

DOUBLE ENGINE CHANGE IN LAOS

9 February 1970

By: Jim Burns, USAF (Retired)

On this date I was part of a team sent to attempt the recovery of USAF, CH-3E helicopter, tail number 65-15695 (695), belonging to the 21st Special Operations Squadron out of Nahkon Phanom, Thailand (NKP). This helicopter was on a mission in Laos the day before and had an engine failure on one engine. I can't remember now if this was a mechanical failure or if it was from battle damage. As the crew was attempting to return to NKP, on one engine they were slowly losing altitude and pulling all the power possible out of the remaining engine. This caused them to exceed the temperature limits on the remaining engine. The crew determined that the helicopter was rapidly becoming unsafe to fly and most likely would not be able to reach NKP. They diverted to an unsecured dirt landing strip (called Lima Sites or LS) in enemy held territory and landed, where they retrieved all the moveable gear, weapons and equipment and along with the crew and passengers climbed on the remaining two CH-3Es in the flight who had followed them into the LS. The damaged CH-3E was abandoned and left at the LS overnight.

Even as the flight was on its way back to NKP plans were already in the works to return to the landing strip the next day and attempt to change both engines and return the helicopter back to NKP. I was selected to be part of the crew sent to change the engines and attempt to recover the helicopter. Members of the crew that day were Lt. Col. Weitzel, Maj. Stuart (pilots), MSgt. Boss, TSgt. Beaulieu, TSgt. Franklin, SSgt. Napoli Jr., SSgt. Watts, A1C Boyer, A1C Christensen, A1C Gillespie Jr., A1C Romans and me. The crew consisted of the two pilots, TSgt. Franklin and I were the flight engineers and the others were helicopter mechanics and engine men but I'm not sure which ones were which.

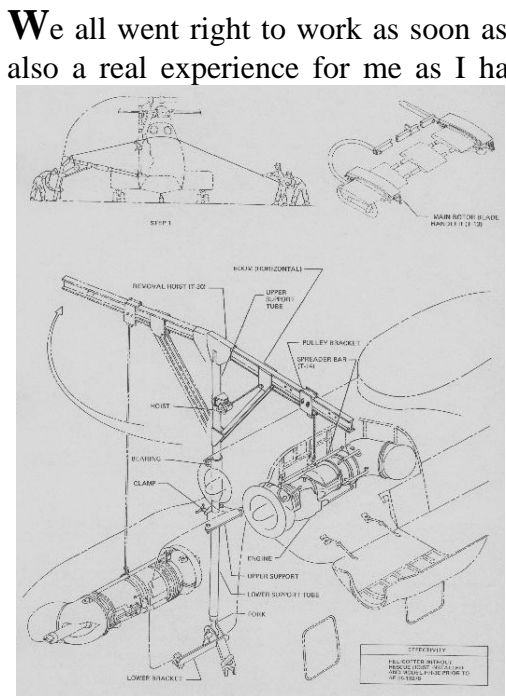
We were briefed to be at the flight line early the next day where we would be flown back to the LS where helicopter number 695 was located. At the flight line the next day, we were sent to some (seems like there were at least two and maybe three of them) Air America Pilatus Porter (Porter) aircraft setting on the parking ramp.

Air America was a charter air service that operated through out Southeast Asia as part of US Aid, but was in reality operated by the CIA as part of the "Secret War" in Laos. The crews, replacement



engines, tools and equipment were all loaded up and away we went. I had never flown in a Porter aircraft before and it was a real experience. This aircraft has exceptional short take off and landing capabilities and can literally land on a dime, almost makes you think it's a helicopter with wings. The takeoff from NKP was accomplished after a very short roll down the runway and we headed across the Mekong River into Laos. We arrived at the LS around noon time and the Porters made a few passes over the LS and the area to be sure it would be safe to land, then set up their approach and landing coming to a dead stop as soon as we touch the ground, turning and taxiing near 695 where we unloaded everything we would need to replace the engines.

