hunters. Tru explained they were selling U.S. dog tags, which they claimed to have found in the outlying country side.

I thumbed through the crusted metal plates but was too uncomfortable to pull out my wallet since I was probably carrying ten years wages for the average Vietnamese at the time. At my urging, we departed for Khe Sanh, leaving them disappointed and me curious as to the identities on those tags.

Stepping around live ordnance that still littered the ground a quarter century later, I felt genuine fear in Vietnam once again at Khe Sanh. Tru hurriedly grabbed some loose shrubbery to cover a pile of rusting grenades lying in a shallow hole as children approached us from the nearby village. Then we quickly walked away so not to draw their curiosity to the deadly explosives.

What a way to have to grow up, I lamented. Tru agreed, explaining as many as 10,000 civilians had been killed by land mines and other explosives left over from the war by both sides. Countless others were maimed, including many children. The legacy of Vietnam continued.

Instead of the blond sand found at Quang Tri which was situated close to the coast, the dirt up here in the mountains was colored a deep red due to its high iron content. We didn't even have to dirty our hands to collect it. The recent rains had left a slick, sticky coating that stuck so hard to my shoes, I was two inches taller when we got back to the car. I had to use my trusty Buck pocket knife to peel it away.

After a claustrophobic tour of an underground tunnel network used by the enemy at Vinh Moc and my first trip across the Ben Hai River into what was North Vietnam, I returned to Dong Ha, checking into what passed as its only hotel. The ugly Russian-built concrete structure was filthy, with bugs and lizards crawling everywhere; but I took it in stride. It still far outshone any of the hooches I lived in during my tour of duty.

Thoughtfully, Tru had arranged for a room that overlooked the plains where Kulland, Frink, and Paschall were shot down. Standing on the small balcony, I

adjusted the worn MIA bracelet with Kulland's name on it that fellow gun pilot Chuck LaCelle had sent me to wear on the occasion of my return. Chuck and gun platoon leader Tim Sprouse had both nearly been killed trying to rescue them, along with their copilots, Lieutenant Skip Baebler and Warrant Officer Neil Thompson. It was Chuck's way of remembering.

Returning to the modest lobby, I was surprised to see two, 4-wheel drive vehicles pull up in front of the hotel and a dozen or so young American men climb out. They were dressed casually in colorful, loose-fitting civilian pants and tee shirts. Some had bandannas tied around their foreheads to keep sweat out of their eyes.

As they unpacked rucksacks and boxes of supplies, I walked out to introduce myself. To my amazement, I found they were members of the Joint Task Force - Full Accounting teams (JTF-FA in militarise or JTF for short). Part soldiers, part archeologists, they were sent here to resolve the fates of our MIAs. I was elated just to shake their hands. Naturally, I asked if we could meet later at the small hotel bar to talk.

"Right after we get cleaned up," replied one. "It was a long, hot hump out to the dig today."

Later, I found myself in the company of exceptional men, each hand picked for his assignment. They came from all branches of the military, possessing a variety of critical skills. A medic, ordnance expert, two linguists, and a few infantry types, among others.

Conversing over some Ba Ba's, or the popular Vietnamese-brewed beer "333," I found myself thinking back to joyous times spent with similar men twenty-two years before. I asked about their work. Not surprising, it was sometimes frustrating, sometimes rewarding, they all agreed; but they were dedicated to the cause in any event.

With all that unexploded ordnance lying around, their job was certainly not without risk, I observed, cringing to think one of them could be hurt while searching for the bones of long dead Americans. This prompted a short but spirited discussion among them on how to divide their limited resources the following day.

"Okay, if your team gets the medic, then we get EOD," one said firmly, ending the friendly argument.

Their tales of painstaking investigation and back breaking work to resolve the mysteries surrounding our missing-in-action were captivating. Because of their professionalism and national sensitivity to the POW/MIA issue, they were careful not to reveal actual names or locations of unresolved cases when telling the stories. But that in no way detracted from the incredible narrations I was hearing.

Inevitably, the discussion turned to the war. Giving them a flavor for local history after the invasion of 1972 (the hotel would have been behind enemy lines by day three), I looked toward the open window that faced north and mentioned I had lost a crew of men somewhere out there, "probably within a mile or two of this hotel."

When one of them asked their names, I retold the story of Blue Ghost 39's ill-fated rescue attempt. Navy petty officer, Adam Burgess, said it rung a bell. He would check it out on the computer in his room, linked to the main archives in Hanoi, and let me know what happened to my friends. I couldn't believe what I was hearing!

Adam returned fifteen minutes later and approached Jeff Newman, the other Navy linguist. They talked in private a bit, then shook their heads as if in agreement.

"Are you in contact with any of the families?" Adam asked.

"No," I answered honestly, assuring them I was merely a fellow vet interested in knowing what happened to them. Jeff Newman sat his glass down and allowed that he had personally excavated Blue Ghost 39's crash site in April. They were now in the lab in Hawaii awaiting identification.

"Nothing's positive; but if you're asking my personal opinion, I feel I've accounted for all three of them. That's all I can say at this point. I wouldn't have told you that much, except you're a friend of theirs and all."

I was speechless for a moment, looking at this strapping young sailor who had gleaned their precious earthly remains from the sandy soil. "Where did you find them?" I was finally able to ask.

Jeff stood and walked to the window. "See that ville just across the river? Right next to it."

I stood motionless, trying to sort through the flood of emotions I was feeling. Tru leaned close to me. "They are no longer missing. Maybe you should make the bracelet a gift," he almost whispered.

Tru's suggestion moved me. How appropriate. Removing the silver band inscribed with Kulland's name, rank, and date he became MIA from my wrist, I handed it to Jeff, asking him to accept it from the crew's families and friends as a token of our deepest gratitude. Back at the table, I ordered another round for everybody.

"Now, I'd like to tell you about the personalities behind those bones you found..."

Clouds grayed the morning sky, threatening rain on April 29, 1994, as Lynn and I gripped one another's hands and walked the last hundred yards toward the old chapel at Ft. Myer, next to Arlington National Cemetery in Washington. Others who remembered and could attend converged on the small sanctuary as well.

It was one pleasant surprise after another. Al Rushatz, the former Blue Ghost commander, showed up first. Later came Frank Leggio, our chief maintenance pilot, who had roomed with Kulland just before he was shot down. Tim Sprouse and Chuck LaCelle were also present and accounted for. Another surprise visitor was Darrel Whitcomb, one of the Air Force FAC pilots circling overhead in an OV-10 Bronco reconnaissance plane when they died.

We met with the families briefly before entering through separate doors. Inside, we sang hymns and bowed through the moving eulogy. Outside, a team of six white stallions paced nervously as the metal casket was loaded onto the caisson. The line of mourners followed the horses through the cemetery down Grant Avenue.

Eight soldiers carefully lifted the casket to follow Chaplain Pierce through neat rows of white monuments, down to the final resting place of Blue Ghost 39's crew. It was a heroes' burial. The 21-gun salute. The bugler standing alone under a shade tree while playing Taps, the loneliest song ever written. The chaplain presenting three, crisply-folded flags, one to each family. After the services concluded, a soldier stood ramrod straight, charged with guarding the men until they were lowered into U.S. soil finally and forever. As the others dispersed to rendezvous at the monument's reception center for a final gathering, I stayed behind, lingering alone awhile to remember them one last time and thank them for their ultimate sacrifice.

After the reception, those who could attend were invited to go the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. At the Wall, three soldiers from Ft. Hood, Texas, who had escorted the remains from California, held a short ceremony in the crews' honor. Lieutenants Perito and Hoyt joined with Sergeant Jackson to place a plaque from the men of 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry below the familiar names on the monument.

Then, they stood at attention and saluted the polished black granite. I swelled with pride at the sight of these men honoring their cavalry forbears. Perito, who lead the delegation, was handed John Frink's MIA bracelet by Chuck. Now representatives of all the men responsible for bringing them home had been duly thanked, both here and in Vietnam.

As I left the nation's capital for the drive home, I felt a contentment I hadn't known before I came. I was sure the others were feeling it, too. If a piece of us had been left behind in Vietnam, a piece of us had surely come home with these brave souls.

Source = <http://www.angelfire.com/ga2/vnhistory/FRAC.html>

[HOME](#)

First Regional Assistance Command (FRAC)

FRAC was unique because it had three highly spirited air cavalry troops, F/8 Cav, F/4 Cav and D/17 Cav. Adding the fire power that resides with the Cobra was the Joker gun platoon from the 48th AHC.



The Easter Offensive of 1972 started at noon on March 30th, 1972 when the North Vietnamese came across the DMZ in strength under weather conditions that favored them. Darrell Whitcomb, author of *The Rescue of Bat 21*, has graciously provided two chapters that he wrote and copyrighted in 1997. Whitcomb, a retired AF COL, VN era Nail and Raven FAC in I Corps and Laos has provided some keen insights that set the stage.

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Chapter 3

THE BATTLE

"Believe me, there is a real

war going on over here now!"

Capt Harold Icke/Bilk 11(1)

At about the same time that Major Brookbank was trying to find his way down through the weather over the DMZ, lunch was being served at the Officers' Mess at the 3rd ARVN Division headquarters at Ai Tu Combat Base, a few miles south of Dong Ha. Several of the Army advisors were entertaining a guest who had come up for the day to see the Division area. He was LtCol Jerry Turley, USMC. Like Brookbank, he had just arrived in Vietnam, and was

slated to serve a tour as a Covan/advisor to the Vietnamese Marines. Since two of their Brigades were opcon to the 3rd ARVN, he came up to observe the operation.

They had just finished their meal and walked outside when they began to hear the boom of the big guns to the North. Turley watched as the shells began to slam into the Quang Tri Airfield just across the road to the east. Then shells began to fall around the headquarters. He and his hosts quickly bolted for the command bunker. Inside, the group was greeted by the sounds of radio reports coming in from all forward positions indicating that they too were under heavy fire from an estimated three regiments of long range 130mm guns.(2) Turley did not realize then that he was about to observe and take part in some of the most unusual actions of the war.

Unfortunately, the ARVN positions and firebases were not hard to locate since they had been fixed for several years and were designed more for counter guerrilla operations. Consequently, they were easy targets for the NVA guns. Everyone immediately sensed that these were preparatory attacks for the infantry and tanks of the three NVA divisions thought to be north of the DMZ and west of the Khe Sanh area.(3)

As Major Brookbank circled in his O-1 and tried to direct ARVN artillery on the booming NVA guns, he was heartened by something he sighted farther west. Under the weather, he could see another of his FACs within visual range of the enemy troops. Surely, he was also engaging the growing enemy columns. That was exactly what the division needed at that moment. But upon returning to base, Brookbank discovered that the other FAC had reported no sightings and had called for no artillery strikes. Brookbank wanted to kill him for dereliction of duty. At the very least, he was beginning to realize the magnitude of his problem.(4)

But that was not his only problem. The NVA had planned their attacks to take full advantage of the seasonal weather. This was the monsoon season. During which the normal weather pattern for this area of Southeast Asia was low clouds and poor visibility. Having just arrived in South Vietnam, Brookbank did not realize at the time that the weather would remain like this for several days and have a negative impact on ARVN and USAF operations.

The opening NVA moves caught the 3rd Division off guard. As directed by Brigadier General Giai, two of its infantry regiments, the 2nd and the 56th, were in the process of switching their areas of operation. Both units had their elements strung out along the road at the same time. This greatly concerned the senior US advisor to the 56th Regiment, LTC Bill Camper. He had only been with the regiment two weeks, having previously been with the 2nd Regiment. He questioned the soundness of an order which would have both units on the road perpendicular to a major enemy axis of advance at the same time. His concern was well placed, for the initial NVA attacks cut right through some of the exposed units.(5)

In fact, many of the moving units were caught in the open by the artillery and suffered grievous casualties. They were not accustomed to this type of action. Additionally, their fixed defenses were designed to counter local attacks and infiltration. The units had not developed any plans for mobile warfare. There were no positions prepared to give the depth necessary to contain an attack of this size, to fall back while slowly wearing down the attackers by trading space for time.(6) Knocked so quickly off balance, they would not recover before the NVA struck with infantry and tanks.(7)

Upon his arrival at the 56th Regiment, LTC Camper was also shocked to discover that the battalions were doing little active patrolling. Sensor reports were being forwarded, but they were not being verified by air or ground observation. In making visits out to the units, he discovered that they were reporting patrolling activity but not actually doing it. Additionally, he was getting little reconnaissance support from the VNAF FACs. He did not have an ALO assigned to the regiment. Consequently, he became the de facto ALO and had to make all requests himself. They were rarely answered. Previously, while with the 2nd Regiment he had personally made some helicopter reconnaissance flights out to the north and west of Camp Carroll. He had seen evidence of tracked vehicles and had noted various fording sites along the Mieu-Giang River west from Cam Lo. He could not get anybody in the regiment or division to react to that information.(8)

The attack did not really come as a surprise to 1LT Mickey Fain. He was a young FAC flying as Bilk 35 out of Hue/Phu Bai. The DMZ region was his assigned area of operations. He had been watching it closely for a few

months and had personally seen the NVA build-up. He had duly reported it and put in airstrikes when available-- which was not often enough by his book. But even he was amazed at the size and intensity of the NVA attack. As it unfolded, it occurred to him that what he was seeing was a whole new kind of war.(9)

The follow-on armor attacks were not long in coming. T-55 and PT-76 tanks were seen that afternoon spearheading four attacks out of the DMZ. One spearhead was directed against a battalion of the 2nd Regiment at firebase Fuller. It had been scheduled to be relieved by a battalion from the 56th. But in the confusion of the onslaught, the relieving battalion never arrived. The 2nd Regiment battalion stayed in place. Another spearhead struck FSB A-4, the old Marine base at Con Thien. There, the swap-out had been completed and another 2nd Regiment battalion suffered through this attack. But the NVA thrust took a heavy toll on the 56th. The battalion which was supposed to move into FSB Fuller disappeared. It surfaced in the rear areas several days later. The regimental trains were cut off from the combat units. The assistant Regimental advisor, Major Joe Brown, was with them. They were not able to fight their way back to friendly lines until the 1st of April. The headquarters element and one battalion of the 56th Regiment did make it to Camp Carroll. And their 3rd battalion did relieve the 2nd Regiment at Khe Gio. But that regiment was never able to fight its way up to FSB C-2.(10)

Another two combined arms spearheads were coming south along route QL-1 to hit the 57th Regiment at FSB A-1 and A-2. Concurrently, the enemy also launched coordinated assaults against the westernmost FSBs at Sarge, Nui Ba Ho and Holcomb. (11)

The North Vietnamese onslaught began to overwhelm the disorganized and surprised ARVN. As Marine LtCol Turley noted;

"South Vietnam's entire northern boundary lay open

to the largest enemy attack of the Vietnam War.

Over 30,000 men from elements of the 304th and

308th Divisions, along with three separate

infantry regiments of the B5 Front, two tank

regiments, and five artillery regiments, entered

the ground campaign of the Nguyen Hue Offensive in

a decisive struggle for control of the South."(12)

He did not mention that these forces were covered by the heaviest, most sophisticated air defenses yet seen in the war. The NVA was prepared to fight for control of the air as well as the ground.

But perhaps their best weapon against airpower at that moment was the weather. Low thick clouds and limited visibility made intense visual bombing impossible. Consequently, the initial air response was limited. FAC coverage was increased. As weather would permit, the 20th TASS began orbiting three FACs at a time along the DMZ. And fixed wing gunships tried to work through the weather with limited success. The Air Force did begin around-the-clock operations with B-52s and fighters bombing under Skyspot radar control. RF-4s were also diverted into the area to lead blind airstrikes using their LORAN for precise navigation.(13)

One RF-4 pilot described a mission this way:

"I was the only LORAN TAC air airborne at the time.

They(an orbiting command and control C-130) got me my own tanker, read me LORAN coordinates, and off I went.

My GIB(backseater) and I joined with fighters from

everywhere for the next several hours ... they came

from SVN, Thailand, carriers(F-4s, A7s, F105s,

Navy, Marines, AF.) We briefed them in the air, they

tucked it in tight - overlapping wings for a good

cluster, and during a 20mm run in to the drop they

learned the procedure - briefed by me via UHF radio.

Then...'five miles...one mile...5,4,3,2,1, pickle!'

They dropped, peeled off and I went and got some more

guys and bombs. The short term coordination and

teamwork was impressive. After about 2.5 hours on

station, dropping through dense overcast, I got

relieved by another LORAN bird and went home to

Udon."(14)

On the ground, the attacks through the DMZ had caught the ARVN napping. And the swap-out of the 2nd and 56th Regiments just added to the confusion.

The next day, March 31st, enemy attacks increased in intensity. By now, all ARVN and Marine units were in heavy contact with the enemy. That evening, it appeared that the marines might have to evacuate the two westernmost outposts at Nui Ba Ho and Sarge and fall back towards Mai Loc. Elements of the 56th and 2nd Regiments which had been manning the forward firebases at Firebase Fuller and Khe Gio respectively, did begin to fall back toward the south and east.(15)

Captain Harold Icke, Bilk 11, flew a four and one half hour mission that day. He took off in his O-2 with a VNAF FAC on board to check him out in controlling US fighters. They flew west as far as Khe Sanh and contacted the Vietnamese Marine units which were getting hit at Firebase Sarge and Nui Ba Ho. But the weather was so bad that they could not get in and actually spot targets or put in airstrikes.(16)

The enemy pressure on the two remote outposts was unrelenting. After almost nonstop artillery pounding and human wave attacks, the commander of the defending 4th Vietnamese Marine Battalion, Major De, directed that his men abandon the positions and escape and evade back to the nearest friendly position at Mai Loc. In the early morning hours of 1 April, the Vietnamese Marines and their two American advisors, Major Walter Boomer and Captain Ray Smith moved off of the sites and attempted to elude their NVA pursuers.

