

OPERATION RAPID FIRE V

4 JANUARY 1968

MY RECOLLECTIONS OF THAT DAY

WO R.C. (DUSTY) RHODES

The 188th AHC started working with Special Forces B-36 troops in early December 1967. I was assigned to this operation which was called Operation Rapid Fire V. I participated in most of the 188 AHC missions with B-36.

The missions were similar involving many LZ's in the northern part of Tay Ninh province along the Cambodian border. The Black Widow command and control aircraft would vector flights of three aircraft flying at very low level into the LZ. Two ships would insert troops and one would fly over the LZ. If executed properly local NVA soldiers on the ground would not realize the two aircraft had landed and inserted troops. Once on the ground the B-36 troops were to observe enemy troop movements and they would occasionally take prisoners.

In early December, once the B-36 troops were inserted, it would sometimes be several days before they were extracted from their mission. The longer we worked the Tay Ninh area the more alert the NVA became to our activities. By the end of December the B-36 troops were being compromised several hours after being inserted.

The inserted B-36 teams consisted of 14 men. After insertion, when compromised, they were forced to deal with large concentrations of NVA troops moving rapidly to their position. To say the least, these B-36 extractions were executed under some pretty extreme conditions. Combinations of air strikes, artillery and helicopter gunship support were used to keep the NVA pinned down while we whisked in for a quick extraction.

On 4 January 1968 the B-36 operation for this day turned into one of those extreme situations. My call sign was Black Widow 44 and I was the Aircraft Commander on aircraft 205. The Pilot was WO Kjell Tollefsen, Crew Chief Specialist John Charlesbois and Door Gunner Specialist John Newcomer. At first light this day we were involved with B-36 troop insertions into an LZ Nora and LZ Rosie. After the troop insertions we refueled at Tay Ninh and then flew to a secure LZ near the operation, landed and shut down. We were on standby waiting to extract the B-36 troops.

In a short while the troops in LZ Nora were compromised, came into heavy contact, and had to be reinforced. I was called out with another aircraft to go to LZ Nora and extract wounded. The events that followed, even after 30 years, are still fixed in my mind that I can roll through like a movie picture.

I followed the other aircraft into LZ Nora in a flight of two. The fighting in the LZ and intense aircraft activity in the area resulted in radio chatter that was almost frantic as the command and control ship vectored us into LZ Nora.

I approached to a hover and did a 180-degree pedal turn to leave the LZ the same way we came in. I kept the aircraft at a low hover. I remember the short sawgrass flattening around us from our rotor wash and there was the smell of the conflict in the air. I remember looking over my right shoulder. I could see out the large door on the right side of the aircraft across the LZ to the tree line. For a few moments there was an almost eerie calm. I heard on the radio the troops were coming out. There was a delay, and then out came a group of five or six men moving rapidly toward us. As they moved toward the aircraft I could tell by their behavior they were starting to receive enemy fire. The situation got very tense as it became apparent the group might not make it to the aircraft. Several of the men dropped to the ground. Two men made it to my aircraft. One man was helping the other. Only one got on the aircraft. I was directed by the command and control aircraft to leave the LZ.

As I moved forward and began to climb out of LZ Nora I directed the crew chief and door gunner to start suppressive fire. Unfortunately after a short burst, the crew chief's M-60 jammed. This was a critical

problem because the enemy fire was coming from his side of the aircraft. I remember yelling in expletives over the intercom at the crew chief to get the gun firing. Before I finished my expletives the enemy fire started hitting the aircraft.

An enemy soldier essentially emptied a full clip of his AK47 into the aircraft. I could hear clearly the weapon firing as rounds struck the aircraft. The aircraft took 38 hits from nose to the tail. As the rounds came through the cockpit and the center of the aircraft they passed all around us and amazingly none of the crew was hit.

As the rounds were striking it felt like the aircraft was going to fly apart. Metal fragments and pieces of Plexiglas were flying all over the place. The cockpit around me momentarily filled with a white smoke or dust. The air cleared quickly and fortunately we were not on fire.

As I continued to climb I started to assess the condition of the plane and crew. The master caution light was on and the master caution panel had multiple lights on. The controls responded normally and the engine instruments at a glance looked OK. I made an immediate decision to continue out of the LZ. I reported to the command & control aircraft.