The Air America pilots told us they would stay with us with one Porter in case we had to evacuate due to enemy activity. Apparently there were some friendly villagers near the LS and they were keeping the Air America guys informed about the enemy activity in the area. They told us that there were enemy forces near by, but for the time being they were not headed toward the LS, but if things changed they would let us know. About two hours before sunset the Air America crew told us that the enemy forces were now reported as heading our way and would be expected to get to the LS just about at sunset. They also said that an additional enemy force, with mortars, had also been spotted heading our way as well. They wanted to know if we wanted to leave with them at this time as they were going to take off. We felt we had about another hour to go before we would be ready to crank up the engines on the helicopter and head back to NKP. The Air America guys told us to call them on the radio if we were not out of there before dark and they would attempt to come back and get us. The Porter took off leaving just the helicopter crew at the LS. This was kind of a scary feeling seeing our backup ride home taking off and leaving us behind. I think there may have been a few friendly villagers, who had some weapons posted near the LS, but they would not have been able to defend us from the size of enemy force that had been reported.



We all went right to work as soon as we had arrived. Replacing the damaged engines was also a real experience for me as I had never changed CH-3E engines in the field using a special portable hoist for this purpose. I was performing duties as a helper to the maintenance crew during the replacement of both engines and as a flight engineer after the repairs were completed. We had worked steadily through the day and had the engine replacements finished as it was getting close to sunset. We had loaded the tools equipment and damaged engines on the bird and had it ready to go. The pilot said he would start the helicopter up and do a short test flight. So the flight crew jumped on board and started the helicopter up and took off. We made a few short circles around the LS, making sure the engines were operating properly, and then the pilot



started climbing to altitude and took up a heading toward NKP. I called him on the intercom and reminded him that we had left the helicopter mechanics and engine men on the ground and needed to go back and get them. He was not very happy about this as he thought we already had all the crew on board, it was almost dark and the last radio reports he had received

indicated the enemy force was setting up the mortars within range of the LS. We made a diving turn back to the LS, landed and quickly got the rest of the crew onboard and took off again, this time climbing to a safe altitude and heading to NKP. I think that some A-1 fighter aircraft had been sent to escorts us out of Laos, but I'm not positive about this anymore.

As a result of our actions on this day Lt. Col. Weitzel, Maj. Stuart, MSgt. Boss, TSgt. Beaulieu, TSgt. Franklin, SSgt. Napoli Jr., SSgt Watts, A1C Boyer, A1C Christensen, A1C Gillespie Jr., A1C Romans and I were awarded The Bronze Star. This is the citation that came with my award for this mission.

CITATION TO ACCOMPANY THE AWARD OF
THE BRONZE STAR MEDAL
TO
JAMES W. BURNS



Staff Sergeant James W. Burns distinguished himself by meritorious achievement as a CH-3E Helicopter Flight Engineer while engaged in ground operations against an opposing armed force in Southeast Asia on 9 February 1970. On that date, Sergeant Burns was part of a helicopter recovery team that successfully recovered an abandoned CH-3E helicopter from hostile held territory. In a five hour time period, working under the constant threat of hostile attack and a blistering tropical sun, both engines of the disabled helicopter were replaced, again making it airworthy, and it was then flown to a friendly held air base. The outstanding efforts of Sergeant Burns contributed directly to this helicopter being returned to its unit for continued air operations in Southeast Asia. The exemplary leadership, personal endeavor and devotion to duty displayed by Sergeant Burns in this responsible position reflected great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

A special thanks to Lew Taylor, former CH-3E crew chief with the 21st Special Operations Squadron, for the diagram of the portable hoist equipment we used that day to change the engines on helicopter number 695. Lew was one of the men that always, day in and day out, made sure our aircrews had a safe and reliable helicopter to fly.

I must note that while I was researching through my old flight records and trying to match up aircraft tail numbers with the dates on this award, I discovered a discrepancy between the two. My flight records show time on helicopter 695 on the 8th of February 1970, yet the award shows the date of the 9th of February 1970. I tend to believe that the 8th of February date is the correct one, since it was often the case that recommendations for awards were not submitted until days or weeks after an event took place. In any event, I did participate in the recovery described in this story.

This is my story of a few moments in my life, one day, 8 or 9 February 1970, while doing my job on one of my tours to sunny Southeast Asia.