But they were not the only Americans out there. The US Army had established a listening post for its electronic sensors on Firebase Sarge. It was manned by two young soldiers, Specialist Five Gary Westcott, and Specialist Four Bruce Crosley, Jr. Earlier in the day, their bunker had suffered a direct hit from NVA artillery fire, burst into flames, and collapsed. Major Boomer had checked the bunker, but found no signs of life. Nobody had seen the two since the incident. As the Vietnamese Marines and their Covan left the site, they were not with the group. They were never seen again. (17)

The escape from Sarge and Nui Ba Ho would not be that easy. Radio contact was lost with the 3rd ARVN Division. The Marines and their Vietnamese were on their own, deep in now enemy territory, and running/fighting for survival. Unsure of their whereabouts, the American advisors at Division in turn notified the FRAC that the whereabouts of Major Boomer and Captain Smith were unknown at that time.(18)

As the sun came up over the DMZ, Bilk 11 was airborne again and attempting to get out over the units. For a second time, he had a VNAF FAC in his right seat for certification. But the weather was still terrible, thick clouds whose bases reached well down into the valleys. It kept the pilots from getting in over the firebases or escaping Marine columns to provide airstrike control or even reconnaissance.

Captain Icke found this very frustrating. He wanted to do so much more for his lost countrymen. But even though two Americans were known to be lost behind enemy lines, no special effort was put forth to find or rescue them. Their particular fate was tied to that of their units. They would return to friendly lines the next day after their terrible odyssey. Most of the Vietnamese marines would be lost in the effort.

The weather also precluded Captain Icke or any of the other FACs from helping in a drama which was unfolding at the firebases just south of the DMZ. By late morning of April 1st, all positions were under attack by enemy infantry forces and were in danger of being overrun. Col Metcalf, the senior US advisor to the 3rd ARVN Division, had directed that his advisors be evacuated from these forward positions. This was first priority. Helicopter teams of Hueys and Cobras from F Troop of the 8th Cavalry, were in the area to fly the missions. Several were run successfully throughout the morning. (19)

But the situation at one of the firebases had become especially critical. A US Marine fire control team from the 1st ANGLICO had been sent to firebase A-2 to control naval gunfire from the ships out on the gunline. As the enemy troops surrounded the advanced position, the team leader, 1stLt David Bruggeman, requested an emergency evacuation for himself and his four Marines. His request was relayed to the 3rd ARVN Division forward headquarters at Ai Tu. LtCol Gerry Turley, USMC, was present when the call came in, but still only as a visitor, without any official position or authority. Unfortunately, when the decision needed to be made to commit helicopters to a rescue attempt, he was the senior ranking American present. All of the junior officers looked to him for a decision. It could not be deferred; lives were at stake. Consequently, he had to make the call. When informed that the F Troop, 8th Cavalry helicopters were refueled and on call at the Quang Tri Airfield, he told them to go. There was no way that he could abandon the Marines up there.(20)

The rescue force would consist of one UH-1 Huey helicopter and two AH-1 Cobras for cover. Major Kennedy, the F Troop commander, just happened to be at the airfield when the call came in. He decided to fly the Huey. But he had only been in Vietnam for three weeks. Additionally, he had only recently converted from fixed wing aircraft to helicopters. This meant in practical terms that he was one of the least experienced pilots in the unit, especially for a mission as dangerous as this. His copilot, 1LT Bob Sheridan "politely" pointed this out to him. That created a dilemma for Kennedy, because the only other pilot available was warrant officer Ben Nielsen, the detachment commander. Nielsen was a highly experienced Huey pilot. But, the day before, Kennedy had taken him off of aircraft commander status for flying too low and having a minor accident. Considering the gravity of the situation, he quickly countermanded that order and told Nielsen and Sheridan to go. Nielsen's call sign was Blueghost 30. The covering Cobras were Blueghost Red flown by CPT Tim Sprouse, the F Troop "Guns" platoon leader, and Blueghost 26, flown by 1LT Chuck LaCelle. They scrambled for the evacuation.



The plan was to approach the firebase from the southeast at low level. The Huey would go in and land, while the Cobras provided suppressive fire around the firebase. As they approached the camp, the NVA forces detected their presence and began to throw up a withering ground fire. This was not going to be a simple rescue. (21)

Bruggeman and his team rallied to the landing zone and began to destroy their equipment. One of the team members, Corporal James Worth, was especially worried that the communications gear could be recovered and used by the advancing enemy, so he doused all of it with diesel fuel and ignited it with a thermite grenade. He kept one back pack radio for the team's use. As they feverishly worked to deny the enemy any useful equipment, artillery and mortar rounds began to fall all around them.



Arriving at the firebase, the Cobras held back and engaged enemy moving around the site as the Huey darted in low for a pick up. Nielsen had to pop up to flare for landing on the helipad. To his horror, he saw that it was covered with dead in body bags. For expediency, he landed on top of them. The team scrambled out through the exploding rounds. In the process, 1stLt Bruggeman was critically wounded and had to be carried. As the Huey touched down, the team scrambled on to the craft. But there were only four. Corporal Worth was missing. As they were waiting for what seemed an eternity, Nielsen saw an NVA soldier kneel down 20 feet in front of him and aim his rifle directly at him. He could hear rounds hitting all over the aircraft. But for some reason, the soldier did not fire. He kept his bead on Nielsen, but never pulled the trigger.

One of the Huey crewmembers frantically ran from bunker to bunker looking for Worth. They shouted for him repeatedly over the concussion of the shells, but he was not to be found. The choppers had to leave without him. The incoming artillery fire was just too heavy. To stay any longer would have needlessly risked the lives of all the others.(22, 23, 24)

The damaged rescue force pulled off of A-2. The two gunships headed for Quang Tri Airfield. But Nielsen, in Blueghost 30, was concerned about Bruggeman. He had a US Navy medical Corpsman on board who immediately began to give him aid. But he was critically wounded. Nielsen decided to take him to the big American hospital at Da Nang. Twice enroute, Bruggeman stopped breathing. The Corpsman frantically fought to keep him alive. Concerned, Nielsen told Sheridan to take control of the helicopter, and he offered to help as he could. But as they passed the Hai Van Pass, just a few miles north of Da Nang, Bruggeman died. The Corpsman sobbed.(25)



CAPT Sprouse changed to another aircraft. But as he was cranking his engine, the airfield came under a devastating NVA rocket attack. Sprouse was just about to lift off when one rocket hit next to his machine and sprayed it with shards of ripping metal. Considering the situation, he quickly decided to chance that it was flyable, lifted off and proceeded to Hue/Phu Bai. There, he discovered that his craft had 23 holes in it from thumbnail to baseball size. He had taken hits in the engine, oil reservoir and tail rotor cable. He was badly shaken by the experience, but felt that the day had been one of the most rewarding of his tour. He had helped recover numerous individuals from possible capture from the advancing enemy forces.(27)

By the end of the day, firebases Nui Ba Ho, Sarge and Holcomb had been overrun and all strong points along the northern line had been evacuated. For the most part, the evacuations were orderly and carried out according to plan. Engineers were attached to the 2nd and 57th regiments to wire and, if necessary, blow the bridges over the Mieu Giang - Cam Lo River at Cam Lo and Dong Ha. But some mistakes were made. Artillery batteries were not evacuated at A2 or C1 and as a result, 6 105mm and 6 155mm howitzers were captured by the NVA.(28) By the end of the day, eleven major firebases had been lost. The last two remaining firebases at Camp Carroll and Mai Loc were under very heavy artillery and probing ground attacks.(29)

Major Brookbank continued to have trouble with his vietnamese FACs. They were not flying beyond the line of contact to observe and target enemy movements. With very few exceptions, they were not even flying into their assigned areas or contacting besieged ground commanders. Brookbank finally conceded that US FACs would have to take over because the Division was fighting blind. In actuality, he was only admitting the obvious because the VNAF FACs were flying, but were orbiting well inside friendly lines.(30)

In an attempt to make his FACs more effective, Major Brookbank began putting US Marine artillery spotters from Sub Unit One of the 1st ANGLICO in the back seats of the VNAF O-1s. Ostensibly there to adjust naval gunfire, they had a strengthening effect on the VNAF pilots.(31) Brookbank also took steps to get his Marine spotters in 20th TASS O-2s and OV-10s. But now, he was faced with more bad news--the NVA invaders were overrunning the Division's sensor readout facilities and radio intercept stations at the forward fire bases. Their ability to collect intelligence was collapsing.(32)

But the VNMC Brigades maintained a constant flow of targeting data about enemy positions which they were passing through their S-2 intelligence sections. This data was immediately transformed into requests for airstrikes. Unfortunately, because of the sheer volume, most of it was coming in to Brookbank. Because of the poor weather, only LORAN or Skyspot drops could be used. Brookbank said that the number of requests was "astronomical." The first list that he submitted to the 1 DASC(1st Direct Air Support Center at Da Nang) had been "reduced" to 100 targets.(33)

7th Air Force was beginning to react to the tactical situation along the DMZ. Late that evening, they notified the 3rd ARVN Division CP at Ai Tu that they would be receiving 25 Skyspots and 7 B-52 strikes on a daily basis.(34)

But the airstrikes going in were being directed out of 7th AF headquarters in Saigon and based on targeting data which was several hours old. As night spread over the area, Brigadier General Giai was notified by his intelligence that a major enemy headquarters had been set up in the freshly abandoned bunkers at firebase C-1. ARVN troops had not destroyed the phone system when they departed the position. NVA troops were using the system to call various 3rd Division units. This was causing great confusion among his command, and he wanted C-1 bombed immediately. Brookbank relayed the request to the I DASC at Da Nang.

But several hours went by without the position being hit. This infuriated the General, because he could see the effect the confusion was having on his remaining units. He demanded that Brookbank have it bombed as the absolute first priority. Sensing the urgency of the situation, Major Brookbank shed his role as advisor to the Division ALO, and assumed an operational one. He violated normal security procedures and standard airstrike request format by contacting the orbiting command and control C-130 directly on an unsecured radio. He demanded that a strike flight be immediately diverted to hit the position. After a several hour delay, it was done and the bunkers were destroyed. But the incident made many of the advisors wonder what the priorities were down at 7th AF. They did not appear to be the same as those up at Ai Tu who were fighting for their lives.(35)

Responding to the lack of FAC coverage over the growing battle, planners at 7th AF began to reassign USAF FACs to work with the 3rd ARVN Division and attached units. The 20th TASS was directed to begin flying 42 FAC flight hours daily in the 3rd ARVN Division AO. Also, by the 10th of April, the US Marine artillery observers would be physically transferred to Da Nang and fly in these aircraft.(36) Starting on the 7th, some of the Covey FACs would fly to the airfield at Hue/Phu Bai and pick up the Marine observers there. The ARVN FACs would not be shoved aside. They would still fly and, when possible, direct VNAF airstrikes. But their limitations were recognized and hopefully rectified due to clear operational need.

But overall, this augmentation arrangement was a godsend for Major Brookbank. Soon, the Division would begin receiving reinforcing South Vietnamese combat units. They did not have their own FACs, and the VNAF would not provide him with augmentees for them. Therefore, he had to rely on the 20th TASS.(37)

Even 7th AF began to receive reinforcements. Headquarters, Pacific Air Forces directed the 35th Tactical Fighter Squadron(TFS) to deploy from Kunsan, Korea, to Udorn Airbase, Thailand. It arrived on the 3rd of April.(38)

To stem the enemy's advance, the Vietnamese Joint General Staff directed that a defensive line be established and held at Dong Ha. Consequently, at 1800L, on the 1st of April, Brigadier General Giai ordered the reorganization of his defensive positions. In order to take advantage of the natural obstacles presented the enemy by the Mieu Giang - Cam Lo River, all divisional forces north of the river were ordered south. Attached Regional/Popular(RF/PF) forces would defend in the east from the coast to approximately 5 kilometers inland. The 57th Regiment would hold the line from there to Dong Ha. The city and its immediate vicinity would be defended by the 1st Armor Brigade, a powerful unit with mechanized and armor units, which was being attached to the 3rd Division. Its main unit, the 20th Tank Regiment,(with just one battalion) was equipped with M-48 tanks and was just completing its spin up training at Camp Evans, near Hue.(39)

To the left of the 1st Armor Brigade, the 2nd Regiment held the line over to Cam Lo. It was reinforced with an armored cavalry squadron. To its left, the 56th Regiment, also reinforced with an armored cavalry squadron, was ordered to hold Camp Carroll and all of its artillery. To its south and facing west, the Vietnamese Marine Regiment and battalions held the line as far south as Firebase Pedro and provided security for the Quang Tri Combat Base at Ai Tu which was now being used as a forward command post since the 3rd Division headquarters had been relocated to Quang Tri Citadel earlier that day.(40)

In the forward command post, the remaining advisors felt the gravity of the situation. LtCol Turley noted:

"The Cam Lo [Mieu Giang] - Cua Viet River was the last

natural obstacle for the ARVN to use as a defensive

line. If they failed to hold along the river, the North

Vietnamese could break the back of the 3rd ARVN

Division and move into Quang Tri City."(41)

That evening, the Vietnamese commanders and staff and the American advisors had a meeting in the Ai Tu command bunker. After reviewing the tactical situation, LtCol Turley turned to the Vietnamese commander and assured him that he and the other American advisors were not leaving. They intended to stay at their side and as a team, defeat the enemy offensive. In their hour of great testing, the South Vietnamese, fighting for their lives below the DMZ, would not be abandoned by the Americans on the ground. Perhaps symbolically, LtCol Turley changed from just being a visitor to permanent status. Now, it was his fight too. (42)

FOOTNOTES

Chapter 3

THE BATTLE

1. Icke Narrative.

2. Turley, Pg 45.

3. Truong, Pg 24.

4. Brookbank Interview.

5. Camper Interview.

6. Truong, Pg 25.

7. Turley, Pg 46.

8. Camper Interview.

9. Interview with Col Mickey Fain, 7 Nov, 1992.

10. Camper Interview.

11. Turley, Pg 49.

12. Ibid, Pg 49.

13. Mann, Pg 14.

14. Personal letter from Mr. Brian DeLuca to Mr. Tom Boettcher, 18 July, 1986. Used with Mr Boettcher's permission.

15. Turley, Pg 71.
16. Icke Narrative.
17. Turley, Pg 53.
18. Ibid, Pg 73.
19. Letter from CAPT Tim Sprouse to his parents, 4 April, 1972. (Sprouse Letter)
20. Turley, Pg 82.
21. Interview with MAJ(ret) Tim Sprouse, 11 April, 1994,(Sprouse Interview), and interview with Mr. Chuck LaCelle, 24 April, 1994,(LaCelle Interview).
22. Dyer, Major Edward J., " Investigation to inquire into the circumstances surrounding the Missing in Action status of Corporal James F. Worth, USMC, on 1 April 1972 at Quang Tri Province, Republic of Vietnam." Department of Defense(DOD)- FOIA
23. Turley, Pg 82.
24. Nielsen Interview.
25. Nielsen Interview.
26. Kennedy Interview.
27. Sprouse Letter.
28. Turley, Pg 88.
29. Ibid, Pg 116.
30. Mann, Pg 34.
31. Ibid, Pg 25.
32. Ibid, Pg 19.
33. Brookbank, David A. Major, Special Report, "VNAF TACS and the Fall of Quang Tri," 31 Jul, 72, Pg 6.
34. Turley, Pg 111.
35. Ibid, Pg 109, Brookbank Interview.
36. Mann, Pg 25.
37. Brookbank Interview.
38. Air War - Vietnam, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Indianapolis/New York, 1978, Pg 124.

39. Truong, Pg 27.

40. Ibid.

41. Turley, Pg 114.

42. Ibid, Pg 107.

Chapter 4

APRIL 2ND - EASTER SUNDAY

"War involves in its progress

such a train of unforeseen

and unsusposed circumstances

that no human wisdom can

calculate the end."

Thomas Paine(1)

As the sun came up on the 2nd of April, Easter Sunday, the 3rd Division's defense appeared to be relatively well organized. With the exception of some stragglers and rear guard forces, all major units had been withdrawn south of the river line.(2) But appearances were deceptive, for a series of events was about to occur which would radically alter the form of the battle. This day would be a fateful day for many on the ground and in the air.

The bad weather continued. Low clouds(1,000 foot ceiling) and poor visibility precluded the effective use of tactical airpower under visual control. B-52 Arclights and Skyspot strikes were used as available, and were obviously having an effect on the enemy.(3) But the number of requests coming in from the units was skyrocketing. Major Brookbank and his team were becoming overwhelmed.

One battalion of the 57th Regiment along QL 1 and elements of the 2nd Regiment farther west were still north of the river. They were the rear guards for the retreat. But they were becoming enveloped by enemy units and in danger of being cut off(4). At 0854L, soldiers from the 57th Regiment reported seeing enemy tanks along QL-1 near the recently evacuated firebase at C-2. Response was swift. Naval gunfire from the US Navy destroyers off the coast was quickly brought to bear on the columns. Coordination was begun to divert airstrikes on them. But the weather still grounded most strike aircraft.(5)

As Major Brookbank was attempting to orchestrate an air response to this serious turn of events, his Vietnamese counterpart, the VNAF ALO to the 3rd ARVN Division and his entire tactical air control party, packed up their gear and left the forward command post. His response to Brookbank's request for coordination was "What's the use?" By default, Dave Brookbank, the former B-52 pilot, just three weeks in Vietnam, was now the ALO to the 3rd ARVN Division as it faced the onslaught.(6)

With the commitment of the tanks, the ARVN commanders could begin to see the NVA's plan. A major thrust was developing, apparently aimed directly down QL-1, and directed to seize Dong Ha and Quang Tri. The rear guard battalion from the 57th Regiment began to pull back.(7) In Dong Ha, the 3rd Vietnamese Marine Battalion was attached to the 20th Armor Regiment, under the control of the 1st Armor Brigade. Their mission was to defend Dong Ha and hold the critical railroad and vehicular bridges there. The commander of the 20th armor considered moving his tanks north of the river to engage the enemy tanks. But this could not be properly coordinated and was abandoned.(8) Instead, they would fight it out along the river.

