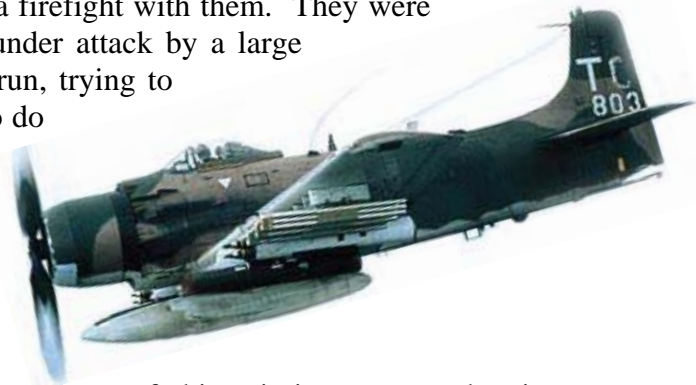


MILITARY ASSISTANCE COMMAND VIETNAM  
SPECIAL OPERATIONS GROUP (MACV SOG)  
PRAIRIE FIRE EMERGENCY  
24 March 1970

By: Jim Burns, USAF (Retired)

On this date I was flying on a USAF, CH-3E, tail number 66-13291, belonging to the 21<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Squadron out of Nakhon Phanom, Thailand. I was performing duty as a Flight Engineer/Gunner in the low bird of a three ship gaggle. My crew consisted of Lt. Col. Weitzel (pilot), (I'm not sure who was flying as co-pilot), SSgt. Joseph Hollens and SSgt. Thomas Mason (two other flight engineer/gunners and me. My crew position for this mission was at the right cabin door, where I was responsible for keeping the right side of the helicopter clear of any trees or obstructions, manning the, 7.62mm, M-60 machine gun mounted in the doorway and operating the rescue hoist, if needed.

We were on an emergency mission to extract a six man MACV SOG Special Forces Long Range Reconnaissance Team from the Ho Chi Minh Trail area in Laos. This was a declared 'Prairie Fire Emergency' (this was the code name for "team in trouble in Laos"). The team had been discovered by the enemy North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces in the area and was in a firefight with them. They were still in contact with the enemy and under attack by a large enemy force. The team was on the run, trying to break contact but had not been able to do so. The team was calling in air strikes and the A-1 fighters were already strafing and bombing the NVA positions prior to our arrival.



I can not remember any of the details of this mission, except that it was a good and successful extraction of the team. I do remember that we were receiving automatic weapons fire from the enemy NVA troops while on our approach to the landing zone (LZ). This was a quick extraction and we were able to land in the LZ, fairly close to the team and get them onboard without having to use the rope ladder or rescue hoist. The enemy automatic weapons fire directed at us continued after we were able to land. All of the crew manning the M-60 machine guns was returning the enemy NVA fire throughout the approach, landing and takeoff. Once we were on



the ground the team came running toward our helicopter and quickly climbed aboard. The enemy ground fire continued as we took off and exited the LZ and the A-1 fighters were still making repeated strafing and bombing attacks on the enemy NVA positions as we made the exited the area. Other than these few details, I am not able to remember anything about this mission that made it stand out from several other similar missions I had participated in.



As a result of our actions on this mission Lt. Col. Weitzel, SSgt. Hollens, SSgt. Mason and I were awarded The Distinguished Flying Cross. I'm not sure if the co-pilot also received a decoration for this action, but I feel certain that he must have and most likely it was also The Distinguished Flying Cross.

This is the citation that came with my award for this mission.

CITATION TO ACCOMPANY THE AWARD OF  
THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS  
(THIRD OAK LEAF CLUSTER)

TO

JAMES W. BURNS



Staff Sergeant James W. Burns distinguished himself by heroism while participating in aerial flight as a Flight Engineer/Gunner on a CH-3E Helicopter, in Southeast Asia on 24 March 1970. On that date while landing in hostile territory to rescue a Forward Reconnaissance Team, Sergeant Burns fought and overcame heavy ground fire from a numerically superior hostile force. His steady and accurate fire not only shielded the team members from further injury as they boarded the helicopter, but also prevented the hostile force from damaging the helicopter during a critical phase of flight. The outstanding heroism and selfless devotion to duty displayed by Sergeant Burns reflected great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

This mission and thousands like it could not, and would not, have been accomplished had it not been for the hundreds and hundreds of men and women that it takes to make it possible for Air Force crews to have a safe helicopter to fly. Just to name a few on this team and I always start with the Crew Chief and mechanics who spent countless hours on the hot humid parking ramps, working day an night, often in the pouring rain, to make sure 'their' bird was ready for the next days missions. Then there are the refueling crews, the armament crews, the guys in the chow hall, the guys in the supply chain and in the mailroom and on and on..... Most of these team members never get any recognition for their part in the successful completion of missions like this one, but without them being there, doing their jobs, my crew and I would not have been where we were on this day. To all the 'team' members who made this successful mission possible, I offer my most sincere and heartfelt thanks....

## **LSALUTE EACH AN EVERY ONE OF THEM.**

**T**hat's my story (as best I can remember it) of a few moments in my life, one day, 24 March 1970, while doing my job on one of my tours to sunny Southeast Asia.

**P**hoto credit: The photo of the CH-3E in the LZ is used with permission from the web site of Lt. Col. Matthew D. Kirkpatrick (RIP), CH-3E helicopter pilot with the 20<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Squadron 1969-1970. [http://www.geocities.com/kirkpatrick\\_54/](http://www.geocities.com/kirkpatrick_54/) This photo is used for illustrative purpose only and is not meant to depict a picture from this actual mission.

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