



**“Knife Tales”**  
**21<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Squadron**  
**Nakon Phanom, AB, Thailand**

by

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*The following are my recollections of operations of the 21<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Squadron, 56<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Wing, Nakon Phanom Air Base, Thailand from March 1969 to February 1970, extracted from my e-mail to other squadron members. Also included and extracted from their past e-mail are the memories of squadron mates John Holt, Jay Merz, Jerry Kibby, Jerry Bucknall and of Bill Shelton, the MACVSOG detachment commander at NKP.*

*(During the Vietnam War, it was Air Force policy to avoid sending aircrew members to a second non-voluntary SEA tour. By the late 1960's, most of the Air Force's relatively small number of helicopter pilots had served a tour in SEA. Consequently, the Air Force initiated an extensive program to transition fixed-wing pilots to helicopters for service in Vietnam. When I completed a 3 year overseas tour of duty in Europe in 1968, I was a bit surprised to find that my assignment to SEA was in CH-3E helicopters. I not only didn't know how to fly a helicopter, I'd never even had a ride in one! However, I went to a three month helicopter conversion course at Sheppard AFB enroute to SEA. Nearly everyone in my class had just returned from USAFE. Most of us were Majors and Lt. Colonels with a few Captains thrown in. We initially trained in UH-1 "Hueys" then went on to the much larger, two-engine, CH-3E (identical to the Jolly Green HH-3 but without the refueling boom). After training, I went to the 21st Special Operations Squadron at NKP. By the time I had been there 6 months, all the "old heads" had rotated, and I was one of the more experienced helicopter instructor pilots in the squadron!)*

### Prairie Fire

The 21<sup>st</sup> SOS was initially sent to NKP to place electronic sensors in Laos along the routes and areas used by the North Vietnamese Army to move men and materials to South Vietnam. These sensors were to be part of what was then known as "McNamara's Line". When sensor placement was begun using CH-3E's early in 1968, it soon became apparent that the areas were too heavily defended to permit sensor placement by slow moving helicopters. After several helicopters were lost to enemy fire, the sensor placement mission was transferred to fighters. At that time, one of the 21<sup>st</sup> SOS prime missions became the support of Operation *Prairie Fire*.

*Prairie Fire* was a top-secret operation run by MACVSOG at Saigon to gather intelligence by inserting Special Operations teams into Laos along the "Trail". (These missions were codenamed "Shining Brass", prior to 1967.) MACVSOG was not under MACV but was under the command of and reported directly to the JCS! During the Vietnam monsoon (the dry season in Thailand & Laos), Army helicopters had great difficulty infiltrating / exfiltrating the teams due to weather. In 1968, the 21st was assigned the task of getting teams in and out during the Vietnam monsoon season. A MACVSOG detachment named "Heavy Hook", was established at NKP to run the program.

The team to be inserted was flown into NKP on a "black" MC-130 from Nha Trang. Teams were normally comprised of two Special Forces troops (Green Berets) and four Montagnard "mercenaries". This whole operation was so covert that our mission "frag" orders were top secret as were the mission briefings! We inserted the teams into very remote, small LZ's which were usually in rugged karst areas near the Trail. The LZ altitudes and temperatures gave us some real density altitude vs weight problems. Often, the LZ density altitudes were such that you could not hover out of ground-effect. A Heavy Hook member riding with a Nail FAC selected, reconnoitered and photographed the potential LZ's. Those pictures as well as the Heavy Hook and Nail opinions were damned important at the mission briefings in determining whether or not you could get low enough in the LZ to hover in ground-effect! (I "fell through" once, unable to hover out of ground-effect, going into a very tight LZ. I probably bent the "collective" I was pulling up so hard on it. What a horrible feeling as you lose translational lift and sink through a hole in the upper jungle canopy with the collective full up! Thank God we got into ground effect before we hit any of the lower trees. After that, I was more choosy about accepting an LZ at high density altitudes unless the performance charts clearly showed that we could hover out of ground-effect.)

