

sent letter
and photo of crashed
gunship - 3/24/98

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Dick Detra

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Dear Dick,

I received your letter of 1 Jan 1998. Please excuse my delay in getting back to you. Again there are not enough hours in the day to get every thing done. Between work and the family, I have been busy.

In your last letter you commented on the photo of Joe Walker and I. There is an interesting story behind this photo. You will have to ask Joe if he remembers any of this and to fill in any details. It was taken on a bunker within the Army Special Forces compound at Khe Sanh Combat Base in June 1968. We flew into Khe Sanh several times during June. I do not think that this was the first trip which I will expand on later. This was one of several missions out of Khe Sanh Combat Base. We flew out of this location until 2 JUL 1968 when we began flying out of Mai Loc, located at the base of the mountains and coastal plain just east of Khe Sanh along Colonial Route 9.

* In response to your question, yes I did fly with Joe when I first took over as platoon leader in May 1968. Joe was one of the more "seasoned" aircraft commanders and I needed a thorough orientation on how the Spiders operated. Remember, I was an RLO / Lt. and dangerous by the nature of my rank. Actually by this time, I had been flying guns in country for 5 months. The 101 Avn Bn guns operated differently and Joe was instrumental in getting me up to speed. His training and patience and that of the other A/Cs in the 188Th enabled me to survive my tour. Charles guys. By the time this photo was taken, I was the A/C flying flight lead. Joe Walker was the A/C of my wing ship. We were flying cover for 3 UH-1Hs in support of a F.O.B. 1 cross border (Laos) mission. At the time we were just taking a lunch break before being briefed for the mission. The S.F. compound was located on the south side of Khe Sanh's runway, along the perimeter of the base.

Joe and I were just sitting there watching 2 Marine CH-46's do some external sling load work about 250 yards away. We were facing west with one 46 to our front and one just slightly to the right. Suddenly the CH-46 to our front starts to drop it's tail as if all lift in the rear rotor ceased. The helicopter hit the ground and tore itself apart with a cloud of smoke and flying debris. We just about sh... , to say the least. We didn't even move as it was too far and Marine grunts were already in the area responding to the crash.

At the time we did not hear any gunfire or any incoming NVA artillery from Co Ro Mountain just across the Laotian border at (XD-741317). We then watched the second helicopter as it hovered with a sling load beneath it. After about a minute it started to roll to the left and crashed. In less than five minutes we saw 2 helicopters crash while hovering over Marines below, with who knows how many fatalities. Now we knew that Khe Sanh was a very dangerous place to be even when the NVA were not shelling the base.

Just what aircrews need to witness before a cross border mission. Not a calming thought. No matter we did our thing anyway. I guess we felt that the more distance and altitude between us and Khe Sanh the safer we were. It's great to be young and stupid. Was it John Wayne who said "Life is tough, but it's tougher when you're stupid."?

Speaking of stupid; I suppose I should tell how we flew into Khe Sanh the first time. I am enclosing some material from the book BONNIE-SUE A Marine Corps Helicopter Squadron in Vietnam by Marion F. Sturkey. I just finished reading this account of the Marines at Khe Sanh. It helped me recall some events there and orient me to the terrain and locations of key friendly and enemy positions. I recommend reading this book. The attached maps from Sturkey's book will allow you to follow some of the events

On 14 JUN 1968 we were given our first mission to support F.O.B. 1 at Khe Sanh. We were to fly to the Special Forces compound located on the south side for a mission briefing. I was flying 471, CLIMAX, the HOG, with the 48 rocket system. This was the same 471 that was destroyed in typhoon Bess on 4 SEP 1968. I'll cover that incident in my next letter.

I do not recall if we had sufficient maps but we figured we could find Khe Sanh by flying northeast along Colonial Route 1, turn left at Dong Ha and the Cua Viet River and pick up Colonial Route 9. We would fly over Cam Lo, Ca Lu, and west to Khe Sanh. Looked good to me so off we went. The blind leading the blind. We cruised at about 3,000 feet, to avoid small arms fire. We flew up the east side of Route 1 looking for the Cau Viet River to identify Dong Ha. We were not too concerned about the trip or any enemy threat as the Marines and Army 5th Mechanized Div had the area pretty much under control.

We; or should I say I must have lost count of the rivers we would cross enroute. Departing from LZ Sally there is a River, the name I cannot recall. The next river was Quang Tri River which flows through Quang Tri City, then the Cau Viet River at Dong Ha. We proceeded northeast probably listening to the "tunes" on FM and occasionally chattering on UHF or VHF.

Fat, Dumb, and Happy; we proceeded to the river where I decided we should turn west. Westward we flew, but everything looked strange, real strange. There was absolutely no vegetation on either side of this river for quite some distance due to the thousands of bomb craters. There were craters upon craters as far as you could see. I began looking for some other prominent feature and realized we were flying west over the Ben Hai River, right down the center of the DMZ.

