

PRAIRIE FIRE

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188TH and 9/10

One of the many types of missions that were flown by the Black Widows and the Spiders was the CCN Forward Operations Base (FOB) mission. Forward Operations Base was the official title for the mission but in all reality it really meant Flight Over the Boarder. I don't recall ever flying a mission inside of South Vietnam for CCN.

On one particular mission we were on alert at the Special Forces (SF) Camp, MAI Loc just in case one of the many teams that were out on intelligence gathering ~~mission~~ was ~~spotted~~ ^{COMPROMISED BY THE NVA.} Our job was to retrieve the teams before they got caught. This mission was either late August or early September 1968 when we were given the scramble mission that an A Team had been spotted and was on the run. We received our briefing of the A Team's location and what direction they were moving. As I received the mission briefing everyone else was starting the helicopter for immediate lift off. Time was critical for the A Team and it was our responsibility to get to their location as soon as possible (ASAP). In this case, because of the Team's location we would have to fly directly over a North Vietnam Army (NVA) 57 MM Anti Aircraft Artillery Unit. This NVA unit had been shooting at us every time we went on a mission. Luckily for us they were not very good at their jobs. They had not shot down any of our aircraft to date.

As we lifted off it was decided that we would go through the NVA AA location at low altitude and high airspeed. That would eliminate the AA threat but we would have to contend with small arms fire. Speed and maneuverability would give us the advantage. Our extraction team consisted of three slicks and three gunships. I was assigned the job of slick lead and air mission commander. We were able to fly through the NVA AA area with out anyone getting hit.

As we arrived at the A Team location we broke radio silence and contacted the team for its final location and to determine the enemy situation and possibility of a landing zone (LZ). We were informed that there was not enough clearing to land a helicopter on top of the mountain. After a short discussion it was determined that the only place we could land was on a large rock about one thousand feet below the crest of the mountain. Our gunships provided covering fire while the A Team maneuvered its way to the rock.

When the A Team radioed us, they were at the rock and ready for extraction. I as slick lead started my approach to the rock. We immediately came under enemy small arms and automatic weapons fire. We had no alternative but to continue our approach because the enemy was also coming down the mountain and we were getting low on fuel. We had to pick up the A Team on our first attempt or we would run out of fuel before we got home. I did not relish the idea of walking back to Vietnam. As we approached the rock we realized that it was too close to the trees to land on it. We were able to put the right skid on the rock and have the left skid hanging over the valley. It was at least three thousand feet to the valley floor.

If we screwed this up we would all be killed. Thanks to the work of the Spider Gunships, our Door Gunners and Crew Chiefs the A Team was able to low crawl to the helicopter with out anyone getting wounded or killed. This extraction took about four or five minutes but it seemed like a lifetime. Just setting their and holding the helicopter in position and believing in the ability of the rest of the flight team to do its job and we would all get out of this situation with out injury. Once the Crew Chief gave the ^{lets} get the fuck out of dodge radio call; it was time to go. We lifted off of the rock and dove to the valley floor to build up our airspeed. As we were leaving the NVA broke out of the jungle and were standing on the rock. This was not a real smart move on the NVA's part because our gunships were still overhead covering our departure. Needless to say, a number of the NVA paid the ultimate price for their lack of planning.

As we were returning to our base of operations all of the helicopters were very low on fuel. As the boarder came in site I started getting calls from my ^{crew} that the twenty-minute fuel lights were on. When we landed at LZ Stud, we were the only helicopters there to be refueled. There were enough refueling points so that all six of us could refuel at the same time.

MAI → After landing at MAI Loc and checking our helicopter for enemy damage it was discovered that one of the gunships had taken a hit in the shoe cap of the skid. We all thank God for allowing us to survive another intense action so we could do it all over again the next day. There are no atheists in a foxhole!