The mission was flown with three CH-3's and four A-1 escorts. A Nail O-2 with Heavy Hook rider would meet us in the area to guide us into the LZ. The "low / lead" helicopter, Knife 51, was the air mission commander. The six team members were normally all on Knife 51. On arrival at the LZ area, Knife 52 & 53 would remain high while Knife 51 took the team in. (The rationale for using three helicopters ----- at the high density altitudes we were operating at, we were usually just able to hover out of ground effect with the six man team on board even after dumping fuel. If we were shot down or crashed, there would be 10 people --- team & crew --- to rescue. That would exceed the capability of a single helicopter hovering out of ground-effect, thus two back-ups were used.)

After infil, the team would immediately depart the LZ (as every Gomer within miles could hear the CH-3 when you unloaded the blades to descend). In theory, the team was to be picked up at another predetermined LZ a few days later. However, during my tenure, we rarely made a "normal ex-fil". Every *Prairie Fire* exfil that I made was an "emergency ex-fil" with the team in contact with the NVA. After all, we were putting them in near the "Trail" to gather info and that entire portion of Laos was full of NVA! The Special Forces men that served with MACSOG were as brave as they come!

The emergency ex-fils were something else! Usually the team would have been in a running firefight throughout the night and we launched ASAP in the morning. Flying to their location, you would listen to the Nail FAC with Heavy Hook rider directing air strikes around the team. It sometimes sounded like the entire air strike capability in SEA was being used to keep the Gomers off the team. (This raised the "pucker factor" several notches enroute.) On arrival at the location, the Nail would lead us into the

team's approximate position and the team would pop smoke (predetermined color so the enemy couldn't lure us into a trap). Rarely, was the team able to get to a clear spot during the emergency ex-fils so the jungle penetrator had to be used. (Fortunately, we had the CH-3E's with the door mounted hoist motor and not the cabin hoist "jury rigged" with pulleys found on the older models.) As you hovered near the smoke, the FE, had to spot the team through the trees, then "talk you" to a position over them and guide the penetrator down through the trees. An important job made more interesting for the FE by having to continuously lean out of the door of a helicopter that people are shooting at! While hovering in the treetops, it seemed like it took that cable at least a half-hour to make one trip down and back up and it usually took three cycles to get the six men with their equipment. (If it seemed that long from the air, it must have seemed a helluva lot longer to the guys on the ground!! Again, I can't praise the guts of those SOG team members enough!)

In the summer of 1969, we had a big turnover of people and lost most of our crewmembers with Prairie Fire experience from the previous dry season. By October, we were down to only four qualified "low / lead" aircraft commanders. Then on October 6th, one of those, Phil Conran, was shot down and wounded in the ensuing ground battle when we lost two helicopters in a "trap" on a 7/13 AF-DOSA mission on the Bolivens Plateau in Laos. That left three of us (low / leads) making it a very interesting October and November!

In summary, "Prairie Fire" was a Special Forces mission in which we (21st SOS - "Knives) played a small but important part. I am very proud that our squadron did not lose a team that we inserted during my tenure. (Primarily due to the teams' warrior skills but our guys always "hacked" the emergency exfils!)

Before the 21<sup>st</sup> SOS became involved in SOG missions, the 20th SOS "Green Hornets" flying Huey's (at Nha Trang) built an outstanding record flying SOG missions. Their primary mission was supporting SOG teams operating in Cambodia under the codename "Daniel Boone". One Green Hornet, Jim Fleming, received the Medal of Honor for getting a SOG team out under extremely heavy, point-blank fire.

### **Prairie Fire Emergency Exfil – 18 Nov 69**

One Prairie Fire emergency exfil that I vividly recall occurred on 18 Nov 1969. Jerry Kibby was my co-pilot two FE's /door gunners were SSgt Jim Burns and SSgt Charles Hill. The SOG team had come into contact with the NVA close to "The Trail" during the night. After a running battle, they were surrounded and under attack. Of the six team members (two Americans & four indigenous), one had been killed and two others were wounded. Unfortunately, the weather in the area was terrible; low clouds, poor visibility and severe turbulence. We launched ASAP from NKP with three CH-3s and four A-1 escorts. On arrival in the area, we made contact with the NAIL FAC who had a Heavy Hook (SOG) rider with him. I was pleased to discover that the NAIL was 1/Lt Hank Haden, an outstanding young FAC from NKP with whom I had worked other emergency exfils.