To the west, the last stragglers of the 2nd Regiment were crossing the river over the Cam Lo Bridge. But they did not destroy it because NVA units were literally on their tail. This was ominous because this bridge was the only other bridge on the river other than the Dong Ha bridges which would support heavy armor.(9) However, the bridge was well defended by the 56th Regiment located just southwest at Camp Carroll.

But Carroll was coming under increasing artillery and ground attack. The incessant artillery pounding was especially intimidating to the ARVN artillerymen. Their responses to fire requests were becoming more infrequent. And they were not returning fire against the NVA artillery.(10) These events naturally had a negative impact on the morale of the soldiers on the line.

Just to the south, the firebase at Mai Loc was receiving the same treatment. Artillery fire was mixed with probing ground assaults and 57mm recoilless fire directed at specific bunkers. The fighting at both bases was becoming so heavy that resupply helicopters could not get into either location.(11)

Concurrent to the intrigue on the ground, a battle was raging in the skies above. As cover for the invading troops, the air defense regiments were deployed forward and looking for targets. They claimed their first victim at about 1430L when a FAC O-2 from the 20th TASS, call sign Mike 81, was hit by antiaircraft fire north of Quang Tri.(12) The fire so damaged the aircraft that it went into a spin. The pilot, 1LT Richard Abbot, had to climb out of a side window to bail out. In the process, he broke an arm. Fortunately, he was out over the Gulf of Tonkin when he jumped.

Captain Icke, Bilk 11 was in operations at the 20th TASS when the word came in concerning Mike 81. He was directed to get airborne and begin work on the SAR. He was off of the ground in twenty minutes.(13) Right behind him, Two HH-53 Jolly Green Giant rescue helicopters, Jolly 65 and 67, also launched out of Da Nang for the pick up. They were escorted by two A-1s, Sandy 07 and 08.(14)

Fortunately, Mike 81 was able to get several miles out to sea before he abandoned his stricken aircraft. And before the SAR forces could arrive, he was picked up by the USS Hamner, a destroyer on the gun line. (15)

When the orbiting King aircraft heard that Mike 81 had been recovered, the rescue effort was canceled. Bilk 11 was directed to take Mike 81's place along the DMZ, and the SAR forces were directed to orbit south of Quang Tri, pending an operation to extract the American advisors out of Ai Tu.

To relieve the pressure on Carroll, Skyspot airstrikes were planned around it. But as the weather was beginning to break a little, a FAC was requested for the besieged firebase. Bilk 07, an O-2, arrived on station at 1350L. (16) But the weather was still too bad for visual airstrikes so he concentrated his efforts on trying to locate the harassing artillery.

Throughout the morning, Carroll had been under continuous artillery attack. The enemy also made numerous probes against the outer defenses, leaving some bodies in the wire. LTC Camper and MAJ Brown constantly moved from bunker to bunker to make sure that the ARVN troops had food and ammunition. Additionally, they would do spot analysis of enemy artillery shell impacts, to try to ascertain the location of the batteries. Overall though, they felt that Carroll was a strong position and the ARVN should be able to hold there.

But still, Camper was concerned. Since becoming the unit advisor, he had not had a chance to develop a working relationship with the commander, LTC Pham Van Dinh. Dinh was a proven combat veteran. He had distinguished himself in the heavy fighting for the Imperial City of Hue in the TET attacks of 1968. But since that time, he had

been caught up in the political intrigues of ARVN and had lost his warrior edge. He spent a lot of time away with his family in Hue and commanded by exception, delegating much to his subordinates.

By early afternoon, the attacks continued to intensify. Some of the troops began to come in from the outer bunkers. Camper went into the TOC to assess the situation. There were no officers present. Shortly thereafter, an event took place which has never been fully explained. The incoming artillery and probing attacks suddenly stopped. Camper immediately went to see LTC Dinh. His executive officer, Maj Phuy, would not let him in, claiming that Dinh was in an important meeting. Camper returned to his bunker. A few minutes later, Dinh came to see Camper. He informed him that he was going to surrender the regiment and Camp Carroll. Camper was dumbfounded. He stated that they had enough strength to break out toward Mai Loc and link up with the forces from Sarge and Nui Ba Ho. But Dinh replied that the soldiers wanted to give up - that he had even shot a few, and still they would no longer fight. He told Camper that he had a plan for the two of them to commit suicide as a matter of honor. Camper rejected that out of hand. Dinh then suggested surrender for the two Americans. (In fact, Camper was later told that when LTC Dinh was negotiating the surrender over the radio with the NVA, it was understood that Camper and Brown would be part of the bootie). But Camper also explained that Americans did not surrender. He also considered killing Dinh - but rejected that as impractical. Instead, he told him that he and Brown were no longer his advisors and would take care of themselves. They shook hands and separated.

Quickly, Camper returned to his bunker and began destroying equipment and papers. He told Brown that they were on their own and had to get out quickly. Each had an ARVN radioman assigned. They wanted to go with the Americans. Camper consented and used one of the radios to call the 3rd Division TOC and inform them that their services as advisors were no longer needed at Camp Carroll.(17)

As they left the bunker, Camper saw the ARVN troops beginning to come out of their bunkers and stack their arms. It reminded him of the stories he had heard as a child about the end for the American troops at Corrigador in World War II. He ran into the regimental operations officer. Camper asked him in English to join them in escaping. The young captain replied that he had to follow the commander's orders. Camper told him that it was obvious that many soldiers did not want to surrender. He did not respond. Camper cursed his own lack of fluency in Vietnamese. He felt that had he been able to explain the situation to the soldiers, many would have come with him.

Camper and Brown and the two radiomen began to cut their way out of the perimeter wire towards Mai Loc. An NVA company took them under fire. Camper realized that they were trapped. He called the 3rd Division at Ai Tu to request a helicopter. Major Jimmy Davis, an advisor in the operations section at the Division, answered the call.(18) He informed Camper that a US Army CH-47 cargo helicopter was in the Mai Loc area and could be contacted on an alternate frequency. Camper switched over and Coachman 005 answered his call. He directed the helicopter to the landing pad at Carroll, and Camper and his team moved back inside the wire for the pick up.

Enroute to Carroll, Coachman began receiving fire from NVA troops. Two 8th Cavalry Cobra gunships operating in the area also heard the call to Coachman. Blueghost Red, CPT Sprouse, and Blueghost 26, 1LT LaCelle offered to cover the mission. Their offer was quickly accepted. They joined up on the CH-47 and began to answer the ground fire. (19)

As Coachman settled in the landing zone, Camper and Brown and the radiomen scrambled on board. Several ARVN tried to join them. Camper would only let on those who still had their weapons. In fact, he physically threw one soldier off. But a total of about thirty joined them. Camper could hear enemy fire hitting the aircraft. As they were lifting off, the commanding officer of the attacking NVA unit was entering the camp in an armored vehicle to accept the surrender of the position and the ARVN unit.

The ground fire damaged the CH-47. Initially, the pilot intended to fly to La Vang, several miles south of Quang Tri. But the damage forced him to put the craft down along QL1 just south of the city. As they landed, Camper saw several American officers in light vehicles. They were advisors to the 20th Armor Regiment and were trying to join their unit near Dong Ha. Unfortunately they and now Camper and his force had stumbled into an ambush. Camper quickly deployed the soldiers into a defensive perimeter. The enemy force broke contact.

Using the helicopter radio, Camper contacted 3rd Division headquarters and reported that Carroll had been surrendered with all equipment intact and requested a B-52 strike on it.(20)

He had to try to do something to counterbalance this tragedy, for in this one act, LTC Pham Van Dinh had surrendered over 1800 soldiers and 22 artillery pieces to the NVA. The impact was devastating to the 3rd ARVN Division. In one stroke, a large hole was blown in their defensive line and the key bridge at Cam Lo--fully operational--was left unprotected. (21)

That afternoon, LTC Camper and Major Brown were flown to 3rd Division headquarters. Camper reported to Brigadier General Giai and told him about LTC Dinh. General Giai did not believe the advisor. He and the Colonel Dinh had been personal friends. Instead, he accused Camper of cowardice and desertion in the face of the enemy.(22)

The next day, Radio Hanoi broadcast an appeal from Dinh for all ARVN soldiers to lay down their arms and rally to the North Vietnamese.(23) When General Giai heard this, he personally went to LTC Camper and apologized.(24)

Dave Brookbank also heard the broadcast. He was later told by ARVN officers that most of the captured soldiers of the 56th Regiment were marched northwest to a place called the "Rockpile" and executed.(25)

Throughout the day the Marines at Mai Loc had been taking the same pounding as Camp Carroll. But the loss of Carroll and the 56th Regiment made the defense of the Mai Loc firebase untenable. Accordingly, the commander of the 147th Marine Brigade requested that he be authorized to evacuate to the east. He was instructed to move his unit to Quang Tri where it would be replaced by the 369th Marine Brigade and allowed to regroup and refit.(26) Before leaving the firebase, they fired off all of their artillery rounds and spiked their guns.(27)

Almost simultaneously, events were coming to a head at Dong Ha. The ARVN troops from the 57th Regiment retreated across the Dong Ha bridge with the NVA armor on their heels. The bridge had been partly wired with explosives for destruction but was not blown by the ARVN engineers. At 1324L, the north end of the vehicular bridge was struck with a Skyspot airstrike and partly destroyed.(28) Major Jim Smock, senior advisor to the 20th Armor, reported this to the 3rd Division CP and also stated that the bridge was still passable.(29) Tanks from the 20th Armor attempted to shoot out the bridge supports and struts with their main guns. But the bridges were too strong. While the ARVN tanks and Vietnamese Marines dueled with their opposites across the river, the advisor to the 3rd Vietnamese Marine Battalion, Captain John Ripley, and Major Smock, emplaced additional charges under the south end of both bridges. The detonations dropped the southern spans of both bridges and set them on fire. Both were now impassable. For the time being, the NVA drive was stopped.(30)

As the smoke cleared from the explosions, the clouds began to break up somewhat. A VNAF FAC from the 3rd Division was overhead in an O-1. He spotted the tanks bottled up north of the bridges and called for air support. VNAF A-1s took off from Da Nang Airbase and proceeded to Dong Ha. Their arrival overhead was a tonic for the hard pressed troops.(31)

For over an hour, six different flights of VNAF A-1s attacked the tanks, armored personnel carriers and troops of their enemy. The results were devastating. They claimed a total of 29 tanks destroyed.(32) But as the last flight was finishing, disaster struck. Captain Ripley watched as troops on the north shore launched a heat seeking SA-7 anti-aircraft missile against the lead aircraft. The missile scored a direct hit on the aircraft, destroying its engine and forcing it down. The pilot attempted to turn south before ejecting. Directly over the river, he punched out. His parachute blossomed normally, but the winds were from the south, and they carried him back into enemy hands. The marines watched helplessly as the pilot was captured.(33)

As the VNAF A-1s were pounding the NVA tanks, the command post at Ai Tu came under another furious pounding from the 130mm guns. In the middle of one barrage, 1stLt John Thoens, a Marine advisor to the Vietnamese Marine artillery battalion, heard a radio call from Corporal James Worth, the artillery spotter left at A-2. He indicated that he was trying to escape south to rejoin the friendly units in the Dong Ha area. Several Americans

heard the call and identified the caller as Worth. But he did not respond to their return calls. Since he did not say exactly where he was, no forces were alerted or committed for another pick up attempt. (34)

Approximately one hour later, a team from a local Viet Cong unit under the command of Nguyen Van Bot, entered the abandoned ARVN position at A-2. There they found an American slumped over the steering wheel of a jeep. He appeared to be about 5 feet 10 inches tall and approximately 145 pounds. He had a radio strapped to his back. He was dead, with a large, bloody wound in the shoulder. But they left him because their mission was to secure the position. Instead, the team searched for ARVN stragglers and weapons, collected South Vietnamese wounded, and raised their flag over the captured firebase. (35)

The destruction of the Dong Ha Bridges brought the NVA drive down QL-1 to a complete halt. The only other crossing point was the bridge at Cam Lo. It had not yet been destroyed.(36) Later that evening, Captain Ripley heard the remaining NVA tanks start their engines and begin moving to the west towards Cam Lo. He did not know about Camp Carroll and the 56th Regiment. But with several ships on the gun line, he immediately called for naval gunfire and destroyed numerous tanks before they moved west, beyond the range of the guns.(37)

Now the bridge at Cam Lo was the big worry. With the fall of the 56th Regiment, it had to be destroyed. The 20th Armor extended their lines to the west to cover the Cam Lo bridge until the 2nd Regiment could consolidate itself and fill the gap left by the surrender of the 56th Regiment.(38) They reported that the bridge would support 60 tons and that the retreating ARVN units had refused to blow it, citing enemy pressure and the loss of necessary equipment.(39) Perhaps with the slow but steady clearing away of the low clouds, it could be taken out by an airstrike. LTC Louis Wagner, senior advisor to the 1st Armor Brigade directed that this be accomplished. He was optimistic that it could be done because they had just been able on short notice, to divert a B-52 mission to destroy the abandoned artillery at Carroll.(40)

FOOTNOTES

Chapter 4

APRIL 2ND - EASTER SUNDAY

1. Paine, Thomas, Prospects on the Rubicon, 1787, Quoted in Tsouras, Peter G., Warriors' Words, Arms and Armour Press, London, 1992.

2. Truong, Pg 29.

3. 3rd ARVN Division Tactical Operations Center(TOC) Log, MACV Adv Team 155, 2 Apr, 72, item 17. National Archives, Suitland, Maryland.

4. Turley, Pg 118-120.

5. Ibid, Pg 120. At this time, the gunline consisted of the USS Buchanan(DDG-14), the USS Strauss(DDG-16), the USS Waddell(DDG-24), the USS Anderson(DD-786), and the USS Hamner(DD-718).

6. Ibid, Pg 123.

7. Ibid, Pg 126.

8. After Action Report, LTC Louis C. Wagner, Jr., Senior Advisor to the 1st Armor Brigade, Undated, Pg 5.
9. Turley, Pg 140.
10. Ibid, Pg 143.
11. Ibid, Pg 141.
12. Thomasson, David E., Major, An Analysis of USAF Combat Damage and losses in SEA Apr 72 - Mar 73, HQ 7AF, 30 June, 1973. Pg 69.
13. Icke Narrative.
14. History of the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron, 1Apr - 30 Jun, 1972, Da Nang AB, SVN. Pg 14.
15. MACV Command Center Log, 2 Apr, 1972, item #42, 1023Z.(National Archives, Suitland, Maryland) Also Deck Log of the USS Hamner, DD-718, 2 April, 1972. Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC.
16. 3rd Division TOC Log, 2 Apr, 72 items 56 and 65.
17. Ibid, item 66.
18. Ibid, item 67.
19. Sprouse Interview, LaCelle Interview.
20. Camper Interview.
21. Fulghum, David, Maitland, Terrence, South Vietnam on Trial Boston Publishing Company, Boston, MA. 1984. Pg 140.
22. Camper Interview.
23. Fulghum, Pg 140.
24. Camper Interview.
25. Brookbank Interview.
26. Truong, Pg 30.
27. Turley, Pg 171. The story of the evacuation from Mai Loc is one of unbounded heroism in the face of incredibly difficult conditions.
28. Message/DTG 021400Z From I-DASC Da Nang to 7AF Subj: BDA(Bomb Damage Assessment) Report of 0600H-2000H 02 Apr 72. The strike coordinates were YD 24136108 - exactly on the north end of the bridge. National Archives, Suitland, Maryland
29. 3rd Division TOC Log, 2 Apr, 72, items 54 and 55.

30. Fulghum, Maitland, Pg 139. See also Miller, John G., The Bridge at Dong Ha, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD, 1989, which well describes this operation for which Captain Ripley received the Navy Cross.

31. Turley, Pg 163.

32. Message/DTG 021400Z From I-DASC Da Nang to 7AF Subj:

BDA Report of 0600H-2000H 02 Apr 72. National Archives, Suitland, Maryland

33. Miller, Pg 160.

34. "Statement of First Lieutenant John M. Thoens, USMC, concerning the missing status of Corporal James F. Worth."(DOD - FOIA)

35. Message/DTG 200819Z Jul 92. From CJTF-FA DET TWO Bangkok Thailand. Subj: Field Investigation Report Concerning Case 1810(Worth)(DOD-FOIA) Note: The physical description provided by the interviewees matches Corporal Worth.

36. Turley, Pg 165.

37. Miller, Pg 162.

38. 3rd ARVN Division TOC Log, 2 Apr, 72, item 99.

39. Ibid, items 97 and 93.

40. Ibid, item 88.

Chapter 6

CAVALRY TO THE RESCUE

*"The numerous helicopters
operated in South Vietnam
by the US Army and Marines
provide an immediate
capability for aircrew
recovery."(1)*

"[It] was just a natural thing

*that when anyone had trouble,
if you were in the area, and
you had the capability, you
just responded. It was SOP
(standard operating
procedure). There were no
questions asked."*

Captain Mike Rosebeary

Blueghost 28(2)

*"I have never known the Army
[helicopters] to turn us
down."*

Capt Fred Boli

Sandy 01(3)

Time was of the essence. 1LT Bill Jankowski knew that sometimes the best plan was to get whatever helicopter and striker assets were available in the area to come in and try an immediate recovery before the enemy could respond to a downed crew. The pilots called it a "quick snatch." So he came up on the emergency frequency and called for any support available to rendezvous with him for the SAR effort.

Sandy 07 and 08, two A-1s led by Captain Don Morse, responded to the call. They were in the area, having been earlier launched for two missions. They were scrambled to support the two HH-53 Jolly Greens which had launched to pick up Mike 81. After his successful pick up by the Navy, they had been told to orbit and to be ready to support the helicopter evacuation of the American advisors from the Ai Tu combat base. This evacuation was also canceled when most personnel were moved out by truck.

The two A-1s were still escorting Jolly Green 65 and 67 and were just east of Quang Tri. Responding to the emergency call, Sandy 07 instructed the Jolly Greens to hold south of Quang Tri, and turned the two A-1s north to find Bilk 34. Captain Morse thought that since the aircraft had gone down in South Vietnam, the SAR effort should be fairly straightforward and not take too long.

