

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

18 November 1969

By: Jim Burns, USAF (Retired)

On this date I was flying on a USAF, CH-3E, tail number 66-13292, belonging to the



21st Special Operations Squadron out of Nahkon Phanom, Thailand. I was performing duty as a Flight Engineer/Gunner in the "high bird" of a three ship 'gaggle'. My crew consisted of Major Robert Arnau (pilot), Capt Jerry Kibby (co-pilot), SSgt. Charles Hill (another flight engineer/gunner), a Special Forces medic (I can't remember his name) and me.

My crew position for this mission was at the left cabin window, where I was responsible for keeping the left side of the bird clear of any trees or obstructions and to man the, 7.62mm, M-60 machine gun mounted in the window.

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 'fire fight' with them. Normal procedures were for the "low bird" to extract the teams unless there were wounded. In the event there were wounded to be extracted the "high bird", with the medic on board, would make the pick up attempt. The "middle bird" was there as a back up, in case either of the other CH-3Es got into trouble. The six man, MACV SOG Special Forces Long Range Reconnaissance, team consisted of two U.S. Army Special Forces men and four Vietnamese/Nungs. One of the Vietnamese/Nung team members had been killed in action by the NVA troops and two others had been wounded. The team was on the run, but they were still in contact with the enemy. Because they had wounded, my bird was moved into to the "low bird" position to make the extraction so they could receive immediate medical attention once on board.



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Unfortunately, the weather in the area was terrible; low clouds and visibility and severe turbulence. Our Forward Air Controller (FAC) was below the overcast and, even though the clouds were almost on the karst mountaintops; he was directing A-1 fighter air strikes against the enemy positions. The FAC radioed us that the best approach route to the teams' location was under the cloud cover. He directed us to a "hole" in the overcast that we would be able to descend through and get below the cloud layer. The FAC also told us that, unfortunately, this "hole" in the overcast was directly over a known 23mm anti-aircraft gun emplacement. But, since this was our only choice to get below the overcast and make an attempt to extract the team, Major Arnaud took us down through the "hole" and got us below the overcast.



were strafing, with their 20mm cannons, along the ridgeline. The team was located on a steep slope of the ridge which prevented us from landing. Major Arnaud brought our helicopter to a hover as close to the team's location as possible, with only the nose wheel on the ground and the rest of the bird hovering over the slope. We were able to get just low enough that the cabin entrance ladder was just barely within reach of the team.

The wind turbulence coming over the edge of the ridge was severe and Maj. Arnaud was having a rough time keeping the nose wheel on the ground and the cabin door close enough to the ground to get the team on board. The blades, on the right side of the bird, were extremely close to the 'up' slope of the ground. We were bucking wildly, bouncing all over as we saw the team pushing through the elephant grass coming down the slope towards us. The first two that came out of the tall grass were dragging the dead team member by the boots. All of the sudden we took a big bounce in the air and I thought maybe we had been hit and were pulling off the LZ. I found out later (some 35 years later) that Capt Kibby had felt that the team was about to walk into the path of the rotor blades and he had yanked up on the collective to lift the blades (and the helicopter) above the team.



Once the team got closer and under the blade tips Major Arnaud again settled us back into our precarious 'bouncing', nose wheel on the ground, hover. The rotor wash was blowing the elephant grass flat and the two dragging the dead team member were able to rapidly move down the slope and just below the cabin door of the chopper. The other three were backing towards us, firing

at the enemy troops as the first two got to the cabin entrance ladder with the body. As they were trying to lift the body on board I moved to the cabin door to help SSgt. Hill pull the dead Nung onboard by stepping down the ladder to grab the body. With the chopper bouncing all over the place from the wind turbulence...this was not an easy task. After a short time, between the two of us, we got the body on board and then the other five team members scrambled aboard as SSgt. Hill and I helped pull them up. Then SSgt. Hill and I returned to our respective M-60 machine guns to return the enemy fire as we began our exit from the area.

It seemed like it was taking forever to get them onboard, but in reality this all took place in just a few short minutes. The entire time we were in a hover the A-1s continued to make passes and lay protective fire, strafing along the ridge line with their 20mm cannons. Once we had the team safely onboard, Maj. Arnau lifted the bird off the ground and pointed its nose down the slope and rapidly picked up airspeed. As we were exiting the area, down the slope, we flew directly over a North Vietnamese Army anti-aircraft position, but I guess they were too surprised or didn't have time to swing the gun around to fire on us, as I don't remember us receiving any fire from this gun position. We safely exited the area as we continued our climb back to a safer altitude above the overcast cloud cover and headed back to Nahkon Phanom, Thailand.

As a result of our actions on this mission Maj. Arnau, SSgt. Hill and I were awarded The Distinguished Flying Cross (I'm not sure if Capt. Kibby also received a decoration for this action or not). This is the citation that came with my award for this mission.



down
20mm cannons.

CITATION TO ACCOMPANY THE AWARD OF

THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS

(FIRST OAK LEAF CLUSTER)

TO

JAMES W. BURNS

Staff Sergeant James W. Burns distinguished himself by extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight as a Flight Engineer/Gunner on a CH-3E Helicopter, in Southeast Asia on 18 November 1969. On that date, Sergeant Burns with complete disregard of hostile automatic weapons fire and his own safety, stood unprotected in the cabin door of a hovering helicopter to rescue a Forward Reconnaissance Team that had suffered one killed and two wounded and was surrounded and under attack by hostile forces. Once the team was safely aboard the helicopter Sergeant Burns moved to the open cabin window firing his machine gun to suppress the hostile fire with deadly accuracy, unquestionably making possible their successful departure from the hostile area. Sergeant Burns' heroic and decisive actions in the face of hostile automatic weapons fire resulted in the saving of the surviving team members from certain death or capture. The professional competence, aerial skill, and 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 I always start with the Crew Chief and mechanics who spent countless hours on the hot humid parking ramps, working day and night, often in the pouring rain, to make sure ‘their’ bird was ready for the next days missions. The refueling crews, the armament crews, the guys in the chow hall, the guys in the supply chain and in the mail room 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....

I SALUTE EACH AND EVERY ONE OF THEM.

Well that's my story (as best I can remember it) of a few moments in my life, one day, 18 November 1969, while doing my job on one of my tours to sunny Southeast Asia.

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