Hank was below the overcast and, despite the fact the clouds were almost on the karst tops, was directing air strikes against the enemy. He advised us that the turbulence in the area was quite severe and that our planned approach route to the team was unusable due to the low clouds. The good news

was that there was a small hole in the undercast that we could descend through. The bad news was that the hole was over a known 23 mm NVA gun.

Obviously, there was no choice and we went through the hole. Once the formation was below the cloud layer, following standard tactics the other two helicopters held clear (while keeping us in sight) as we followed the FAC into the team's location.

We spotted the team's smoke on a steep ridge line that was covered with tall elephant grass. They were under small arms and automatic weapon fire and our escorting A-1s were delivering protective ordnance. The steep slope of the ridge prevented a landing so we hovered with the nose wheel on the ground and the main gear in the air over the precipice. The wind turbulence coming over the edge of the ridge was indeed severe and the CH-3 was bucking wildly as we hovered.

Despite the 30 years that have elapsed, I clearly recall my initial glimpse of the team as they came into the area of elephant grass blown flat by the rotor downwash. The first two team members were dragging their dead comrade by his boots. With the helicopter bucking like a rodeo bull, the team had difficulty getting the body on board and it seemed like an eternity before all were finally on board. The A-1s continued to lay down protective fire as we came safely off the ridge line.

After the exfil, we had the privilege of having a beer with the surviving team members at the SOG Heavy Hook compound at NKP. At that time, I asked the Heavy Hook commander, Major Bill Shelton, why, since they were under fire, didn't the team leave the body. He explained to me the importance to the Nungs/ Vietnamese of returning the body of the team member to his home village for a proper Buddhist funeral. That the SOG Special Forces members would go to that extent (recovering the body while under fire and managing to get it aboard a nearly out of control helicopter) to assure the loyalty and future support of their indigenous troops, made me respect them more than ever! Those guys were unbelievable!

Before sending the narration regarding this mission to other squadron members, I ran it by Bill Shelton (Heavy Hook detachment commander) and Jerry Kibby for their comments and/or additions. Jerry sent me his following interesting comments about the mission: *"If you don't mind my "view from the other seat", I would like to add the following:*

*The A-1s which were providing close air support for the mission were unable to work in their usual way, i.e., near vertical descent firing/dropping weapons followed by a near vertical climb-out and turn back for another near vertical pass at the target area. The combination of low clouds and high terrain forced them to stay under the clouds in order to be of use and they had to make long horizontal passes at the target area, during which they strafed with their 20 mm cannons for as much of the pass as they could. After passing the target area, they had to remain under the clouds with the ground still in sight and fly a horizontal loop back to the target area for another pass - and while they were doing this, they had to avoid the high terrain, each other and the two other CH-3s on the mission. The result of this was a lot less supporting fire on the*

target than would have been possible in different meteorological conditions.

When the team came into sight (popped up out of the elephant grass, by my observation), they were (as you said, Bob) dragging the dead team member. This was my first time as copilot in the "low bird", and I was backing up Bob on the controls in a non-interfering way. He was having to fight the winds to try to keep the nose gear on the top of the peak, and I don't think he noticed that the heavy head winds had resulted in the rotor blades being so low in front of the helicopter that they were almost at belt-level with the approaching team members. There was not time, as the team approached, pulling their dead mate, to tell Bob about the problem. I pulled back on the collective slightly, which caused two things (maybe three, if you count pissing off Bob to an extent), it raised the path of the rotor blades and it caused us to back-off slightly. But it also allowed the team to move under the blade path while it was higher than it had been initially. When we had the team on board, Bob turned us to face down-hill and we accelerated just above ground level down the hill as fast as we could go. As we went down, and prior to pulling into the clouds, we passed right over a manned anti-aircraft position - which did not have time to come to bear on our aircraft. I also recall a sudden sickening feeling as we ran down the hill - smoke in the aircraft. I recognized the source within a second or less as the smoke from our own machine guns. Our FE's were putting out all of the fire they could from our M-60s, and the shape of the CH-3 causes a reverse airflow, pulling air (and gun smoke) from the back up to the front and out the windows.