Now we knew from experience monitoring radio traffic and distress calls; that the NVA would shoot down "fast movers" like F4-Phantoms with ease. Here we were trucking along at

we crossed the Song Bo River

3,000 feet and 80 knots. I called wing and said we would be picking up speed and turning south to get to Khe Sanh. There was a response "South?" followed by a brief pause then by "that means that we are over...". He didn't even say DMZ or North Vietnam as if it would alert the enemy as to our presence. Ha, you know how quiet a Huey is. So much for my wingman verifying my enroute navigation. We flew south as fast as we could and came upon the Rock Pile, which was a Marine observation post. The Marines must have thought the NVA had helicopters. A short distance further, we picked up route 9. I suppose we were lucky. The NVA probably figured we couldn't be that stupid. Or: our flight must be some sort of ploy to draw fire. Ha, I guess we fooled them.

At route 9 we flew west hoping for an uneventful arrival. As we came up on Khe Sanh we were lined up on the runway about 2,000 feet above ground level and 3 miles out. I called the tower, or what was the tower, and was cleared to land. As we closed to about 1.5 miles the base came under artillery attack. This was evident by large explosions around the runway with huge white clouds like WP. The tower called "Khe Sanh is under attack, do not land." We broke off our approach and started a climbing turn to the right. Before we had turned 180 degrees the tower called again with an all-clear to land.

The Marine controller felt the attack was over but I was not that sure. We flew inbound and broke off short of the runway to land at the Special Forces compound on the south side. Landing at the S.F. compound involved picking a spot clear of bunkers and wire. Before we could shut down we were told to reposition the gunships to the runway revetments, as we would draw too much fire and our hosts did not appreciate this. As you know gunships have much more difficulty taking off than landing. Fortunately we were light on fuel and had little difficulty in clearing the perimeter wire.

We landed on the runway and parked the aircraft in the revetments on the north side. These revetments were made of PSP, stood about 12 feet high, and were about 50 to 60 feet wide. The Marines used them for fixed wing protection when they had aircraft here. Now the only aircraft visiting were C-123s and C-130s making low altitude parachute drops or CH-46s picking up wounded. I wonder what made us think we would be overlooked.

Remember stupid. Well there we were again. We had read in the "Army Times" about the Marines' low crouched walk from bunker to bunker with one ear to the west to listen for the tell-tale sound of the NVA firing their artillery. It was called "The Khe Sanh Shuffle". As we walked out onto the runway to cross to the other side for our "ride", we mimicked this Marine walk jokingly. Some joke, we were in the middle of the runway when the shells began impacting. Fortunately they were nowhere near us, and few in number. It was all over in seconds. Remember they had this runway zeroed in and had shelled it just moments earlier. How they missed us I'll never know.

Our ride, a black jeep, driven by an Army S.F. Sgt was waiting. As all 8 of us tried to figure how this one jeep was going to haul us, the driver briefed us on taking cover in case of a shelling. We were told to watch the Marines all the time. They were "tuned into" the subtle pop of the enemy artillery when they fired from Co Roc Mountain to the west. The rounds' impact was 5 to 7 seconds later. If you could not see any Marines, then they were already under

cover and you were already late. One other comment was: "if you observed the driver missing from the moving jeep you were already late." He does not stop to take cover. Nice place to visit. All this excitement and we haven't had lunch yet.

The ride was uneventful and we kept our eyes on the Marines. They were difficult to see as they shuffled low and rapidly, exposing only their shoulders and steel pots. The fully loaded jeep must have looked like a Rose Parade float. We arrived at the S.F. compound and had a brief tour of the command bunker and where we could seek shelter.

During a break we were walking around looking at the craters from previous shelling. I went to one crater that was about 15 feet across and 5 or 6 feet deep. About 2 feet from the crater rim was an entrance hole 5 to 6 inches in diameter with rifling grooves where the round entered the earth and curved to the bottom of the crater. These rounds were fused to penetrate deep, then explode.

Within a few moments we heard the pop of incoming. We scattered looking for cover. I looked to my left and there was nothing. To my right about 15 feet away was a huge ramped hole with a 5-Ton truck parked in it. I dove under the truck. The rounds landed some distance away and were no danger to us. When we collected ourselves and each commented on their choice of cover, I bragged about my top cover, a 5-Ton truck. "You mean that truck?" someone commented pointing to the truck. It was fully loaded with ammunition. If a round had landed even close, I and the truck would be MIA. We all had a laugh over that one. Needless to say no one was going to follow me next time we get shelled.

Remember "Stupid"? His sister "Lady Luck" was always close by.

I do not remember anything about the mission we flew. We logged two flights that day but, I am sure the thrills in the air palled in comparison the ground action.

I have some "final" photos of 471, "CLIMAX", from my "Typhoon Bess" approach to LZ Sally. These and a description of the events of 4 SEP 68; I will recount in my next letter. I am not trying to stall this but it is important to recall events as they come to me by your questions and comments on the photos and material I send you. I use my log book entries to fix dates so the chronology is some what accurate.

Please keep those questions coming and I will try to fill in the blanks. I wish you and your wife the best.

Your friend

John F. Soares