

MILITARY ASSISTANCE COMMAND VIETNAM
SPECIAL OPERATIONS GROUP (MACV SOG)
PRAIRIE FIRE EMERGENCY
3 December 1969

By: Jim Burns, USAF (Retired)

On this date I was flying on a USAF, CH-3E, tail number 67-14703, belonging to the 21st Special Operations Squadron out of Nahkon Phanom, Thailand.



I was performing duties as a Flight Engineer/Gunner in the “high bird” of a three ship ‘gaggle’. My crew consisted of Lt.Col. Weitzel, Major William Horn (pilot and co-pilot, but I can’t remember which position they were in this day), 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 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 a mission to extract a six man MACV SOG Special Forces Long Range Reconnaissance Team from the Ho Chi Minh Trail area in Laos. The team had been discovered by enemy North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces and was on the run. This was a declared ‘Prairie Fire Emergency’ (this was the code name for “team in trouble in Laos”). Normal procedures were for the low bird to extract the teams unless there were wounded. In the event there were wounded the “high bird” with the medic on board would make the extraction. The middle bird was there as a back up in case either of the other CH-3Es got into trouble. The team leader of the six man team had been wounded and they were still in contact with the enemy, so my bird was moved into to the low bird position to attempt the extraction.

The CH-3E helicopter has a rear loading ramp, actually a double ramp that can be lowered to drive vehicles or roll-on equipment on board. The aft ramp is the longer of the two and is connected to the forward ramp. The ramp arrangement allows for the drive on capabilities and if the ramp angle is too steep with just the aft ramp down, the forward ramp can also be lowered to provide a shallower angle. Our special operations mission did not require the use of the ramps and to save weight the aft ramp had been removed and we flew without it. With the ramp removed it gave us a big opening at the rear of the cabin, where we could quickly load or discharge troops, provided we were able to land. This served as good location where we could mount a third M-60 machine gun as a tail gun when we had a third cabin crew member on board. This was the case on this day and the Special Forces medic was manning the M-60 machine gun mounted on the cabin floor of the forward ramp. With the medic onboard, it also gave us an additional set of eyes to help make sure the tail of the helicopter was clearing any trees or obstructions on our way into a landing zone (LZ).

The Forward Air Controller (FAC) directed us into the area of the teams location, where they were in a defensive position, fighting with the enemy NVA four, propeller guys!!!) who were driven, A-1 fighters (I love those strafing the enemy positions and trying



to suppress their fire and protect the team. As we approached the area we had the team 'pop' a smoke grenade to identify their position. As soon as the smoke grenade was popped we quickly located the team and began our decent toward their position. They were in a low, relatively flat area below a ridgeline that was about 50 yards away. As we came to a high hover over the team and below the ridgeline we began receiving enemy small arms ground fire and heavy machine gun fire. I was standing in the cabin door, on the right, clearing the chopper of any obstructions and returning fire with my M-60 machine gun. As we continued down, I was returning fire and so was SSgt. Hill, from the left cabin window position, and the Special Forces medic from the tail position. At the same time the A-1 fighter escorts were strafing, with their 20mm cannons along the ridgeline that was at our 2 o'clock position about 50 yards away. This was the area that the heavy machine gun fire and most of the automatic small arms weapons fire was coming from.

The team was grouped in a defensive circle in a semi-clear area with several small trees that were about 15 to 20 feet high that was like a "hole" surrounded by larger 60 to 100 foot tall trees. As we began a vertical decent downward over the small trees, trying to get low enough to get the team on board, the normal intercom chatter was going on. SSgt. Hill was calling out "***Clear left...clear down***", I was calling out "***Clear right...clear down...down 20...down 15...clear down***", the medic was calling out "***Tail clear...clear down***". We were all returning fire with our M-60s as we made our decent, with my fire directed toward the ridgeline where I could see muzzle flashes coming from. "***Clear left...clear down, tail clear...clear down, clear right, down 10...down 5....stop down....hold your hover....we are as low as we can go in the trees....I'm putting out the rope ladder...***"

We carried a rope ladder; about 15 feet in length, attached to the cabin floor on one end and rolled up so we could just roll it out the cabin door when needed. Still firing my M-60, I kicked the ladder out of the cabin door and it un-rolled and reached about two or three feet from the ground, close enough for the team to start climbing it. ***“Rope ladder out....hold your hover....tail ok.....ok left.....hold your hover...team starting up the ladder....”*** I could see that the wounded team leader was struggling to climb the ladder and he fell back to the ground, where some of the other team members were trying to help him up...***wounded fell back to ground...hold your hover.....wounded starting up again....hold you hover.*** I had to leave my M-60 machine gun position (not something I wanted to do, since we were still receiving enemy fire) and go part way down the ladder...***hold your hover...hold your hover...***” where I was able to grab hold of the team leaders pack harness and help pull him up into the cabin. Then the other five team members begin scrambling up the ladder behind him...***“wounded in the cabin.....the others are climbing up...hold your hover...”*** as I returned to my M-60 and again to continue returning fire on the enemy positions.