Jankowski told them to proceed to Cam Lo. Not being too familiar with the area, they wandered too far west, out by the lost firebase at Mai Loc, and began to take quite a bit of ground fire to include some kind of unguided rocket which almost hit Sandy 07, Captain Morse. The weather was overcast at about 1500 feet with light rain lowering the visibility.

They found Jankowski right over Cam Lo. Ground fire--mostly of the barrage type-- was extremely heavy from the north and east. The FAC directed them north of the river and showed them the survivor's location. He was located in

a clump of trees just north of a small village at approximate coordinates YD155615. On the ground, Hambleton was amazed that they had responded so fast. He had not realized that they were already in the area.

Sandy 07 took over as the on-scene-commander and Bilk 34 flew south looking for more support.(4) Sandy 07, Captain Morse, was shocked at the ground situation. He had never seen so many guns, not even up in Mu Gia Pass, the hottest place in Laos! Intelligence had not briefed him that anything of this magnitude was occurring. Prior to launch, he and his wingman had received the "standard daily briefing" without any indications that anything unusual was happening. It appeared as though the whole NVA Army had come south. Captain Morse quickly rethought his estimate of the situation. This was going to be one tough SAR.(5)





In the refueling pits, they were joined by two F Troop AH-1 Cobra gunships, call signs Blueghost 28 and 24. Earlier in the day, the two had been working out of the Quang Tri Airfield a few miles east when it came under heavy NVA artillery fire. They scrambled off literally to save themselves and their aircraft and proceeded to Hue/Phu Bai for safety.

Their other unit Huey was also there. Its call sign was Blueghost 30, and was flown by Warrant Officer Ben Nielsen, the one who had made the rescue up at firebase A-2 the day before. Nielsen had no specific tasking, but was on call for whatever might develop.

Based on what little he knew about the shot down aircraft or the developing land battle, Captain White directed Blueghost 28, Captain Mike Rosebeary, to immediately lift off with the other gunship, Blueghost 24, Warrant Officer George Ezell, and one of the Hueys, Blueghost 39, and respond to the emergency call. Rosebeary acknowledged the call and took off with his three helicopters. White then called him in the air and stated that it appeared that six crewmembers from an Air Force aircraft were down north of Cam Lo. He instructed Rosebeary to contact an Air Force FAC, call sign Bilk 34 on the emergency "Guard" frequency to coordinate the rescue. He also informed him that the enemy forces were plentiful and well-armed, and directed him not to take his flight north of the Dong Ha River without fighter support.



Proceeding north, Rosebeary and his team checked in with Bilk 34. Jankowski gave them a cursory situation briefing and instructed them to proceed up to Dong Ha, cross the river, and proceed west to the one survivor who was located near where the river made a big bend back to the east. Rosebeary acknowledged the information, but further queried the FAC on the threat. Jankowski told them that there were many guns in the area, but that A-1s and F-4s were already hitting them. Satisfied, Rosebeary committed his two lead helicopters to the attempt.

Blueghost 28 and 39 proceeded into the area at low altitude. 39 was out front at 50 feet above the ground. Blueghost 28 was at 300 feet, about 3,000 feet behind, in proper position to deliver rocket and machine gun fire against anything which might shoot at the 39. But as they passed Dong Ha and crossed to the north side of the river, they began to take heavy ground fire. Blueghost 28 responded with rockets and 40mm fire against the guns. But the ground fire was coming from everywhere, and immediately began scoring against both helicopters. Captain Rosebeary was thrown off of balance. He could hear and feel the rounds slamming into his aircraft. Some shattered his canopy. Others ripped at the vital components of his machine. Critical systems began to fail. All types of warning lights began to illuminate in the cockpit. Rosebeary's trusty Cobra was being rapidly converted into a piece of torn wreckage.

He could also see that Blueghost 39 was taking hits. Rosebeary called for the two of them to turn and leave the area. 39 did not respond verbally, but Rosebeary could see that he was beginning to turn. Then 39 began to smoke from the engine area, and Rosebeary watched him cross behind a tree line and set down in a controlled landing at coordinates YD218628.(8)

The crew of Blueghost 39, consisting of pilots 1LT Byron Kulland and Warrant Officer John Frink, crewchief Specialist Five Ronald Paschall and gunner Specialist Five Jose Astorga, was down behind enemy lines and in serious trouble. During the run in, they had also seen all of the muzzle flashes. The pilot, 1LT Kulland, began a descent to try to use the terrain and trees for protective cover. The gunner Specialist Five Astorga, called out ground fire to him and began returning fire against the overwhelming force. But his gun jammed and he was hit in the leg and chest.

He passed out momentarily and came to when the helicopter lurched to a stop on the ground. He quickly unstrapped and crawled to the cockpit to check on the other three. One pilot and Paschall were conscious. Somebody threw Astorga a survival vest, and he began to crawl away from the chopper.

But he realized that he was alone so he decided to turn back to make an effort to pull out the rest of the crew. Then someone yelled "VC!" and he could see enemy troops closing in. They were firing their weapons at the helicopter. It exploded in a violent fireball. The other three crewmembers were still onboard. The wave of heat from the explosion swept over Astorga, and he renewed his efforts to crawl away. Immediately, he was set upon by NVA troops and captured. He began his long journey north to Hanoi. He never saw his two pilots or crewchief again. (9)

But Captain Rosebeary did not know this as he struggled to keep his ripped and shattered helicopter in the air and escape to the south. Fortunately, his main radio still worked. So as he egressed, he called a warning to the other two choppers not to cross the river. He also made his own Mayday call, announcing that he was badly damaged and heading southeast to escape. Jolly Green 67, one of the HH-53s which had launched for Mike 81 was still in the area. He acknowledged the call and proceeded to rendezvous with Blueghost 28.

Once clear of the immediate danger area Rosebeary and his Gunner Warrant Officer Charles Gorski tried to determine the condition of their aircraft. It was severely damaged. The antitorque control was gone and the transmission by-pass light was on. The fuel tanks were also leaking fuel at the rate of about 50 pounds a minute. So Captain Rosebeary kept flying until the engine quit. He then autorotated onto the beach south of the Cua Viet River.(10, 11) Almost immediately, Jolly Green 67 landed and picked up the crew.(12) Just a few minutes later, Blueghost 30 landed next to the wreckage of 28 and recovered what gear they could along with radio code cards and maps. The copilot, Warrant Officer Laughlin, was in shock over the fate of his compatriots on Blueghost 39. But for a turn of fate, he would have been there instead of Warrant Officer Frink. (13)

Back over Hambleton's position, Sandy 07 and 08 continued to strike enemy targets. Hambleton was acting as a ground FAC, calling out targets and giving them corrections.

The Sandys were impressed with the survivor. Given the situation that he was in, he was able to maintain his composure. Indeed, he was becoming a major player in this fight.

But several things concerned Morse. First of all, the weather was lowering. This was making it more and more difficult to put in airstrikes. Second, it was getting dark. He called Bilk 34 to inquire as to the progress of the Army helicopters. Only then did he discover that they were involved in their own SAR and would be of little use to him! Given these two factors and the withering ground fire, he chose not to commit the two waiting Jolly Greens. The area was just too hot. Too much work had to be done to prepare the area for a pick up attempt. The "quick snatch" had not worked. So he turned over on-scene-command to another FAC and pointed the two noticeably damaged A-1s toward Da Nang. Bilk 34 was not far behind.(14)

As Bilk 34 and the Sandys were heading for Da Nang, Jolly Green 67 landed at Hue/Phu Bai to drop off Captain Rosebeary and Warrant Officer Gorski. Captain White was there to meet them. Just a few moments earlier, he had gotten a call from FRAC headquarters notifying him that two of his helicopters were down up north. The caller did not specify which two. When White heard that the Jolly Green was inbound, he hoped that they had his men.

Rosebeary and Gorski climbed out and told him what happened. Even though it was now almost completely dark, White immediately decided to mount a search for his downed crew. He had another flight of two AH-1s in the rearm/refuel pit. Once again, It consisted of Blueghost Red, CPT Tim Sprouse, and 1LT Chuck LaCelle, Blueghost 26. This ubiquitous tag-team just seemed to be everywhere in the battle. White directed Sprouse to take Blueghost 30 and the other gunship to search the Dong Ha area for any sign of the lost crew.

The three crews launched off in the dark for their missing mates. But low clouds had moved in over Dong Ha. Every time they tried to drop down below them to visually search the area, the NVA gunners opened up on them, and Sprouse was unnerved by the "big red tennis balls," which were being fired at them. Several times, they heard an emergency beeper. But nobody ever responded to their calls to "come up voice." At one point, Sprouse also observed somebody firing what appeared to be small "pengun" signaling flares carried by all crewmembers. But without voice contact, he was hesitant to commit one of his helicopters for a pick up or even a closer look. It could easily have been a trap.(15)

Prior to launching on the search, Blueghost Red had been able to refuel. But Blueghost 26 had not. Consequently, he got a "low fuel" light before the other two. This light came on in the cockpit when the helicopter had 20 minutes of fuel left before flaming out. In practical terms, it meant that it was time to land. LaCelle announced his fuel status to Blueghost Red. The leader acknowledged and then directed that he remain in the search for five more minutes since the nearest airfield at Hue/Phu Bai was not that far away.

LaCelle complied and after five more minutes of fruitless searching, turned to head for the airfield. But more cloud decks had moved in. They could not proceed visually. Instead, they had to switch to instrument flying to get through the clouds. To help them navigate, they contacted the radar controllers at Hue for radar vectors. But the controllers could not pick them up on their radar scopes. Anxiously, they contacted a US Navy radar aboard one of the ships out in the Gulf. But they also could not pick up the helicopters. So LaCelle headed off in what he thought was the direction of Hue/Phu Bai. After several minutes and approaching fuel exhaustion and flameout, he spotted a light through the clouds. With no other options, he descended through the clouds and landed next to the light. Moments later, his engine flamed out. Luckily, LaCelle had stumbled upon a friendly ARVN outpost. He had landed at Bastogne, an old US 101st Airborne Division firebase now occupied by a battalion of the 1st ARVN Infantry Division, several miles west of Hue/Phu Bai.

The two American advisors greeted him warmly. They had been surrounded by NVA forces for several days and asked him if he could arrange gunship support for their battalion. He called Captain Sprouse who was overhead to report his status and their request. Then he and his gunner tried to get some sleep.(16)

As the three helicopters were searching for Blueghost 39, Captain White called down to the Troop headquarters at Marble Mountain. He told them to round up all sober pilots and be prepared to launch out immediately to Hue/Phu Bai to support a first light effort to continue to search for the crew, and recover LaCelle and his gunner from Bastogne. One of the administrative clerks immediately went to the Officers' Club to start rounding up the crews.(17)

Captain Morse and his wingman landed at Da Nang. Both aircraft were so badly damaged that they would require several days of repair work before being flyable again. They debriefed intelligence on the dramatic events unfolding up north. Then Morse got on the phone and called back to his squadron commander at NKP. He told him of the situation and stated that they needed more A-1s at Da Nang. This was going to require an extensive effort to fish this guy out of the middle of the NVA Army. His commander replied that several A-1s would be dispatched that night to augment the effort.

Then Morse tried to get some sleep. He knew that tomorrow was going to be a very busy day. The effort was going to be difficult, but there was no doubt that they would go back in to get him. That was what they did. That was why they were there. They would do everything they could to get him out. He was one of ours and would not be left behind. Like any other downed airman, all efforts would be made to get him out as long as he was still alive and free.

But Morse could not doze off. The thought of the guns haunted him. There were so many. Instead, he either paced or shook the whole night. It was "the worst night of his life."(18)

FOOTNOTES

Chapter 6

CAVALRY TO THE RESCUE

1. 7th AF Pamphlet 55-1, 20 March, 1968, Pg 115. Also 7th AF Manual 64-1, 1 Mar, 1968. Pg 3-1. Bolling AFB, Washington, DC.

2. Interview with LTC(ret) Mike Rosebeary, 12 April, 1994.

(Rosebeary Interview)

3. Sandy Statement for the SAR for Bat 21B, 3 April, 1972, by Captain Fred Boli, Sandy 01. Maxwell AFB, AL.

4. Sandy Statement for the SAR for Bat 21B, 2 April, 1972 by Captain Donald Morse, Sandy 07. Maxwell AFB, AL.

5. Interview with Lt Col(ret) Don Morse, 16 May, 1993. (Morse Interview)

6. Verbatim testimony of Witnesses given to Board of Inquiry, 23 April, 1972. Convened by the 196th Infantry Brigade to determine circumstances surrounding the loss of Blueghost 39. National Archives, Suitland, MD. (Verbatim testimony)

7. Nielsen Interview.

8. Verbatim testimony.

9. Witness statement of Specialist Five Jose Astorga included on a biographic computer print out of Specialist Five Ronald P. Paschall, dated 27 Feb, 1989, from the Casualty Division of the Joint Casualty Resolution Center. DOD-FOIA. Also, interview with Specialist Four(med ret) Jose Astorga, 24 May, 1994.

Note: Specialist Five Astorga was held prisoner by the NVA and released in 1973. The others were listed as Missing in Action.

10. "... And War Beat Goes On," Pacific Stars and Stripes, April 5, 1972. Pg 7.

11. Verbatim testimony.

12. History of the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron, 1Apr - 30 Jun, 1972, Da Nang AB, SVN. Pg 15.

13. Testimony of Warrant Officer Guy E. Laughlin, in Verbatim testimony.

14. Sandy Statement for the SAR for Bat 21B, 2 April, 1972 by Captain Donald Morse, Sandy 07.

15. Sprouse Letter.

16. Verbatim testimony. Also, LaCelle Interview and Sprouse Interview.

17. Interview with Mr. Mike Austin, Blueghost 23, 10 April, 1994. (Austin Interview)

18. Morse Interview.

Extract from chapter 19

... Now successfully launched on a new career in the corporate world, Rick joined with others in the Post Chapel in a homecoming ceremony as he - they , friends family members, and troop mates were there to welcome home the crew of Blueghost 39, the three lost men who first attempted to pick up Bat 21Bravo.

The previous August, a joint United States and Vietnamese search team put together reflecting the reopening of relations between out two nations, went to the crash site, investigated, dug, sifted and recovered the bodies, the bodies of Byron Kulland, John Frink, and Ronald Paschall.

It was a beautiful ceremony. The pomp, the precision of the soldiers of the old 3rd Infantry, the snapping of the flag, the hymns, it was a tearful celebration as Army Chaplain(Colonel) Dave Pierce led the congregation through several songs and readings in that beautiful, historic chapel. And after the ceremony, the caisson carried the common casket - one casket carrying the sparse remains of all three - as it delivered them into the cemetery itself, that most sacred of American soil.

The trees had come into blossom. It was green everywhere. At the gravesite, the families gathered, as once again, the Chaplain stepped forward before the families and said the kind if words that come hard to men hardened by battle, but needed to be said about these warriors, about the sacrifices they made, and the pain felt by all in their loss. And he talked about what it was that drove them forward that day 22 years previous, as they launched on the call that a compatriot was down in enemy territory and had to be rescued. The did it for one another, just like all of the rest of them at the end. Hovering on the edge of the crowd were several former members of F Troop of the 8th Cavalry. The tag team of Tim Sprouse and Chuck LaCelle were there once again in formation with their mates, just like in the old days.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, everyone joined in to say the "Our Father," and the Chaplain recited the 23rd Psalm. It was so appropriate, the words spoke so clearly of the deeds of these three eternally young men. "Yea though I walk through the valley of Death...." And then everyone joined in again to sing "America, the Beautiful." It was so touching and right.

Lastly, there came "Taps." Down the hill, in the shade of a majestic Oak Tree, stood one lone Bugler. His rendition of that timeless piece resonated across the hills. Back finally, among their family and friends on their native soil, It was a fitting homecoming for three valiant warriors.

Brave men - God bless them all.

arrel Whitcomb continues:

The Flight of Jolly Green 67

"Jolly Green 67 was an HH-53 long range rescue helicopter assigned to the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS) at Da Nang Airbase, South Vietnam. It was downed by enemy ground fire on 6 April, 1972, while attempting to rescue two American airmen who had been shot down and were hiding behind enemy lines.



An MH-53J overflies the funeral for the remains of the Jolly Green 67 crew. A fitting tribute of remembrance

This was one of the key events in what would become the largest rescue operation of that war, the rescue of Bat 21. Bat 21 was an EB-66 electronic jamming and reconnaissance aircraft. On 2 April, it was hit and destroyed by a North Vietnamese surface to air missile as it and another EB-66, Bat 22, escorted three B-52s as they bombed advancing North Vietnamese units invading South Vietnam at the beginning of what has come to be known as the Easter Offensive.

Only one crewmember, Lt Col Iceal Gene Hambleton was able to eject from his stricken aircraft. His personal call sign for the rescue operation was Bat 21 Bravo. Immediately, US Army helicopters tried to rescue Lt Col Hambleton. But the North Vietnamese guns drove them off and downed one - a UH1 Huey, call sign Blueghost 39. Three of its crewmembers were killed and one was captured. The captured soldier was released by the North Vietnamese a year later. The bodies of the other three were eventually recovered and buried in Arlington National cemetery in April, 1994.

The next day, Jolly Greens from the 37th ARRS made two attempts to pick up Bat 21 Bravo. Both times, they were driven off with heavy damage to their aircraft. Additionally, an OV-10, call sign Nail 38, was hit and downed by an enemy missile. Its pilot Capt Bill Henderson, was captured. Its navigator, 1Lt Mark Clark, call sign Nail 38 Bravo, was able to hide and await rescue like Lt Col Hambleton.

For two more days, rescue forces fought the weather and the enemy forces to try to rescue the two airmen. They could not get in. Instead, hundreds of airstrikes were put in to beat down the enemy gunners.

But the 6th of April, dawned bright and clear. So, after 42 more airstrikes were put in, a rescue force of four HH-53s and six escorting A-1 Sandy aircraft launched to make another attempt to recover the two evading Americans. They were assisted by several forward air controllers in O-2s and OV-10s and numerous other support aircraft.