I met one of the team members we pulled out that day at a bar-b-que at the NKP Heavy Hook detachment some time after this mission. He sat across from me while we ate and told the story of his last mission as a team lead, the one which made him decide he had had enough of that for a while. As he described the mission, I thought it sounded familiar and I asked some specifics that confirmed it was the mission which Bob has described. That Special Forces NCO, once he knew I was part of the crew that got him and his team out, tried to give me anything and everything of value that he had - which in the situation of the day was mostly weapons. I declined his offers, as we were all well provided with personal firearms. He did tell me some things I had not known about the mission. One was that the wounded in their group were wounded by their own grenades, which they had to lay down in a short-long pattern to try to keep the enemy off of them. The other thing he told me that I did not know before was that our helicopter, as it sat there with the nose gear on the karst to pick them up, was actually on top of some of the NVA surrounding them. I sure hope he made it through the rest of the war.

Anyway, these are some of my recollections about the day in addition to what you wrote already. Use them or don't use them as you see fit.  
Jerry"

Well that's it --- as Jerry and I remember it.  
Bob Arnau

## The Evacuation of Muong Soui, Laos

Early on the morning of June 27, 1969, all available 21st SOS (NKP) and 20th SOS (Udon) CH-3E helicopters assembled at Long Tieng, Laos (LS 20A), Gen Vang Pao's HQ and home of the Raven FAC's, about 40 miles SW of the Plain of Jars (PDJ) for a potential evacuation mission. We were joined there by a few Air America H-34's and by a couple of Jolly's (which must have taken very high level approval as the Jolly's normally weren't involved in special operations!).

There were approximately 350 Thai Army troops under attack by a large force of the North Vietnamese Army in Muong Soui, a key town at the west end of the PDJ on Route 7, the main east-west road that ran through the PDJ to North Vietnam. We sat on the ground at Long Tieng for several hours drinking the Raven's coffee, while Vang Pao, the American Air Attache and the CIA folks decided whether the Thai's could hold that key position.

As weather deteriorated and a low ceiling made air strikes in support of the Thai's impossible, the decision to pull the troops was made. As we arrived in trail a couple of minutes apart, Muong Soui looked like a scene from an old war movie. Fires burning all over the place and sporadic mortar explosions occurring. The HLZ was in a large open field but surrounded by flooded rice paddies. I clearly remember that the Thai troops were very well disciplined and stood in ranks awaiting their turn to load despite mortar explosions not very far away. We landed into the wind but had to takeoff down-wind as the enemy fire was coming from the up-wind direction. I was flying as co-pilot that day with Bill Knapp. (Believe me, flying as a co-pilot when you're being shot at REALLY sucks! There's not much to do but sit there and be scared!) When we were full with troops, Bill turned the helicopter downwind and started to takeoff. We were overloaded and barely had enough power to hover. Because of the downwind takeoff, we were unable to get into translational lift. We staggered along above the flooded paddy headed directly toward a large bamboo hootch. With little else to do at the time except watch the hootch grow larger in the windscreen, I hit the fuel dump switch. At the last minute Bill pulled all the pitch that he had and we just cleared the hootch top then fell (and I do mean fell!) with a huge splash into the flooded rice paddy on the far side. (Thank God it was the wet season as we all know how hard a dry rice paddy is!) Unbelievably, we had no damage. I signaled to the Thai NCO holding up four fingers and pointing to the door. He immediately ordered four of his troops to get out which they promptly did--- without argument much to my amazement!. We were then able to takeoff and made it back to Long Tieng. (One of the other 21st SOS CH-3s crashed into this same paddy when shot down a few minutes later! The pilots were Majors Henery & Mattos.) The four Thai's waded back to the HLZ and eventually all the Thai's and our downed aircrew were evacuated.

Epilogue: The next day the Bangkok Post had a large front page story stating that there was absolutely no truth to rumors that Thai forces were involved in the war in Laos!!