Since I was extremely busy clearing the right side, firing my M-60, kicking the rolled up rope ladder out the door and helping the team get up the ladder, I had not even had a chance to look toward the tail or the left side, but since SSgt. Hill and the medic were calling ***“clear left...hover ok.....hold your hover....tail clear..”***, there was no reason for me to take my attention away from what I was doing. ***“Two team members at the door.....hold your hover.....hold your hover...two in the cabin....two almost to door.....hold your hover.....three in cabin....four in cabin.....five on board.....hold your hover....last one at the door....all on board.....take her straight up....”***

As soon as I called out ***“...take her straight up....”*** the medic immediately called out ***“UP SLOW....SLOW...take her up real SLOW....up slow....up slow”***. I couldn't figure out why he was calling out ***“slow”*** and as I looked back toward his position to see why he was calling out ***“up slow”***, I couldn't see him. All I could see in the cabin, from about 3 or 4 feet back from the doorwas tree!!!! I called to the medic....***“you ok? Where are you?”*** He came back with ***“I'm okjust take it up slow while I feed this tree back out of the cabin”***. Unknown and unnoticed by, any of us but the medic, we had come down with the open ramp area over the top of a small tree. The medic had grabbed the top of it and bent it over feeding it into the cabin to keep it from getting into the rotor blades as we descended. He just kept feeding it in, giving us the ***“tail clear...”*** as we continued down over the top of it. Now, as we slowly climbed straight up he was slowly feeding the tree back out the open ramp.

I immediately turned my attention back to the ridgeline and concentrated my M-60 fire on the enemy heavy machine gun position that was still firing at us, along with other enemy automatic small arms fire from the same area. After a few seconds of concentrated fire on the heavy machine gun position, it fell silent. I was given credit for silencing this position, but we were still receiving small arms fire from the ridge about 40-50 yards to the right side of our bird, from about the 2-3 o'clock position.

As we slowly climbed straight up the medic finished feeding the small tree back out the ramp. We were now high enough that we would be able to take off and clear the taller trees

with the rope ladder, which we hadn't had time to pull back in, and was still dangling below the helicopter. The medic called out "*all clear in the cabin...tail clear....take her up*", SSgt. Hill called out "*clear left...clear up*", I called out "*clear right...clear up*" and I think we all called out "*let's get the hell out of here*" at about the same time.

While we were in the hover making the extraction, the A-1 fighters had formed a "daisy chain" pattern, circling and making almost continuous strafing passes, with their 20 mm cannons, at the enemy NVA positions. As our pilot nosed the helicopter over to pick up some forward airspeed and expedite our exit from the area, the cabin crew was still calling out "*clear....clear....clear....*" and returning fire on the enemy NVA positions as well. As the helicopter picked up forward speed I

looked up and caught sight of one of the A-1s heading right at us, from about our 5 o'clock position. When he rolled in for another pass at the ridgeline, I immediately called out "*break left....break left....*" (meaning turn left), but what did the pilot do?



.....**he breaks right!!!!**..., turning us broadside to the approaching A-1 fighter. At about this same time the A-1 salvoes all of his 2.75 rockets at the ridgeline. While I'm still screaming "*break left....break left....*" I'm looking at about a 1,000 little dots with a black smoke trails behind them, getting a lot bigger and a lot closer.....**real fast!!!!** Ok Ok... so... maybe it was more like twenty or thirty little dots with a black smoke trails behind them, getting a lot bigger and a lot closer....**real fast!!!** At this point, the number didn't seem to matter a helluva lot since I immediately figured we were all dead anyway.