Jolly Green 67 was designated to make the rescue attempt. But as it came to a hover over Bat 21 Bravo, it was raked by heavy enemy fire. The escorting Sandy A-1s tried to engage the enemy guns. But they could not get them all.

And they could see what the ground fire was doing to the helicopter. So several shouted for the crew to fly out of the area. The crew of Jolly Green 67 aborted the rescue attempt and tried to maneuver their stricken aircraft to safety. But the enemy fire continued and so damaged the craft that it crashed in a huge fireball a few kilometers south of the survivors. The fire was intense and lasted several days. There were never any indications of survivors.



The Sandy pilots were shocked by the turn of events. The other helicopters were ready to move into the area and make another attempt. But Sandy 01, the leader of the taskforce was not willing to risk another aircraft. He aborted the mission. It was just too dangerous.

The next day, another OV-10 supporting the rescue, call sign Covey 282, was shot down in the same area. The pilot, 1Lt Bruce Walker, call sign Covey 282 Alpha, was on the ground and evading like the two earlier airmen. His crewman, US Marine 1Lt Larry Potts, was never heard from. With this news, General Abrams, the overall US commander in Saigon directed that there would be no more helicopter rescue efforts for the now three downed flyers. Instead, a ground team was formed to attempt to infiltrate through enemy lines and pick them up. It was planned and directed by US Marine Lt Col Andy Anderson, and lead by US Navy SEAL LT Tom Norris. From 10 through 12 April, the team operated through enemy lines and rescued 1Lt Clark and Lt Col Hambleton. They also intended to rescue 1Lt Walker. But on the 18th, he was discovered by Viet Cong troops and killed. The rescues were over. Later, Lt Tom Norris would get the Medal of Honor for the mission.

This was the largest sustained rescue operation of the war. Over 800 airstrikes, to include B-52s, were put in in direct support. Numerous helicopters, A-1s and forward air controller aircraft were shot down or damaged. A total of eleven men were killed. But it was all done in the best traditions of the rescue forces. Their motto was: *That Others May Live*. During the war, they rescued 3,883 downed American or allied airmen, sailors, marines and soldiers and made it possible for them to return home.



The Three Cav Troops in I Corps

An item that jumped out in the collection of the data for this history was the pride demonstrated by VHPA members that were assigned to F/8 Cav, F/4 Cav and D/17 Cav. We have seen the professionalism of the Blue Ghost in the previous pages as cited by Darrel Whitcomb. Next in the barrel is some background, and the professionalism of F/4 Cav- Mike Sloniker

F/4 Cav was D/3-4 Cav, 25th Infantry Division when the unit was a Cu Chi. The troop did not return when the Division returned to Hawaii in 1970. Instead the unit stayed in III Corps. The history of the unit will be reflected as seen by Russ Miller, Mike Woods, Pappy Jones, Ken Mick.

Russ was 1Lt Walter R. (Russ) Miller, Jr. Centaur 47 assigned to F Troop, 4th Cav from Nov 71 to Nov 72. He recalled: *"My first experience, of my second tour, in RVN was being told by some General who briefed us at the reception station "that he had no idea what we were doing there, the war was over and he had told D.C. he didn't need anymore pilots." Well if that had been true I wouldn't be writing today.*

I was assigned to F Trp 4th Cav station in Lie Khe. We provided support to the ARVN Airborne and flew VR into Cambodia. I remember a lot of hot days staging out of Tay Ninh City Airfield and drinking cokes from zip lock bags because the locals wouldn't trust us with the bottles. (Bottles, worth lots of money.)



In January we relocated to Long Binh and continued the same missions but felt a lot safer. Within a short time I was made a Cobra A/C but because of the big influx of pilots, Maj John Spencer made me the Blues Platoon Leader because of my branch.(Infantry) About the same time word came down, not to get any Americans killed on the ground so we were only inserted a couple of times, the rest of the time was guard duty and airfield alert. My platoon was moved north to Phu Bai in a CH47(terrible experience for a Cobra Jock) I remained the Blues Platoon leader until April 28th. CPT Hannie (Cobra Plt Ldr) came in and told me we had just lost Martindale and Haines and that we needed to replace the lost cobra at Quang Tri. So off came the fatigues, on went the nomex and the fun began.

On May 2nd while staging out of Camp Evans we were sent on a mission to extract some American advisors, downed FAC pilots and wounded RVN Marines north of Evans along the highway. We took 2 snakes and 2 slicks. Cpt Dan Tyner was Cobra lead and CWO William Jessie was slick lead.(I can't remember who was flying the other slick, it could have been WO Rose.) We left the little birds at Evans.) As I remember we started taking fire as soon as we arrived. We started normal one snake in followed by the second, at this time we were still flying at 1500 feet.(That would soon change.)I remember Jessie calling pulling pitch and starting out of the PZ, I was inbound as he started to turn left all of a sudden he exploded right beside me. I think I asked my front seat what the hell was that. I continued my break to come around and cover Tyner and heard the second slick reporting taking fire and that he was going down. I couldn't talk to Tyner because he was in the Cobra with the 20mm and every time he fired it, he lost ammo.(He loved the damn thing.)



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The second huey was able to fly across the highway toward the beach before he put it down. Tyner and I continued to fire for the downed crew. My front seat kept seeing the NVA coming out of a tree line toward the down bird every time we turned, so we started making slow passes and firing one pair and just a few duper rounds on each pass. I still couldn't talk to Tyler so I went to guard and called for help. Luckily one of our little birds was goofing around

at Evans. I think it was CPT Fred Ledfors, who came to the rescue. When he arrived I was out of ammo, ideas and about 30 minute into a 20 minute light. Because he came alone he had to shuttle the downed crew to the beach. Finally we got back to Evans and out of nowhere this General appeared and asked if we should go back for Jessie and Petrilla. One of the hardest and most painful decisions I ever made in my 27 years service was to tell that General, NO. Jessie, Petrilla and the others were not recovered until July.

On May 28th while conducting a VR NW of Camp Evans is the day the 51 cal ate my lunch and my CAV HAT. The next day I left for R&R so I missed the shoot out involving McQuade and F/8 Cav.

July 11th was a full day, I didn't realize until today that I had received two DFC's on the 11th. The first was for actions in the morning while covering the Vietnamese Marine Corps (VNMC) insertions and the second was for the extraction of the down USMC CH-53 ches that night. To me the morning was just another day of doing what we had been doing, but there were a lot more of us. After all the circling off shore I can still visualize the beach coming closer and closer and the smoke from the bombardment, naval fire, Blue Max and all the damn helicopters. As we crossed the beach and the first giant sand dune we were taking fire from every treeline. I can remember how safe (falsely secure) I felt behind my chicken plate. (Being young had a lot to do with it and that "it won't happen to me attitude".)

That evening is a blur. I remember being scrambled to Twin Steeples and holding there. I don't remember who was my Cobra lead (probably Tyner). When we started in for the extraction we went in with 2 little birds, 2 snakes and a chase slick. (At least one other full team stayed at Twin Steeples. I can't remember who said later they knew we were there the whole time because of the tracers. Maybe Mick or O'Connel.) The PZ was Hot-Hot. I don't know why or how I ended up hovering in the PZ. Maybe I got target fixation or just the shear shock of all the 23's, 37's, 51's and the kitchen sinks. I remember my front seat shooting the hell out of the mini gun. (Hell we may have been shooting ourselves. Pappy tried to kill me once.) I'm sure we were only in the PZ a few seconds but it seemed like hours. The next day a U.S. Marine General named Miller came and gave us all awards. The little bird guys were the real heroes.



After this the remainder of my tour consisted of VR's and trying to stay alive.

The only other action I can remember but can't remember when it happened was when we were scrambled because the RVN Marines were being overrun on the beach. I remember going up the beach and Marines running south throwing away there equipment. As got further up tanks were driving around shooting small C&C groups. But that's all I remember .

That's it guys. It was REAL and it was GREAT but it wasn't REAL GREAT!!!!!!!!!! I have been wrestling with this for a lot of years but Mike Sloniker was right when he said we have to write this down so it won't be forgotten. I think today was the first time I ever read my four DFC citations.(They have been in the attic long enough.) We have to make an effort this year to bring F Troop to Washington.

Too My Friends,

Russ

F/4 Cav during Easter Offensive 1972 Ken Mick

During 1971-72, I was a 1LT Cobra pilot and AC with F/4 Cav. My call sign was Centaur 49. The following narrative describes what happened to our unit during the Easter Offensive in 1972. I have not had access to detailed records, so have used my memory as the source of the following. Errors in fact and omissions are unintentional. I would enjoy hearing from fellow Centaurs and encourage others to elaborate.

1. I returned to RVN on 31 MAR 72 after a two-week leave to Columbus, Ohio. The trip seemed interminable and I was exhausted by the time I reached the unit at Long Binh. Of course, I was immediately placed on the flight schedule for the next day.

On 1 APR 72 I flew 8.3 hours, south of Bear Cat, refueling several times and rearming twice. I was looking forward to the dedication party for our new troop O Club scheduled for that night. We had not had a real club of our own since we relocated from Lai Khe about a month earlier. At around 2000 hours, CPT Haynie, the Cobra Platoon Leader, called us together. He said that the NVA were invading I Corps and that we were to be redeployed there the next day. As it was April Fool's Day, we all thought he was joking.

Nevertheless, I packed my personal items and collapsed, but did not sleep much. I was very tired and very apprehensive about the move.

On 2 APR 72, F/4 CAV left Long Binh and III Corps in a swarm of helicopters. As I remember it, we flew in three flights with the LOHs leading, followed by the Snakes, then the Slicks.. We refueled the first time near Phan Thiet on the coast. Two more refueling stops were made, including Cam Ranh Bay. At Cam Ranh, I stayed in my seat and slept while everyone fueled and most went to get food.

In early evening, we arrived at Marble Mountain in Danang. Again I was too tired to go anywhere to eat, but shared some Danish Salami I had brought back from the States with Mike Woods and went to sleep on the hangar floor. I had logged 8.8 hours that day.

The next day, we flew to Phu Bai; our new home. We took over an area which had previously been a US base, but had been given to the RVN after the US unit stood down. All that was left were huts with no doors or windows. Anything of value had been stripped. We were issued cots and settled in to await our briefings. Very few of us were familiar with our new AO.

2. Our new AO and the enemy situation dictated that we would use new tactics. In III Corps, we had flown with Pink Teams; A LOH (OH6) low, A Cobra high (usually 15-2500 Ft.), and a Slick taking notes on the enemy sightings, etc. Now, we would use two LOHs and two Cobras, so that we would have more coverage.

One of the first missions I flew was to cover some Chinooks removing the guns from FSB Ann. I was flying wing and we could see NVA almost everywhere around the base. As the Chinooks approached, explosions began to erupt on the base in their flight path. The Chinooks went around and the RVN on the fire base fled down one side of the hill. We fired rockets at the NVA, but it was a futile gesture and the base was lost.

During those first days, it seemed that all we were hearing was that one fire base after another was being overrun. We felt very alone.

Several days later, I was in Ops following one of our missions on the radio. One of our fire teams had run into some heavy fire. When the team returned, I went down to the revetment area to see what had happened. I heard my friend, Russ Miller, swearing and went to see him. He had reached behind his seat to retrieve his Cav hat from the ECU pipe which carried air to our seats. He put the hat on his head and it was very comical to see that it had been half burned away by an incendiary round. Russ didn't see much humor in it, however.

3. On 7 APR 72, I was flying wing with Dan Tyner as Team Leader in support of FSB Bastogne. Bastogne had been surrounded and every effort was being made to hold. The weather was bad and the Air Force was not able to provide much support. Ceilings were down on the mountaintops.

We flew west from Phu Bai, past FSB Birmingham and through a pass in the mountains with the clouds close above. The Fire base was mostly surrounded and we were told that we could fire anywhere outside the wire. We covered a slick trying to resupply a gun position on a pinnacle outside the main base. The slick had to hover up the side of the rock and immediately kick off its supplies upon reaching the top. We were flying a racetrack around Bastogne and

were taking fire from the hillsides as we passed. It was like flying inside a sack. I don't think I have ever been more frightened in my life.

After exiting the valley around Bastogne, we investigated some M41 tanks on the road nearby. They had been trying to get out of Veghel and had been ambushed by the NVA. We took fire from one of them and I remember how strange it was to get shot at with Orange tracer instead of the usual Green stuff. As we rolled in, I covered Tyner's break by putting rockets right behind him. I wondered who was supposed to cover my break.

4. After a few weeks at Phu Bai, we moved East to Tan My. This was a former naval base on the barrier island at the mouth of the Perfume River near Hue. It was a much nicer place to live than Phu Bai. Most of our maintenance support was kept at Marble Mountain.

Phu Bai had concrete barracks with ceiling fans. It was right on the beach. The airstrip was made of PSP and the revetments were sand, covered with Pentaprime, which stuck to our boots forever. Tan My was a much more comfortable place to live, but we were on our own. The perimeter was manned by our own people.

5. Another major mission I remember involved a joint operation with F/8 CAV, the only other Air Cav unit in I Corps. On 11 JUN 72, during an operation northwest of Camp Eagle, they had lost a LOH to an RPG. They were organizing a flight to try to get the crew out. The area was surrounded by mountains and had lots of bad guys. We were aware by this time that the NVA was using SA7 heat-seeking missiles, but our only defense was to fly at treetop level and attempt to confuse them. We would soon be outfitted with exhaust deflectors (smokestacks which directed our exhaust gasses upwards through the rotor system to reduce our heat signature, thereby confusing the missile tracking), but had not yet received them. Needless to say, this mission sounded decidedly hairy.

I don't remember the details, but the flight into the downed LOH vicinity took us over the mountains and past readily visible signs of AA sites. I kept expecting to receive a Strella up my tailpipe at any moment. As we reached the neared the area, you could see smoke rising from the missing helicopter. We went through a pass and into the valley beyond. Two LOHs flew over the downed bird, whereupon one of them was shot down with an RPG. All hell broke loose and we were all withdrawn from the area to Camp Eagle.

We were called to a briefing by the 11th CAG commander. He told us that he would like us to make one more try to get the crews back. The guys from F/8 who had now lost two crews were willing to make another try and we said we would go too. After refueling, we made another attempt to get into the area. We received heavy fire 1-2 clicks out. I only remember firing at 51 cal positions on the hillsides. At one point, I had one of the F/8 Cobras firing across my nose at other AA sites. We were unable to get near the downed aircraft.

6. Now most of our missions involved VRs to the north of Hue. At this point in time, Quang Tri had fallen and the RVN had set up a defensive line south of the My Chanh (?) River. All we had to do was fly north of the river and we would take fire. I remember seeing and shooting at NVA tanks (PT76) and personnel carriers. On one mission, I saw a strange shape in a field. It appeared to be a haystack, but when I flew near it, it fired at me. We called in Tac Air. On another mission, I was shooting rockets at an NVA machine-gun site and almost flew into a French blockhouse while looking back at the NVA sight on my break. We flew so low that you had to be aware of things like that on the ground.

On another mission, I took heavy fire lost my hydraulics. I had Pappy Jones in my front seat. He had just recently joined our unit. I flew back to Tan My and successfully executed a running landing with stuck pedals. I did a great job, even though that always caused me problems on my check ride. After we came to a halt on the strip, Pappy looked back at me and began pointing above my head and laughing. I looked up and saw where an AK round had exited near my head. Pappy turned pale when I pointed an inch above his head and he saw where the round entered. As we exited the Cobra, I remember someone handing me a cold beer. God it tasted good!

7. The biggest and scariest mission I was involved with occurred on 11 JUL 72. It was to be an insertion of elements of the RVN Marines to retake Quang Tri. We had a huge briefing the night before, with representatives from F/4 & F/8 Cav, An ARA unit, the Blue Max who joined us from III Corps, where they had participated in the An Loc

operation, the 48th AHC (Blue Star), and various Marine Aviation units from the carrier Iwo Jima. The plan involved numerous Navy and Air Force sorties against targets around Quang Tri and several Arc Lights. To hear the briefer tell it, there would be nothing left for us to shoot at when we got to the LZ!

As I remember the tactical plan, the Blue Max was to lead and expend all of their ordnance on the approaches to the LZ, in effect blasting an open path between the friendly lines south of the river and the insertion site, which was an enormous open field. F/4 would fly on the left of the Marine slicks and F/8 on the right, each with three Cobras. When the Marine H53s & H46s started their approach, we would run racetracks to the side suppressing any enemy fire. However, we were assured that the air strikes would render us superfluous.

When we approached the river, the Blue Max darted ahead and salvoed their rockets then broke away. As we crossed the river, all hell broke loose. We began taking fire from all sides. One of the H53s was hit by a rocket or RPG and crashed in flames on the LZ. The Marines were taking heavy fire and shouting on Guard, which made it extremely difficult to understand anyone. We began to orbit to the left and I was struck by the lack of destruction on the ground. (We later learned that most of the Air Strikes were canceled because of the historical and cultural sites in the area.) I was taking fire and hits and returning fire through all quadrants of the racetrack. Finally, low on rockets, I lost my SCAS and decided to exit the area and orbit south of the river over an area controlled by friendlies.

Evidently, the friendlies were not home. I felt like I was inside a popcorn popper and heard numerous ball-peen hammer sounds from the airframe. I lost hydraulics and interest in everything else except returning to Tan My. Meanwhile, the insertion continued. Several H46s landed in friendly areas with battle damage.

I returned to Tan My and made a successful running landing; again with fixed pedals. I believe my co-pilot was B.J. Jans. The Cobra was a brand new 1970 model with less than 100 hours. The Maintenance Officer almost cried when he saw what I had done to his newest aircraft. The Cobra was slung out by a Chinook later.

The next day, I covered an extraction at the Quang Tri LZ. The mission was to pick up the Marine crew from the downed H53. As the slick approached, large numbers of RVN soldiers began running toward it. The Marines were loaded, but the Vietnamese tried to get on to get out of Quang Tri. Troops were hanging from the skids. One of the aircrew was shot by a Vietnamese. We finally got out of the area. Later, the Marines took a number of F/4 pilots to the Iwo Jima for lunch and to thank us for our support.