The evacuation of Muong Soui is described in a book that the Air Force History Office published in 1983 titled, "The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia - Tactical Airlift", by Ray L. Bowers. It is a large volume, approximately 900 pages, and has one entire chapter, "Airlift In Irregular Warfare", that is primarily about the 20th and 21st SOS.

## "Friendly" Fire --- Isn't!

Throughout my tour, the 21<sup>st</sup> SOS flew a nightly reconnaissance mission around the base and along the Mekong River at random times for base security. Besides the usual crew of pilot, co-pilot and two FE/gunners, on these missions we usually carried a couple of Security Police troops with "starlight scopes". Since there was some insurgent activity in northeast Thailand at that time, the mission made sense but was usually quite boring. The toughest part was staying awake! (The only time I would eat pizza from the NKP "O" Club was on a night that I was scheduled for night recce --- the inevitable indigestion that ensued was bound to keep you awake!)

One night, during a night recce mission, NKP approach control advised us that they had an unknown, slow-moving, westbound target crossing the Mekong from Laos northeast of the base and asked us to check it out. It was a clear night and we were flying at about 500 ft. AGL over the Mekong, southeast of the base. We followed approach control vectors which took us in a large circling path north of the base as we tried to intercept the "bogie". After several minutes we were approximately 10 to 15 miles west of the base, still at 500 feet, when all hell broke loose! We were suddenly taking heavy ground fire from directly beneath us with tracers passing very close to the front and both sides of the helicopter. (The FEs later said that tracers were also passing close behind us.) I started evasive action and the co-pilot doused our navigation lights. Somehow, we managed to escape with no damage and returned to base. (We never did see the bogie although approach control said we were close.)

The next day, after investigating the incident, the local OSI agents advised me that we had flown directly over a Thai Army base and they had fired on us with quad-mounted 50 cal machine guns "seeking monetary rewards"! (Thai military officials, aware of clandestine flights from Laos that may have been supporting Thai insurgents, had authorized attacks on unidentified helicopters and offered monetary rewards. Apparently, the base was alerted by the bogie we were chasing and the Thai gunners were "cocked and primed" when we came over!) Unbelievably, the information that Thai officials had placed a "bounty" on low flying helicopters had never been passed to those of us in the Air Force who were flying helicopters!! From then on, night recce stayed closer to the base!

Two other "night recce" incidents from squadron mate, John Holt:

*"The first time I received ground fire at NKP was on my first night recon mission. I was behind an A-26 on downwind when we had several large bursts of tracers that went between the A-26 and our H-3. That was probably in September of 68. Downwind on this occasion I think was towards the river so the ground fire was coming from inside Thailand.*

*"Later in 1968, I had another unusual experience on a night recon mission in the NKP area. There was a high overcast but visibility was good. It was around midnight and we were just tooling around the base at around 3000 feet. I noticed a red light moving around the base. We watched him for about 10 minutes. I asked tower if they had traffic and did they see the light or aircraft or whatever. They responded they had no traffic. We proceeded to move towards the circling "bogie". Tower at this time called and said they could now see the light and also see us and asked us to investigate as there was not supposed to be any traffic in the area. It is hard to judge distances but when we were about 1/2 mile or so from the object when the object/aircraft began a slow climb. We followed. Still could not see an outline only the light(s). We had closed a little closer when he really started a rapid climb which left us in the dust. He turned off his lights and*

*was headed across the fence (Mekong) into Laos when we last saw him. Invert never could paint him on radar but had us.. I've always wondered what or who that could have been. Not many airfields near NKP that could handle night takeoffs and landings.*

Note: Reports of insurgent flights from Laos and incidents of Thai forces firing on USAF aircraft are discussed in Chapter 16, Airlift in Irregular Warfare, "US Air Force in Southeast Asia, Tactical Airlift" -- published by the Office of Air Force History. In August 1970 several months after my departure, one of our CH-3s on a routine daytime flight was shot down in Thailand near Ubon by insurgents. Four of the five crewmen were killed including the pilot, Captain Al Cheeseman, who had flown several missions as my co-pilot.