As I gained altitude, it became apparent the engine was not going to last long. The oil pressure was starting to drop and the engine developed an unusual whining sound. There was nothing but jungle canopy below the aircraft. I turned for the closest open area and we all started to hope

the engine would make it. The command & control aircraft was getting very excited because I was flying into Cambodia. Someone in the command and control ship kept demanding that I turn around. I stopped responding to the radio calls. My route of flight was the only alternative to avoid going down in jungle canopy.

The engine started losing power as we approached short final to the open area. As the engine power drained off there was a loss of rotor rpm and the aircraft hit hard on both skips, bounced up and came to rest on its' left side.

The sounds associated with the dying engine, hitting the ground hard, the crunching metal and the shuttering sound of the rotor drive train coming to a sudden halt were horrendous. For a moment there was total silence. Then suddenly all of us were scrambling to assess our condition and get out of the aircraft. We were fortunate again; the aircraft did not burn.

The B-36 soldier did not survive. I am not sure which action caused his death. But he died of a gunshot wound in the back.

The aircraft crew all survived the crash with minor injuries. However, we faced a serious problem. The door gunner, John Newcomer, was pinned under the aircraft. His head, in his flight helmet, was caught under the doorframe. The rest of his body was free. Newcomer's

shoulder was injured but he was fully conscious and not in great pain. To a man none of us wanted to leave the crash site without Newcomer. Aircraft 122 followed us in. They dropped several B-36 troops to try and secure the perimeter of aircraft 205. We then all set to work trying all sorts of ways to get Newcomer out of the aircraft. With the help of aircraft 122 we attached ropes and tried to lift aircraft 205 enough to free Newcomer. This did not work. During this effort I remember Smoky Bear the Battalion smoke ship coming in and smoking the entire area.

The situation was getting tense because this was a definite big NVA area. We tried to pry the plane up with a lever and fulcrum we devised. That also did not work. The command and control aircraft wanted us to leave the area. We asked for more time and they allowed all of us to stay. At this point another aircraft landed and dropped off one B-36 soldier. I remember his arm was in a sling. I am not sure; he may have been a friend of the dead B-36 soldier in the aircraft. He looked Newcomer's situation over and suggested cutting the helmet chinstrap and trying to pull Newcomer's head out of the helmet. While the crew lifted the aircraft, with Newcomer's help, Tollefsen and I forced Newcomer's head out of the helmet. I remember badly tearing one of his ears. However, Newcomer was free and we all took the extraction out of the crash site on aircraft 122.

The crew of my aircraft 205 all conducted themselves in the best possible way throughout this event. They were calm and professional carrying out their responsibilities as they were trained. We were all incredibly lucky to have avoided serious injury in the heavy barrage of enemy gunfire and then the crash in Cambodia. The crew of the aircraft 122 stayed with us for a long time trying to free Newcomer. The Aircraft Commander was Captain Gerald Doht and the Pilot was WO George Jones.

Also, the command and control aircraft let us stay longer at the crash sight than was advisable. However, this risk paid off and resulted in getting Newcomer out before the NVA closed in on the crash site.

Both the sounds and the visual perceptions of the event have remained vivid in my mind for over 30 years now. Going over these events I have tried to decide in my own mind if I could have handled this crisis differently with different results. Leaving LZ Nora and flying to the open area was a questionable decision. I could have turned back to LZ Nora and probably landed under power. However, the return approach may have been subject to the same heavy gunfire. Once in the air and it was apparent the engine was going to fail the only choice was the nearby open area in Cambodia. Fortunately the engine kept running until short final. My approach into the crash site could have been made without crashing. I tried to make it in under power with a dying engine

and on short final ran out of power, air speed and rotor rpm. I could have kept more altitude and then did an autorotation into the open area.

Lastly, I regret I never thought about cutting the chinstrap and pulling Newcomer's head out of his helmet. It would have resulted in a lot less risk to the people trying to support our efforts to get Newcomer out, not to mention the anguish Newcomer was going through pinned under the aircraft. Taking this action just did not occur to me or anyone else in my crew.

In the end, we all walked away. We used to joke around that any landing you can walk away from is a good one.