I am still amazed that the Quang Tri mission turned out as well as it did. It could have been a disaster with that many units participating. I'm glad that I never had to take part in a mess like that again.

8. F/4 Cav participated in numerous missions after the Quang Tri insertion. I saw the remains of the ARVN evacuation of Quang Tri on Highway 1: hundreds of burned-out vehicles and debris from the NVA ambush. I saw abandoned M48 tanks and destroyed PT76s. We lost CPT Paul Martindale and his co-pilot to AA fire. CPT Ron Radcliffe and several other LOH pilots were shot down and many wounded.

In late August 72, we got the word that anyone incountry by a certain date would get an early deros. I fell into that category and went back to the world. I was sad to leave great friends like Mike Woods and Chuck O'Connell and many others, but eager to see my wife and home.

The above narrative does not cover more than a fraction of the F/4 CAV flights during the 1972 Easter Offensive. I encourage others to add their memories to mine.

Ken Mick, Centaur 49

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Mike "BG" Woods, Centaur 45, account of F Troop 4th Cavalry, Vietnam 1972, sitting Lt Ray's snake.

"To pass on my account of F/4 actions during the 1972 Easter Tide Offensive, I have to start at the beginning of my second tour in Vietnam. I was assigned to F/4 in October of 1971. Hostile action was winding down and only two US ground unit Brigades remained in Vietnam. The 1st Air Cavalry Brigade in III Corps and the 196th? In I Corps. F/4 was located in Lie Khe with a 4th Cav light ground troop. That was the 1st Infantry Division headquarters while the 1st Division was in Vietnam. We were supporting the 1st Cavalry Brigade located near Bien Hoa also the ARVN Airborne Division in Cambodia near the Chup Rubber Plantation and other areas.

Several times during the Troops stay in Lai Khe, a CIA agent by the name of Felix would visit and direct us on various missions in the Iron Triangle region. Several large bodyguards always accompanied him. He always knew where the NVA were and rode in our lead Loach. We always got a lot of shooting and enemy contact with Felix. Years later, I saw him testifying in the US Senate Iran/Contra hearings as Felix Rodriguez. He wrote a book called Shadow Warrior not to many years ago. Very interesting individual. Big Cuban.

Before the end of 1971 or early 1972, the Troop moved to Long Binh. We felt more secure because at Lai Khe we had to provide our own security. The NVA could have over run our Lai Khe base camp if they had a mind to.

The missions with the ARVN Airborne Division in Cambodia near the Chup Rubber Plantation were mostly uneventful. We flew each morning to stage out of Tay Ninh City (shown below) and awaited our daily mission orders. Our VR's in and around the Chup and above the FishHook area produced a lot of trail activity and track vehicle tracks on the roads. Probably signs of many of the units that later were pounding An Loc when the Easter Offensive began.



One day while returning to Long Binh from Tay Ninh City we lost a Loach crew in the Iron Triangle. CPT James M. Hamrick and Sp4 Don H. Ware lost their lives in that February 20th action. CPT Angel Arzate and I were flying the Cobra's. CPT Ron Radcliffe was in one of the other Loach's. I can't remember who else was involved. It was a sad day

During our time in Long Bihn, we were at 200% strength most of the time because of all the aviation units that were standing down during early 1972. Any pilot that had less than 6 months in country was infused into the remaining aviation units. Many pilots came through F/4 that I never got to know very well. Personnel movement in and out of most remaining aviation units was very active indeed.

One of the strangest and scariest moments happened one day while we were staging out of Tay Ninh City. Several of us pilots were standing around the MACV TOC for the ARVN Airborne Division advisors. All of a sudden, none other than Vietnam President Thieu walked up to us and began shaking our hands and talking with us. I looked around and there must have been a half dozen well-armed big Chinese bodyguards in and around our location. It made me very nervous because we were all armed and if the bodyguards got nervous, someone could have gotten hurt. He was quite short and older looking than his pictures.

We were amazed and scared but not surprised when the Easter offensive began. Are VR's were seeing a lot of heavy activity including Tank Tracks. The action was real hot along the DMZ and F/4 was selected to re-locate to I Corps

to reinforce the aviation assets already there. The An Loc battle had not yet begun or we more than likely would not have moved to I Corps. We will never know.

Move North. F/4 moved nearly all the aircraft up to Marble Mountain in one day. Ken Mick described that well. I do remember that F/8 was in a lot of activity and lost a UH-1H crew on April 2nd. The Hunter Killer teams were telling us how hot it had been the last few days. They had a lot of combat damage and were glad to see us.

F/8 shows us the ropes. Feeling our way after the move to Phu Bai from our brief stay at Marble Mountain was quick and eventful. I recall a firebase below or near Dong Ha that was receiving an intense artillery barrage. I never saw anything like it. The barrage was accurate, intense and lasted several minutes. It looked like a fire power demonstration. I don't know what it was like in An Loc at this same time but what we experienced in I Corps was a real honest to goodness front line battlefield. We knew where the line was and it moved daily up to the fall of Quang Tri.

FSB Bastogne was a real hopeless situation. Peter Arnet interviewed Frank Walker and me about Bastogne. Ken Mick described the situation well. Mike, you have a copy of the Arnet article.

First SA-7 Strella missile fired was at one of our UH-1H flown by I believe Cpt Vorhees. I saw a rocket fired from East to West at Vorhees tail. I yelled "rocket" at Vorhees and told him to dive. As he did, the rocket, with a tell tale white smock signature, past over his Huey. We did not know what it was but soon found out the NVA had these SA-7 weapons. This caused us to change our tactics to Nap of the Earth VR patrols.



The low-level tactics pretty much made us safe from the big AAA. The thing that got you from then on is the small arms ground fire. It seemed like after every mission there was at least one bullet hole in the aircraft after post flight inspection.

The tactics that was developed consisted of two Loach's conducting a VR in a circle pattern with one Loach conducting the recon and the other covering his wing. Two Cobra's would be in a tree top racetrack pattern with one Cobra inbound toward the two Loach's and the other outbound. The fifth aircraft was an UH-1H with a fire team of Blues on board. The CE of the UH-1H was the mission commander. He directed the VR and also was responsible for crew extraction when any aircraft got shot down. I can draw this tactic if necessary.

Going home almost. Ken Mick described this event well. While we were in Long Bihn, CPT Martindale and WO-1 Haines were killed on April 28th. I don't remember if they were recovered right away or not. I do know that the aircraft was not extracted until after the recapture of Quang Tri or shortly before. Ken and I thought we were going home but I was going to be re-assigned to a ARVN Armored Unit back in I Corps. Both Ken and I begged the Squadron Commander, LTC Duggan, to send us back to F/4 if we were not going home. We got our wish and returned shortly there after.

CW-2 Jesse and WO-1 Petrilla and SP4's Morgan and Porterfield were lost by a SA-7 Strella while Ken and I were in Long Binh. They are listed as 187 AHC in the directory but I always thought they were with F/4. Maybe they just flew missions with us. Can someone enlighten me on this action? The Troop 1st SGT was fragged during our stay in Long Binh. Pappy can give you a better account of that sad event.



Recovering an ancient cannon was an extra activity that Ken Mick and I were discussing last week by telephone. We kept seeing this object in the Bay after our move to Tan My Island. We got a UH-1H to pull it out of the bay. It was quite a struggle but it was a success. The UH-1H lowered it at our base and that is the last I can recall. It is probably still sitting there.

A day or two before the fall of Quang Tri, we were on a VR mission West of Highway One below Quang Tri. 1LT Frank Walker was piloting one of the Loach's but I do not recall who was in the other Loach. Chuck O'Connell was in the other Cobra and WO-1 Vickers was in my front seat. As the VR moved further West, the NVA opened on all five aircraft at once. I heard loud gunfire. It was .51 cal. I later learned. Two rounds hit the main rotor, one more in the doghouse and two in the tail boom. One of the rounds that hit the tail boom hit the main support and put an exit hole in it the size of a basketball. I pulled so much collective that the low RPM warning audio came on. I regained my composure and lowered the collective to gain RPM and speed. We made several gun runs on the suspected locations of the ambush. We left the area and re-fueled in route to Phu Bai. That's when I discovered the damage. When we landed, there was a West German news crew filming our arrival. This was the Discovery Channel segment of me getting out of the Cobra. I think the hovering Cobra was O'Connell. Vickers and O'Connell were in the other shots with me. We exhibited an attitude because we were getting the shit shot out of us daily and we were running out of luck. We all took hits daily. I sure would like to get the total film of that scene. Maybe The Discovery Channel still has the outtakes that were not used. It was only a few days later that Quang Tri fell to the NVA and the mixed civilian and military convoy was attacked on Route One with devastating effectiveness. Weeks later as the ARVN counter offensive to retake Quang Tri did we see the massive destruction of that convoy. I know there were some news articles written about that tragedy. We knew that the unit we tangled with in the ambush was the NVA unit that did the ambush on the Civilian/ARVN convoy a few days later.

Major Spencer; our Troop Commander was quite a guy. He experimented with door mounted mini guns and even a .50 Cal. Machine gun. I do not know what ever became of him after he DEROS'd. Pappy again has more info on him. Pappy flew right seat on several missions with him.

When Quang Tri was about to be over run, I was there on the ground waiting for a mission at the MACV TOC when this Air America Huey landed. Out of the Huey steps Ed Eneboe, a WO Scout pilot that I flew with in 1969 with D Troop ¼ Cav, 1st Infantry Division out of Phu Loi. We were both with Hugh Mills that year. Hugh was with C/16 in the Delta in 1972 but we never crossed paths. Several days later, Quang Tri was surrounded and we had to evacuate the MACV compound. The Air Force did a great job getting everyone out. F/4 had a liaison officer in the compound, a Captain by the first name of Bruce. Pappy and I remembered his name at the Nashville reunion but now it escapes me again. Pappy or Ken will remember. He lowered the American flag as the evacuation took place. He was sure glad to get out of there. I believe he went home early right after that.

The re-taking of Quang Tri was a massive undertaking. The ARVN military used their three best divisions, the 1st ARVN Division, the Airborne Division and the Marine Division and most of their elite Ranger Battalions. I can still remember long columns of troops moving up both sides of Triple Nickel, Route 555. It was a real waste of the backbone of the ARVN military. They should have bypassed Quang Tri and just starved the NVA out. It was a political move to re-take the provincial capitol and a waste of lives. I will never understand that mission.

James R. McQuade, F/8 sadness. I was in the middle of that action with Ken Mick and Frank Walker. It was June 11th and one of F/8 Loach's was blown out of the sky on a VR West of Camp Eagle as I recall. The crew of three were down. Ken Mick described the action very well. The one thing that I can remember as though it was yesterday was kneeling beside 1LT McQuade during the briefing to return to the area to rescue the first crew. I did not know Jim but I can still remember how young he looked and probably very new in country. We flew back to the area and all hell broke loose. McQuade was in the lead Loach with Walker covering his wing. McQuade was taking heavy fire but kept flying toward the still burning first Loach. He was determined to get to the downed crew. As he approached the downed Loach, his aircraft exploded and crashed almost on top of the first downed Loach. McQuade was fearless and paid the ultimate price. That was true bravery. We must have located a Regimental unit or higher. We all began firing our rockets all around the area where we were receiving fire. Enemy fire seemed to be coming from all around us. We expended all our basic load and had to retreat. We were going to attempt another

mission but the area was just too hot and darkness was setting in. I don't know if those five brave crewmembers were ever recovered. I don't know if I could pin point the location after all these years. It was a sad day. This may be the memorial with the five Cav Hats. I believe we were all impacted with the DFC. I could be wrong on that. Anyone have a better memory?

Navy Jet Crash. We were flying up the beach parallel to Triple Nickel. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw this big splash out in the South China Sea about a half-mile out. I suspected it was a fighter splashing into the drink and looked up to see two chutes coming down. The Scouts with the Cobras right behind went out to lend a hand. The pilots were OK and a Destroyer came over and got them out of the water. They were OK.

We all worked with Sandy/A1E1's and Jolly Greens. I vaguely remember a pilot recovery one-day. I recall a reference to dropping knock out gas and a recovery of the pilot. Once the recovery was complete, the SAR team departed and I never knew the outcome.

Ron Radcliffe was a special guy. A real hero's hero. It was a real blow to the Troop moral when he was wounded and was evacuated to the States. He always said that he was too smart to get shot. I sure miss him and wish he would come to one of the reunions. He was Army Aviator of the year and deserved a CMH for his actions with the NVA tank where he dropped a grenade down its hatch.

Ripple fire behind lines. One of our favorite things to do at the end of almost missions was to ripple fire our rockets behind enemy lines. The Cobra's were all nap of the earth at this stage of the war and we would pull our nose up and ripple fire all we had two or three clicks behind the lines. I don't know if we ever hit anything, but I am sure we scared some NVA units.

Arc Lights were very plentiful during the Easter Offensive. We saw more and more Arclights as the ARVN took to offensive to retake Quang Tri. I recall early on before the fall of Quang Tri that several went in out by Cam Lo west of Dong Ha. An ARVN Armor unit was in heavy contact and at least 4 arclights went in less than an hour. We were not sure which direction to work our VR that day. Lots of fireworks.

The last mission that I flew in late September was a VR up the beach. It was my last mission of my second tour and I was nervous about completing it in one piece. I don't recall who was on the team for that mission. The two scouts had been working for 30 minutes or so and I could tell the lead Loach was taking fire but he wasn't saying anything to me. I asked him if he was taking fire and he said Yes. His door gunner was returning fire and I was already in bound firing rockets. We shot the area real good and returned to Tan My base. A day or two later the ground advisors in that area brought us word that we got 17 KBH. A great way"

VHCMA member, Tim Crilley, assigned to the 62d AHC has provided the missing link to the FRAC history with the Official 11th Combat Aviation Group History. It is pretty sterile when read by itself. It takes life when the events are recalled by the participants, whose input will be in *italics*:

06 April 72 F/4 reported two AH-1Gs and one OH-6 received ground to air fire (GAF) from unk en forces. F/4 engaged same resulting in 2 KBH (killed by helicopter). F/4 reports significant enemy fighting positions being constructed between FB Bastogne and Birmingham.

13 Apr F/4 aircraft engaged an est en co with unk results. One F/4 OH-6, one UH-1H and one AH-1G sustained damaged. 48th had two UH-1H and two AH-1Gs hit

16 Apr F/4 engaged unk en sized force resulting in 5 KBHs

01 May F/4 Two OH-6s shot down in vic Quang Tri (QT) while on SAR msn. Both crews successfully extracted. During the rescue, F/4 guns accounted for 90 NVA KBH.

02 May A UH-1H from 62d Avn Co(Corps) successfully rescued 5 USMC advisors from south of QT at YD 420450. Acft sustained major damage and recovered to Camp Evans.

02 May elements of F/4 were responsible for the rescue of two AF pilots and one AF FAC. During the mission, one UH-1H destroyed by SA-7 killing all on board, another UH-1H was shot down, with the crew being successfully recovered.

The F-4 Cav UH-1H shot down was 70-15863 at YD370428

Crew Members were:

AC CW2 JESSE WILLIAM CLIFTON KIA

P WO1 PETRILLA JOHN JOSEPH JR KIA

CE SP4 MORGAN CHARLES VERNON KIA

G SP4 PORTERFIELD DALE KYETTE KIA

Passengers:

CPT BERKSON JOSEPH MIKE, AR, PAX, KIA;



Memorial Service for the fallen members of F/4 Cav. Flag (top right) was the last American flag flown at Quang Tri just before it fell.

Russ Miller was an F-4 Cav Cobra pilot. He recalled:

On May 2nd while staging out of Camp Evans we were sent on a mission to extract some American advisors, downed FAC pilots and wounded RVN Marines north of Evans along the highway. We took 2 snakes and 2 slicks. Cpt Dan Tyner was Cobra lead and CWO William Jessie was slick lead. (I can't remember who was flying the other slick, it could have been WO Rose.) We left the little birds at Evans.) As I remember we started taking fire as soon as we arrived. We started normal one snake in followed by the second, at this time we were still flying at 1500 feet. (That would soon change.) I remember Jessie calling pulling pitch and starting out of the PZ, I was in bound as he started to turn left all of a sudden he exploded right beside me. I think I asked my front seat what the hell was that. I continued my break to come around and cover Tyner and heard the second slick reporting taking fire and that he was going down. I couldn't talk to Tyner because he was in the Cobra with the 20mm and every time you fired it, you lost commo. (He loved the damn thing.) The second huey was able to fly across the highway toward the beach before he put it down. Tyner and I continued to fire for the downed crew. My front seat kept seeing the NVA coming out of a tree line toward the down bird every time we turned, so we started making slow passes and firing one pair and just a few dupe rounds on each pass. I still couldn't talk to Tyler so I went to guard and called for help. Luckily one of our little birds was goofing around at Evans. (I think it was CPT Fred Ledfors.) Well he came to the rescue. When he arrived I was out of ammo, ideas and about 30 minute into a 20 minute light. Because he came alone he had to shuttle the downed crew to the beach. Finally we got back to Evans and out of nowhere this General

appeared and asked if we should go back for Jessie and Petrilla. One of the hardest and most painful decisions I ever made in my 27 years service was to tell that General, NO. Jessie, Petrilla and the others were not recovered until July. (Sloniker notes: "Many times in all three regions, the areas were just too hot to recover the fallen. In the case of Spengler and Windler on 05 Apr 72 they were shot down. Details are in the TRAC portion. The remains were not recovered until 1988, with Spengler's remains being buried at Arlington National Cemetery on 29 Aug 89. I attended that ceremony and recall vividly the sensation of being forced to remember events that occurred 17 years prior."

13 May CA into QT. F/8 credited with 32 NVA KBH in an engagement at YD 6812

15 May CA on FSB Bastogne

20 May Atk Helo Plt engaged two en armored personnel carriers and destroyed same with SS-11s.

24 May 62d Avn Co CH-47, CH-47C 68-15854, on mission to FB Helen, YD 516219, was destroyed by 82mm fire. All five on board, KIA. While on C&C msn 48th AHC UH-1H was shot down by SA-7, killing the company commander, **MAJ. Kingman** and the AC, **LT Cline** at YD563448, acft was UH-1H

68-15381.