Some how...and to this day I still can't believe it was possible....but...as we continued our right turn, climbing to exit away from the ridgeline and LZ.....with 2.75 rockets zooming by in front of us....behind us....under us and over us.....they all missed us.....**unbelievable!!!!**

I was definitely not a 'happy camper' at this time. I mean it's bad enough when 'Sir Charles' (the NVA) and his boys were trying to shoot us out of the sky and kill us.....but now I've got my pilot almost doing a better job of finishing us off than the enemy NVA. **Too much!!!** Being in my high state of '*scared to death*', loaded with adrenaline and extremely pissed off....my immediate reaction (once I assured myself that we weren't all dead from rocket hits from the A-1s salvo) was to unhook my gunners belt 'attachment hook' from the floor ring and use it to reach into the cockpit and hit the pilot, up beside the helmet a few times. At the same time yelling at him....impugning his intelligence, his mother's marital status, and several other choice phrases....that flowed out of my mouth....followed by something like "*you're other left....you #@*#%!!!! of a \$#%&*#%\$*."

We continued our climb out of the area and back to a safer altitude and took up a heading for Nakhon Phanom. By now I had began to cool down....getting back closer to a more normal adrenaline level... and had almost quit shaking. SSgt. Hill and I pulled the rope ladder back into the cabin and checked to see that everyone was ok. About this time I had cooled down

enough to begin to think about the thrashing I had given to the pilot (an officer) with the belt hook and I'm thinking to myself....well now...Sgt. Burns....I guess you'll be standing in front of a Courts Marshall Board for striking an officer when we get back to the base. To my amazement, this did not happen....as a matter of fact, neither Lt. Col. Weitzel nor Major Horn ever said a single word to me about my little temper tantrum. I just figured the pilot must have agreed with my assessment of his ability to follow directions and that given the circumstances, the names I planted on him must have fit. Or maybe, since what I was really hitting with my gunners belt 'attachment hook' was his helmet (not really his head!) and since helicopters are kind of shaky and very noisy.....maybe... just maybe, he just didn't feel or hear a thing and maybe... just maybe... the co-pilot was looking out the window and didn't see or hear a thing either~~~. Maybe!!!~~.

Don't get me wrong here....it takes one hell of a pilot to bring a helicopter to a hover and hold it in position, like a sitting duck, while all the time a bunch of pissed off, unreasonable and unfriendly little guys with automatic weapons are trying their best to shoot you out of the sky. It takes a tremendous amount of skill, training, teamwork and courage for a helicopter crew to pull off a Prairie Fire Emergency extraction, under fire. On this day, I was privileged to be flying with just such a crew and we did a damn fine job of covering each other and safely extracting the six man MACV SOG team. *However I still think the pilot made a wrong turn as we were departing....but then again....since he was driving.....it was his call.*

As a result of our actions on this mission Lt. Col. Weitzel, Major Horn, SSgt. Hill and I were awarded 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
(SECOND 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 CH-3E Helicopter, in Southeast Asia on 3 December 1969. On that date, Sergeant Burns heroically and unhesitatingly risked his life to rescue a six man Long Range Reconnaissance Team, which had suffered one wounded, and was under aggressive attack by a large hostile force. Sergeant Burns, ignoring the intense hostile automatic weapons fire, leaned out the door of his helicopter, in full view of the hostile troops fifty yards away, pulling the wounded team leader up the rope ladder and safely aboard the helicopter. During his departure from the landing zone he silenced at least one hostile gun position with his deadly accurate machine gun fire. The outstanding heroism and selfless devotion to duty displayed by Sergeant Burns reflected great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

As is almost always the case, there is always more to these kinds of stories than just the *fun!! and excitement!!* that my crew and I experienced this day. The team that it takes to accomplish this is one hell of a lot bigger than just the five of us on the helicopter. Besides the obvious flight crews and aircraft involved, it takes many--many more men on the team to pull something like this off. Tops on this list are the Crew Chiefs and other maintainers, who spend countless hours in the sun, in the dark, in the rain, repairing and fixing these birds for the flight crews to take back out to get punched full of holes and break. Then there are the guys that repair and clean the weapons, arm the aircraft, bring fuel to them and replace broken and damaged parts. The guys in the supply chain that keep the parts coming, the guys that kept us all fed, that brought us mail.....that kept us healthy and secure, all the men and women on the team, all the way back to the States that kept us in the air. There is also the families of all service men and women who see us off, for a year or more at a time, in harms way ... and hold their breath until we return. Without the support of all these and many more, missions like this could never be accomplished.

A side note to this story is that the CH-3E, tail number 67-14703, that we were on for this mission also returned safely from the South East Asia war (wearing a few added patches covering bullet holes). She has been beautifully restored and now resides in a place of honor at the Museum of Aviation in Warner Robbins, Georgia.



This is my story of a few moments in my life, one day, 3 December 1969, while doing my job on one of my tours to sunny Southeast Asia.

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