11 June Two OH-6s from F/8 were shot down and destroyed while attempting to recon an LZ for 1st ARVN DIV at YD YD565135



Personnel In Incident: Arnold E. Holm; Robin R. Yeakley, Wayne Bibbs (missing from one OH6A); James E. Hackett; James R. McQuade (missing from second OH6A). On June 11, 1972, Capt. Arnold Holm, pilot, PFC Wayne Bibbs, gunner, and SP4 Robin Yeakley, passenger, were aboard an OH6A observation helicopter flying from Camp Eagle to the Northern Provinces of South Vietnam on a visual reconnaissance mission.. On this day, Holm's aircraft was monitoring an ARVN team insertion. During the mission, Holm reported that he saw enemy living quarters, bunkers, and numerous trails. On his second pass over a ridge, at about 25' altitude, the aircraft exploded and burned. It was reported that before the aircraft crashed that smoke and white phosphorous grenades began exploding. After the aircraft impacted with the ground, it exploded again. Other aircraft in the area received heavy anti-aircraft fire. No one was seen to exit the downed helicopter, nor were emergency radio beepers detected. In another OH6A (tail #67-16275), 1Lt. James R. McQuade, pilot, and SP4 James E. Hackett, gunner, tried to enter the area of the crashed OH6A, but encountered heavy fire and their aircraft was also shot down. McQuade's aircraft was hit, and the intensity of the resulting fire caused white phosphorous and smoke grenades carried aboard the aircraft

to explode prior to hitting the ground. The aircraft continued to burn after impact and no crewmen left the ship before or after the crash. No ground search was made for survivors or remains of either aircraft because of hostile fire in the area.

McQuade posthumously received the Distinguished Service Cross:

"The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress, July 25, 1963, has awarded the Distinguished Service Cross (posthumously) to First Lieutenant James R. McQuade, United States Army, for extraordinary heroism in action:

First Lieutenant James R. McQuade, Infantry, Troop F, 8th Cavalry, 196th Infantry Brigade, distinguished himself by extraordinary heroism while serving in support of the 1st Army of the Republic of Vietnam Division in the Thua Thien Province, Republic of Vietnam, on 11 June 1972. Lieutenant McQuade was participating in a rescue mission of a downed helicopter crew in an extremely hostile area. Lieutenant McQuade, knowing that the downed aircraft had received intense automatic small and heavy antiaircraft fire, volunteered to go into the heavily infested enemy territory to search for possible survivors. Upon initial entry into the enemy held terrain, Lieutenant McQuade reported taking heavy automatic weapons fire from all sides. With complete disregard for his own safety, he continued flying towards the crash site. As he proceeded to the area of the downed aircraft, he reported taking further antiaircraft fire. At approximately 750 meters from the crash site and completely engulfed in hostile fire, Lieutenant

McQuade reported taking numerous hits and, shortly thereafter, was hit with a missile of unknown type. His aircraft disintegrated in mid-air. Lieutenant McQuade's unselfish concern for the welfare of his fellow soldiers resulted in the loss of his own life. He was well aware of the risks involved but refused to give up the search in the face of the fanatical enemy resistance. Lieutenant McQuade's voluntary participation in a desperately dangerous mission demonstrated extraordinary heroism in the highest traditions of the United States Army and reflects great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States Army."

(Signed 13 September 1974 by Verne L. Bowers, Major General USA, and Secretary of the Army Howard H. Collaway)

12 Jun a third F/8 Cav OH-6 was shot down attempting to recon same LZ. The gunner was killed and the pilot rescued. NOTE: I have transcript from the Sandy A-1 pilot that provided CAP for the HH-53 that did the SAR. Pilot was AF 1LT Bryon Hukee who has A-1 Sky Raider website. He sought out and found the F/8 pilot in 1997. I found the pilot, whose name I have forgotten at Ft Bragg who was a CW4 preparing to deploy to Bosnia in a mine laying UH-60. The following is the debrief exactly as Hukee made it. Some AF terms are not familiar to Army flight crews, but the heroism is. Hukee wrote:

. A successful rescue was made of Blue Ghost 10 a U.S. Army OH6 LOH pilot. The aircraft with 2 SOB (Souls on board) was downed by suspected small arms fire on the 280 degree radial for 19 nautical miles off of channel 69. This was within 3 kilometers of where two army helicopters had been downed by enemy ground fire the previous day with no survivors. 2. Blue Ghost 10 was downed at approximately 0200Z. Sandy 07 & 08 (Lt Hukee & Capt Bardahl) were scrambled at 0215Z [from DaNang] but before getting airborne were told to return to the parking area and shut down. Queen [DaNang GCI] advised that there were numerous army choppers in the area and that the Sandys and Jollys were not needed at this time. At 0330Z Sandy 07 & 08 and Jolly Green 65 & 21 were scrambled by Queen and told that although no radio contact had been made with the survivor, mirror flashed were observed from the crash site. We were airborne at 0345Z and contacted King [USAF SAR command and control C-130]. King advised that Covey 116 was the on scene commander at the time and that he was putting fast mover strikes in the area.

Covey 116 advised that known enemy locations were 300 meters north, 300 meters west, and 300 meters east of the survivor. Since no radio contact had been made, Covey 116 was not sure whether there was one or two survivors. Jolly Green 65 and 21 held feet wet east of channel 69 and Sandy 07 & 08 went straight to the SAR scene. Covey 116 showed Sandy 07 the

survivor's position as soon as he arrived in the immediate area at 0415Z. On scene command was given to Sandy 07 at this time and Covey 116 RTB'd to channel 77 as he was running low on fuel. Sandy 07 made several low passes over the survivor with Sandy 08 watching for ground fire. Covey 15 now arrived on scene and he started putting in fast movers to the west and

north. Each time Sandy 07 rolled in over the survivor, he got mirror flashes from him. The survivor was about 10 meters from the wreckage of his chopper. Sandy 08 and Covey 15 were shown the exact location of the survivor by Sandy 07. Due to the lack of [observed] ground fire received, Sandy 07 decided a pickup attempt would be made using Jolly Green 65 and 21 who were holding feet wet east of channel 69. The plan was to have Covey 28 put in a flight of fast movers 500 meters north of the survivor during the pickup. Sandy 08 exited the area to bring the Jollys

to a final holding point about 5 kilometers to the east of the survivor. Jolly 65 was told to proceed from the final holding point on a heading of 210 degrees as low and as fast as he could. At the command of execution, Sandy 07 dropped a "too far" M-47 [100 lb smoke bomb] and headed out to join with Sandy 08 and Jolly 65. Sandy 07 and 08 put down parallel east-west smoke screens 25 meters south and 50 meters north of the survivor respectively. Sandy 07 and 08 delivered ordnance while the Jolly was in the hover and no ground fire was observed during the pickup which occurred at 0630Z. The survivor who was severely burned and lost his radio in the crash

said the chopper rolled onto the other occupant after the crash. Sandy 07 and 08 escorted Jolly 65 with the survivor and Jolly 21 to channel 77 [DaNang]. Sandy 07 & 08 landed at 0710Z. SIGNED

Hukee, Byron E., 1Lt, USAF Sandy 07

Bardahl, Eugene A., Capt, USAF 7 Sandy 08

27 Jun, D/17 Cav rescued FAC at YD 598115.

30 Jun, elements of the 11th CAG support ARVN insertions vic YD4656 and YD

4454. In the afternoon a FAC was recovered by F/4 Cav. Pappy Jones was cited for that action:

"The Distinguished Flying Cross is awarded to CW2 William H. Jones, For heroism while participating in aerial flight evidenced by voluntary actions above and beyond the call of duty: Chief Warrant Officer Jones distinguished himself by exceptionally valorous actions while serving as aircraft commander of a utility helicopter on a search and rescue mission in Military Region I. Chief Warrant Officer Jones began a search pattern with the other utility helicopter, flying low level at low air speeds around enemy positions and taking enemy ground to air fire. Chief Warrant Officer Jones saw the pilot hiding in a tree line and hovered over a rice paddy as close as possible to him. He held the aircraft at a low hover allowing one of the infantryman aboard to leap into the waist deep water and help the pilot aboard."

Pappy recalled:

"Enemy activity was reported by the Vietnamese Marines. On 30 June 1972 a mission came down from higher to do Visual Recon where the suspected NVA activity was to have taken place. Our standard team or LOHs, two Cobras and one Huey were dispatched to check it out. This was the Nap of the Earth tactic we developed and were using since the introduction of SA-7 heat seeking missiles by the NVA. I flew with the team that morning in one of the Snakes. The VR block was cold, the only NVA activity was in the minds of the very jittery South Vietnamese Forces. We returned to our base camp on Tan My island. (old 101st recreation area, Eagle Beach, at the mouth of the Perfume river east of Hue)

My position in F Troop was Cobra and Huey SIP, Admin Officer and the Commander's Pilot. The Troop Commander at that time was Major Ed Larson. He on R&R in Hawaii. The XO, CPT Jim Elder was in command until the Major returned.

CPT Elder found me in the Mess Hall and told me that we had to go to Da Nang for a Staff meeting. I finished my lunch and went to preflight the bird our "slick." She was brand new, factory fresh and vibration free. She flew like a dream. We changed the armament a little, adding a 50 cal mounted on the left that would make your nose bleed SP5 Evans (crew chief) turned it on and trip 60s on the right. (We'd had a mini on the right before but always had electrical problems so we were trying this more reliable set up) The mission to Da Nang went without incident and on the way back to Tan My I got a little hood time with a simulated GCA approach at Tan My. CPT Elder and I headed to the O'Club our day's work complete. Whoever was behind the bar sat two cold Buds in front of us and we were about to take our first sip when the Ops Sergeant ran in and yelling "SAR." Elder looked at me and then at the other troops at the bar, they all had a beer in their hands. He turned to me and said "lets me and you take it, Pappy."

The gunner and CE were still at the a/c doing their post flight when they saw us running back toward them, they untied the rotor blades and pulled them out to the 9 and 3 position. I jumped into the right seat (Elder liked to fly in the left seat while MAJ Larson liked the right. It didn't matter to me because I gave check rides from both positions) and began an abbreviated check list crank. Actually, I hit the master switch, set the throttle and pulled the trigger. By the time I was ready to back out of the revetment I had a full load; the First Sergeant, the Field First Sergeant, LT Hogue the Blue Team Leader and a couple of his team. Elder set the radios and called King 26 (the C-130 on station to coordinate the SAR) on Guard for a situation report.

Covey One-Zero an OV-10 Fast FAC was also on station. He told us that Covey One-One had caught a heat seeker while directing fire at NVA troop concentration. He said a good chute was seen and that he talked to One-One on his emergency radio. The enemy was close and were looking for him. One- Zero told us he was circling overhead and that he had a "tally" on us. I told CPT Elder that it sounded like the place I was with the team earlier that morning and that this should be a cake walk because that area was cold. One-Zero gave me vectors to his location and then on to where he believed One-One was hiding. One turn lead to another and the next thing I knew I was seventeen to twenty clicks behind enemy lines. It should be said at this point that in 1972, a FEBA was established at the Quang Tri Provincial boarder, well south of the DMZ, by the NVA. At one point One-Zero vectored me around some bad guys with a left turn to the west into the setting sun. My gunner startled me when he started returning fire, I fussed at him because of the friendlies in the area. When I rolled wings level a single rain drop the size of a basketball hit the windshield right in front of my face. I almost swallowed my tongue. NVA were everywhere. They were all in fresh uniforms, no black pajamas on these boys and they hadn't bothered with all the camouflaging. The ones I saw had that deer in the head lights look, they were surprised to see us so close to them. Most didn't have time to shoot at us but there were seven launches of SA-7s, each was called by One-Zero. I just closed my eyes anticipating the impact. Luckily, none of them were able to lock on. I remember thinking, "maybe these commode seats really do work."

I was low and slow trying to find One-One when I thought I heard a whisper on Guard. There was so much chatter on all radios that I had to yell, "Everybody shut-up, I think I heard him." The radios went quiet and I heard a whispered, "TURN RIGHT!" I turned hard right and then heard another, "TURN RIGHT!" I turned hard right again and there he was, in my chin bubble. Hard on the right peddle and hard right-aft cyclic, I stood the helicopter on it's

tail then on it's nose and came to a hover just over a low tree line in a rice paddy type depression. One-One appeared out of the brush but he was having a hard time with his right leg. He had obviously been hurt, either in the bail-out or the landing. The Field First Sergeant who was a big man, jumped out, grabbed the Lieutenant and literally threw him on board. I did a left peddle turn (I don't know why - it was the wrong way) pulled 50 lbs torque and came out in a right turn to the south east. All hell broke lose. Evans turned on the 50, the gunner had the 60s clattering when I heard the First Sergeant scream. He was sitting in the jump seat behind Elder and I and he had taken a round through the abdomen. As far as I knew it was the first and only hit we took.

Suddenly in front of me, I saw a Jolly Green and two Sandies. A small rush of pride went through me when I realized that we had beaten them. The lead Sandy said, "Centaur Six, you're taking heavy fire from this tree line, I'll get it," and he lit it up with napalm. At twelve o'clock I could see a lot of tracers but they were going the wrong way, they were firing away from us. Then I saw what they were shooting at, one of our teams! Someone had decided to launch regardless of the beer. Whoever it was probably saved my life because the NVA were paying more attention to them than they were to me. They were laying down a heavy stream of fire at the team. In a second all they would have to do is look up because they looking at the bottom of my helicopter. I sat a little deeper in the seat behind the armor plating and a little lower behind the instrument panel.

I broke clear and was still flying, much to my surprise! Someone came up on Guard and said, "Centaur Six, this is Gallant Man, I have a medical team standing by if you need assistance."

I thought it was one of the Jolly Greens, I knew they carried medics.

I said, "roger, I have two wounded, meet me at Twin Steeples." (remains of an old church close to the beach)

"Negative, Negative I am feet wet, I stay feet wet." Gallant Man said.

"What are you a boat?" I yelled.

"Affirmative, I'm DME"-

I cut him off and said, "Don't give me that shit, I'm a Army Helicopter, I ain't got nothin' but a mag compass."

The Jolly Green said, "Centaur Six, he's eleven out, do you have fuel?"

I told him that I did and he flew over the top of me and said, "tag on and I'll lead you out."



The damn deck wasn't green, it was black, but I figured he meant I was clear to land. I saw a ground guide in the chin bubble and I followed his direction to skids down.

A crew came out with a gurney for the First Sergeant but he couldn't lay down because of the pain. They pulled the pins on the jump seat and carried him in on that sitting up.

I began to shut down the a/c while everybody else unstrapped and got out. The ground handling people chained the bird to the deck.

Elder and I were taken to a room where the OV-10 pilot was being tended to, he shook our hands and said thanks. I told him, "don't worry about, just buy me a drink sometime."

"What do you drink?" He asked.

"Scotch." I said.

(This exchange would come back to bite me in the butt later when MAJ Larson was back from R&R and I least expected it.)

While we were talking with the Air Force Lieutenant a man came in wearing surgical scrubs, he held up an object and asked, "do you know what this is?"

I told him that I did, it was the jump door handle from a huey.

He said that he had taken it from the stomach of our man in the operating room and that he was going to be alright.

A 51 cal HE round had gone through the left hand jump door, taken the handle and deposited it in the First Sergeant and exited before exploding and tearing a hole in the right hand jump door. They turned out to be just two of the 84 bullet holes in the "Ole Man's" huey. The bird had to be scrapped later. Tom Kennedy, our maintenance Warrant (and a member of the VHPA) has never, to this day, let me live it down. It was, after all, a new bird with less than 200 hours. It still had that new helicopter smell.

We spent the night on the Okinawa. The next morning before taking off the Captain of the ship held a small formation and awarded both CPT Elder and I with a Night Carrier Qualification. A set of gold Navy wings turned up-side down on black leather with "Night Carrier Qual" and our names under them. He also gave me a audio tape of the entire mission from the first May Day call to skids down on the carrier deck. He also made note of the "F#king Boat" comment saying something about the Navy only having "ships." I accepted the tape with a red face.*

The First Sergeant survived and was reassigned to Ft. Carson the last I heard.

Somewhere in this thing, I can't for the life of me remember where, Pete Barber (a life member) tagged on behind me and followed me in and out and all the way out to the ship. He couldn't get clearance to land because I had the deck. He returned to Tan My. Jack (Beetle) Bailey (another life member) tried to get behind Pete and I for additional support but was driven away by the heavy fire. I guess his spacing was off, he was far enough behind to be in the danger zone.

I did a couple of really dumb things on this mission that have haunted me these many years later. One was pulling in the 50 lbs of torque and rolling over to vne. Up to that point the enemy had been doing exactly what they were taught, using the flip over sight and leading me, but I was flying too slow and all the fire was going in front of me. When I rolled over to get air speed I flew right into it. Dumb!

Dumber was Pete Barber for following me.

I saw Pete at the reunion in Orlando for the first time since 1972. I got to talk to him about the Covey One-One rescue mission. He told me that he could see a lot of tracers going through my

aircraft and that he had tried to cover me, at one point had even put himself between me and the gunner, but he never took a hit. Dumber! "

07 Jul F/4 killed two T-54s and 56 en KBH

07 Jul 11th CAG participated in a combined air assault inserting a

reinforced VN Marine Corps Bn with advisors at YD 3555 and YD 3553. Again,

this is really sterile. This is what really happened as I discovered at the history table at the Nashville 99 reunion:

"By early July 1972, the "DMZ " was now on a line from the old 101st Fire Support Base Nancy, northeast to the coast. It was 16 KM southeast of Quang Tri. To fly past that point was to be flying behind the lines of the NVA....and that effort was being planned using 20 CH-46s and 10 CH-53s came from USS Tripoli, LPH 10 off shore. The CH-53s were from HMM 165 MAG 36 1 MAW. The ground fighting force was a Vietnamese Marine Corps (VNMC) reinforced infantry battalion. Prior to the 11th the AF planned to prep an area vicinity with B-52s, following that Prep, Naval Offshore gunfire from destroyers and cruisers were to prep the same area, and when the dust settled the AH-1Gs from F/79 ARA ,Blue Max who were deployed from III Corps to I Corps on 25 June, were to prep the LZ prior to the Marines arrival. Soon after the AF rescinded the decision for th B-52 prep on humanitarian reasons. Those being that the prep would destroy a Vietnamese cemetery that had numerous mounds and tombstones in it. Those tombstones turned out to be just the right type of hard cover needed by the NVA to hide behind as they poured close in murderous close in small arms fire into the Marine and Army Helicopters that would appear on the 11th of July.

On the 7th the naval gunfire (NGF) prep was off target, because George Kerr, Joker 52 from the 48th AHC guns recalled there were NO holes in the LZ from the 5 inch guns the Navy usually left as a souvenir of their handiwork. The LZ had high winds as the attacking force arrived. I imagine it was quite a site to see as the Marines flew their loads in V's of 3 for the thirty aircraft. Blue Max provided 6 Cobras to prep the LZ, a prep that was soon to be seen as one that definitely been better with the B-52 and accurate firepower added into the mix. On the left flank, escorting were 4 Cobras from F-4 Cav, according to Russ Miller and Pappy Jones who were in the flight. On the right flanking of this large fleet of USMC helos was George Kerr, flying Cobra 027, a 20mm ship (M-35 system) whose CE was PFC Michael Hill, 20 years old , from Cottonwood AZ who would lose his life on 13 Jul, with under two months left in country. Hill, a 67Y, Cobra CE had to fly as a gunner occasionally to qualify for his monthly flight pay. There was no VNAF participation in this flight nor any USMC AH-1G or AH1Js from the Tripoli. There was NO FAC nor fixed wing support of this attack. The LZ, was in the open flat area just off hwy 555, referred to as triple

nickle or in Bernard Fall's famous book, Street without Joy, because of the heavy french fighting there in the early 50's. One has to wonder if there might have been some North Vietnam fathers and sons from those first fight against the south back in there 20 years later hammering away in their attempt to push the ideology of North Vietnam on South Vietnam.

Miller, Jones and Kerr all recalled how the LZ was raked with small arms, 51 cal. and 23 MM, that was firing at aircraft that were flying in there at 50 feet off the deck. The 53s each had 50 VNMC pax and slingloads external. All were extremely impressed with the calm, cool, professionalism of the USMC pilots. Specific comments were how calm one 46 driver was as he announced he had to make an emergency landing because of the hydraulic fluid that was pouring into the cockpit. One other cool character was the aircraft commander of CH-53D 156658, who on short final, decelerating to

land with a sling load, and the 50 VNMC aboard calming announced, "we have just lost our starboard engine." This aircraft was in the 2s flight of 3 CH-53Ds making that assault.

What took out that starboard engine was an SA-7 that flew by Kerr in his snake and hit the 53. This missile was fired at low flying helos and was successful in bringing down the lumbering Sea Stallion at a very critical phase of its flight envelope, slowing to land, under fire with an external load. The pilot quickly punched off the load and "augered" in at YD 345644. The aircraft went in, on fire, and burned up on the ground later leaving a distinct wreckage pattern with the 5 blades laying on the burned magnesium pile, reminiscent of the destroyed 53 at Desert One in Iran in the Spring of 1980, that were all recall seeing. Killed with their bodies never being recovered were USMC SSG Jerry Wayne Hendrix, 29 years old from Wichita Kansas and CPL Kenneth Lloyd Crody, the 18 year old gunner from Gritith, IN, who might have been on his first hot combat assault.. All others aboard the 53 survived and were rescued at night by F/4 Cav.



Roark sustained personal injury to his face when his canopy shattered from ground fire and peppered him with plexiglas, causing facial bleeding and impairing his ability to keep that aircraft in the flight.

As this was occurring, Kerr himself was taking fire, with damage being inflicted to the 20 mm ammo in the ammo pod that is on both sides of the bottom of a snake configured with the M-35 system. With that system down, expended 7 shot rocket pods and no turret ammo remaining, Kerr kept diving at the muzzle flashes to draw fire away from the Marine Helicopters. He felt he could not leave the fight because Roark in the second Cobra was already limping home and this would leave Whisky Jim alone. The VERY next day, the 12th, all Joker pilots would receive DFCs from a USMC General back at Marble Mountain."

That night F-4 Cav were called upon to do a night Search and Rescue (SAR). Again, Russ Miller clearly recalls:

July 11th was a full day, I didn't realize until today (August 9, 1999) that I had received two DFC's on the 11th. The first was for actions in the morning while covering the RVN Marine insertions and the second was for the extraction that night. To me the morning was just another day of doing what we had been doing, but there were a lot more of us. After all the circling off shore I can still visualize the beach coming closer and closer and the smoke from the bombardment, naval fire, Blue Max and all the damn helicopters. As we crossed the beach and the first giant sand dune there we were taking fire from every treeline. I can remember how safe (falsely secure) I felt behind my chicken plate. (Being young had a lot to do with it and that "it won't happen to me attitude".)

That night, just before dark, an Airborne Command and Control Center (ABCCC) C-130 callsign King picked up a beeper in the vicinity of the downed CH-53. It was the surviving members of the helo crew. King contacted a Covey FAC who was in control over the site. F-4 was closest so they were launched on this NIGHT SAR. The only way to do target ID was for the Cobra's to fire at the incoming rounds being fired at the OH-6s that darted in under fire to get the Marines. **Russ Miller** continues his recollection:

*That evening is a blur. I remember being scrambled to Twin Steeples and holding there. I don't remember who was my Cobra lead (probably Tyner). When we started in for the extraction we went in with 2 little birds, 2 snakes and a chase slick. (At least one other full team stayed at Twin Steeples. I can't remember who said later they knew we were the whole time because of the tracers. Maybe Mick or O'Connel.) The PZ was Hot-Hot. I don't know why or how I ended up hovering in the PZ. Maybe I got target fixation or just the shear shock of all the 23's, 37's, 51's and the kitchen sinks. I remember my front seat shooting the hell out of the mini gun. (Hell we may have been shooting ourselves. Pappy tried to kill me once.) I'm sure we were only in the PZ a few seconds but it seemed like hours. The next day a U.S. Marine General named Miller came and gave us all awards. The little bird guys were the real heroes. (Sloniker notes: "The two scout pilots, **CPT Frederick D. Ledfors**, and **1LT Wesley Walker** were eventually awarded the Distinguished Services Crosses.") Additionally, when I heard this story with Pappy Woods, Mike BG Woods and Russ Miller recounting it, I could not be more impressed to hear how the cobra crews laid in the rocket and minigun fire.)*

Roger Nelson from the 48th AHC shared the following with Mike Williams, D/17 Cav concerning the 13-14th of July 1972:

"The July 13th Mission as I recall: On July 13, 1972 the Bluestars had a Medivac Mission supporting Vietnamese Marines east of QL I and just south of what was left of Quang Tri. I was flying Chalk 2 that day.

My Platoon Leader, Captain Luke Norbeck was Lead. As we came in on the approach my door gunner, Joe Acuna said something and, out of the corner of my eye I saw that the lead aircraft was about to intermesh rotors

with my aircraft. Needless to say I had an awful sinking feeling in my

stomach as the classical slow motion of "shit I'm about to die" crossed through my mind.

Anyway at the last fraction of a second, God I am sure, intervened, (I appreciate that a lot more now), and Luke's aircraft veered off and landed hard. I believe it had been hit in the tail rotor or tail

rotor drive shaft. The Vietnamese were in a panic and swarming my aircraft. The wounded were still in their stretchers on the ground while the others were just trying to get the heck out of a deteriorating

situation. We were receiving incoming of some type and small arms fire.

I was holding to see if the crew from the downed aircraft would be able to make it to mine but the C&C bird was saying they would pick them up and Luke was waving to me to get on out of there. We had all kinds

of folks hanging on the skids who had to be pushed off. The same happened to the C&C bird when they went down to pick up the downed crew. They were swarmed and though the crew got on, so did a lot of Vietnamese who wanted to get out of there at the time. As the

crew was pushing people off the overloaded Huey, a weapon discharged and the door gunner of the downed aircraft, Michael Hill was killed. He was a Maintenance Troop who was filling in as a door gunner.

July 14, 1972

I was the Flight Lead for the mission that day. There had been, I think five previous attempts by other units earlier during the course of the day to get the wounded out of that location which was surrounded by

the enemy. At each effort an aircraft was lost. There was a flight of VNAF Hueys sitting on the ground there at the Firebase as well as the Bluestars. I was informed toward the end of the afternoon that we were

needed to make another try. I asked why weren't the VNAF going, it was their people needing the evacuation. That did not get much of a response. I had my aircraft and five more UH-1s that were supposed to

go in, along with the four covering Cobras. I made it clear to the senior US Army advisor that if we were swarmed like we were the previous day that the door gunners and crew chiefs would not hesitate to open up.

I was assured that this, (swarming the aircraft in panic while the wounded were left on their stretchers on the ground), would not happen.

These troops were ARVN Rangers as I recall. As the mission proceeded I decided that I would leave the other UH-1s east of the highway and proceed with my aircraft, and with the four Cobras, flying low and

fast. I thought I was taking a devious winding route but, I think I flew over all, if not most of the wreckage's of the aircraft which had been involved in the previous attempts. As we continued to proceed over

some pretty barren low hills there was some smoke popped on one of the nearby hills but, it was the wrong color, we had to go to another smoke, the correct color about a half mile further west. As I started the approach all was just fine until I got close to short final and then the whole world started exploding. My Peter Pilot, Ron Rivera was pretty

excited and expressing himself as such over the radio. I guess he was seeing all that was going on around us. I called, " taking fire, taking heavy fire" and then my excellent tunnel vision took over and I

concentrated on the landing and the slow motion of the wounded in their stretchers being hoisted on the aircraft. I think we had twelve wounded, (as well as an Army Advisor whom I think was a Major Nelson who came with us) when we pulled pitch. As we slowly got the flock out of there I think an empty stretcher blew out of the aircraft and the Hand of God was letting the Cobras protect us. I believe I remember hearing

that you guys expended all your ordnance covering us.

When we returned to the firebase the wounded were unloaded, I shook hands with somebody, and we went back to Marble Mountain. I wrote up that the mission involved the most intense hostile fire ever witnessed

by those who participated, or some words like that.

Anyway, words cannot express the my gratitude to you and the crews of the other three gunships. I still haven't figured it out why the Good Lord decided to keep me among the present and accounted for. Neither

the aircraft nor the crew were harmed.

Joe Hines another 48th AHC recalls a 100 ship mission to Quang Tri:

*"...the 48th AHC "blue stars" participated in a big way in the attempt to recapture Quang Tri. I had just begun my second tour and was assigned to the 48th at Marble Mountain. As I recall, we provided four ten ship lifts from us forces and there was a ten ship lift of VNAF. (all of the US ships couldnt possibly have come from the 48th so maybe the D rp/17th Cav was involved.) We were joined by gun and scout support from other units. All the a/c rendezvoused at an LZ up near highway one and prepared to combat assault the ARVN ground troops. I remember very vividly the dawn sun just peeking over the hills silhouetting the lines of troops single file marching toward our ships in preparation for takeoff while we checked our weapons and sharpened our survival knives. the estimate of casualties we would incur based on the briefing the night before was not encouraging. After takeoff we flew pretty much right up highway one and the scene was as surreal as i will ever experience. It was right out of "Apocalypse Now". There were convoys of tanks and trucks stopped short of blown up bridges burning with bodies still in them, (apparently fleeing ARVN) along the entire route. crashed helicopters and O-1 airplanes, smoking craters and unimaginable carnage for the entire flight north. There was an arc light or artillery prep scheduled about ten minutes prior to our landing at the objective. my recollection is that I was lead a/c in the second flight. when the lead a/c of the first flight almost reached the objective he determined that the vis was so bad from the dust and smoke in the air that we could not reach it, so he began a 180 turn. You can imagine what a giant gagglef**k that became when 50 hueys and all the accompanying guns and scouts turn 180 degrees. A quick decision was*

made to land us at an alternate objective and the whole thing sort or worked itself out.

I do remember yelling at my peter pilot to tell the guns that they were getting their rockets too close to us when the reply came back that they had not fired any ordnance yet. We had landed as a flight of 50 in the middle of an NVA battalion HQ. The good news is that I don't remember any aircrews getting killed that day. After the 48th stood down in July or August I went across the river to join D Troop/ 17th Cav."

14 July D/17 NightHawk engaged an NVA rocket launching team at AT925655.

Destroyed 10 122MM, and 10 KBH.

Later that night one AC-119K "Stinger" engaged same area and destroyed 10

more 122mm and killed 3 NVA.

22 Jul F/4 destroyed one soviet built tracked veh at YD383646.

05 Aug D/17 discovered one 122mm field gun, one T-54, one 23mm, and 5000

rounds of mixed mortar and arty ammo. TACAIR called in. Results unk.

11 Aug D/17 NightHawk engaged 122MM rocket site resulting in 16 NVA KBH. Mike Koone was the pilot on this mission:

"One of the most exciting Nighthawk missions I remember was an evening in the late summer or early fall of '72. For the life of me I can't remember the pilot's name I was flying with but he was getting short and was turning the reigns of Nighthawk over to me.

The evening started out uneventful with our standard briefing at Headquarters at 1800 hours and a return to our standby area. In the briefing we were told there would be an attempt to intercept some bad guys who were supposed to be setting up a 122mm rocket site for an attack on Danang. I would be flying in the low bird and Mike Williams ended up flying in the high bird with the Nighthawk pilot. Mike was out of his element not flying a snake but wanted to get some night flying experience with Nighthawk "Defense of Danang". The plan was set into motion with the low bird leaving a designated point in the foothills SE of Danang and flying due West on a line south of DaNang. We were flying lights out as usual only turning on our rotating beacon occasionally so the high bird could direct our flight. We were at tree top level and 60 knots when we broke over a large sandy area at least a klick square. We told the high bird to begin popping flares. We immediately had at least 12-15 personnel in the middle of the open area humping rockets on a path leading south to north. The pilot kicked the bird into a righthand turn and the crewmember on the 50 cal. opened up on the the dudes dropping several of them instantly. I never saw such accuracy in my life, I was looking out the door window and yelling at the top of my voice to waste 'em. He didn't need any encouragement We were in a tight right hand turn at this time and both the 50 cal. and the M60 on the right hand side didn't let up until it was apparent that no one was moving on the ground. It was a virtual turkey shoot. There was bodies and rockets scattered all over the open sandy area.

We pulled up to a couple hundred feet and began shooting up the area but when one of our rounds somehow ignited a rocket motor and it took off in wild flight we decided to knock it off and orbit the area and wait for the ARVN ground unit which had been dispatched to the area from DaNang. Unfortunately, it took them most of the night and several refueling on our part to finally arrive and clean up the mess we had caused. Stinger was also on station during this occurrence and provided us with 20mm fire and their "big eye in the sky" lighting capabilities.

A few weeks later we were summoned to Headquarters for an awards ceremony. The members of D troop flying that evening were awarded the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry and given a 122mm rocket (disarmed of course) which had several holes from our 50 cal or M60. We all jumped into the duece and half and road back to company headquarters whooping and hollering and showing off our captured prize. The rocket was displayed proudly in our operations office."

12 Aug OV-1D crashed on takeoff at MMAAF. One crewmember safely ejected,

the other received fatal injuries. 1LT Troutman was the survivor. He had ejection injuries and was medevaced with Rich Cunnare, who was wounded on the 15th.

15 Aug D/17 AH-1G shot down at YD420300 killing the AC and wounding the CPG. Again very sterile. Here is what happened via Rich Cunnare:

"What happened to Chuck Dean and I when we were shot down on 15 August when we blundered into the same anti aircraft positions we encountered on the mission prior was a good example of how pilots who faced heavy fire every

day developed fatalistic attitudes of invincibility. It was not uncommon for pilots returning from these missions to openly harass the ineffectiveness of NVA gunners. D-17 Cav scout pilots Dexter Florence and Doug Brown flew into the middle of an NVA Division under heavy fire to rescue me because I was badly wounded. Both pilots dropped off their door gunners, Sgt Don Fraighly and SSG Thomas Boyd who moved through heavy enemy fire and dragged me to Dexter Florence's aircraft. "

16 Aug 72 11th Combat Avn Group (CAG) moved from Marble Mountain Army

Airfield to Danang Air Base. Move was completed by 06 Sep

17 Aug 72 D/17 Cav engaged a VC meeting place resulting in 30 KBHs.

20 Aug F/8 Cav engaged enemy at BT104403, resulting in 30 NVA KBH

24 Aug F/8 Night Hawk engaged and destroyed 30 sampans(BT 065713) Enemy personnel also engaged at BT 067617 resulting in 13 KBH.

24 Sep DaNang received 27 122MM rockets. No damage to 11th CAG equip nor personnel

27 Sep DaNang received 18122MM rockets. Same results.

06 Oct D/17 engaged enemy pos. at BT 115160, results 30 KBH

12 Oct D/17 credited with 10 KBH will on recon msn

17 Oct F/4 destroyed two NVA trucks at YD 558035

25 Oct Danang hit again with 18 122s, this time one US govt contract worker killed.

26 Oct "an air cavalry team from D/17 Cav detonated a mine which killed the gunner, and destroyed the OH-6. The pilot died later as a result of injuries received." (Dexter Florence)



The 11th CAG by late June had the combat power of 7 aviation companies and 2 separate platoons (TOW and SS-11) totaling 1600 personnel and 209 aircraft.

In late July Group strength began to diminish with the the standdown or
reassignment of the following units:

F/79 ARA 22 Aug standdown

48 AHC 05 Aug standdown

B/229 AHB 24 Jul Standdown

131st SAC 02 Oct Standdown-OV-1company

F/8 Cav 16 Oct reassigned

Atk Hel Plt 21 Oct Standdown -SS-11 unit

1st Aerial TOW 29 Oct reassigned.



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