### **"Bad News" on the PDJ**

On January 17, 1970, TS 609, an A-1H named "Bad News, assigned to the 22nd SOS, Zorros and flown by Captain Terry Bolstad had its engine shot out near the Plain of Jars. Bolstad was near an old WWII Japanese airfield (and sometimes Lima site) on the PDJ so he made a dead stick landing into it with the gear down. After touch down, he saw that the PSP was missing ahead and retracted the gear before hitting the dirt and the aircraft slid to a stop on its belly. Captain Bolstad was quickly picked up by a Jolly who was on SAR orbit in the area.

The next day, I was fragged to lead a flight of two CH-3E helicopters with an A-1 escort to the PDJ site of the forced landing. We carried a maintenance officer and NCO who were to determine if the A-1 could be recovered. The only problem was that no one knew whether the area belonged to the North Vietnamese or Gen Vang Pao. 56<sup>th</sup> SOW Intell could only state that the situation was "fluid"! (As it usually was at that time of year on the PDJ!)

As we got near the Plain of Jars, I inquired on the Air America common freq if anyone had been in the area recently. One Air America pilot indicated that he had taken fire there the previous day (rather obvious since the A-1 had been shot down there!). Another suggested that we try it and if no one shot at us it was OK! That was really a lot of help!

On arrival we saw troops on the ground and one of the A-1's "trolled" the area. No one shot at him so we decided they were friendly! While the second helicopter held high, we landed, the maintenance guys safetied the guns and ejection seat, quickly assessed the damage and we departed. A maintenance team came in the next day and the A-1 was sling loaded into Long Tieng and eventually returned to full status at NKP.

### **Combined 7/13AF DOSA Mission**

Shortly after I arrived at NKP, the squadron was involved in a large combined operation with the 20th SOS and Air America. This March 25, 1969 mission is described in Chapter 16, Airlift in Irregular Warfare, "US Air Force in Southeast Asia, Tactical Airlift" -- published by the Office of Air Force History. The mission was in the north end of the Laotian panhandle. The book describes it as follows: "Ten Air Force and eight Air America helicopters successfully inserted the 200 man Laotian assault force, but strong enemy reaction necessitated an unplanned withdrawal. Air America helicopters picked up some of the troops but the Air Force CH-3's met heavy fire. Five

were hit, two lost engines and one pilot was wounded. The withdrawal was stopped and the helicopters returned home. The withdrawal was completed the next day by CH-3's and H-34's with fire support by A-1's."

I watched that mission on the radar screen and listened to the radio chatter at our area radar unit, Invert. For an FNG, which I was at the time, it was one hell of an indoctrination! It sounded even worse on the radio than it was. As I recall, one of the damaged CH-3's started vibrating so badly that the crew had to put it down about half way back. They were picked up by another crew and the aircraft was destroyed.

The following comments from squadron mate John Holt, who flew on this mission:

*We used all of the 21<sup>st</sup> SOS helicopters, the CH-3's from the 20<sup>th</sup> SOS at Udom, and some Air America H-34's. We were pulling out what appeared to be a battalion of Lao troops who were under siege. I think I was the first CH-3 in after two Air America H-34's. The Lao troops panicked when the first H-34 landed and it took off with some troops hanging onto the landing gear. The only Lao radio man on the ground got aboard that H-34 and they had to go back, land and throw him out. When I came in the troops appeared to be orderly but then rushed our aircraft. I told the flight engineer to count about 60 people and we were then coming out of there. They were coming in through both the ramp and the door with wounded and dead. Outside my cockpit window a Lao officer was trying to restore order and I watched him split a guy's head open with his pistol butt. When we were at about 2000 ft climbing out after we picked up the troops, we heard a loud bang underneath the aircraft and I thought we had been hit. After landing back at NKP, I found a large hole about a foot in diameter under the helicopter. When going in to pick up the Laos, I had landed on a stump and it had lodged in the bottom of the fuselage. As we climbed out, it broke loose causing a loud thumping sound. John Holt*

As the helicopters were returning across Laos, a fast-mover (F-100 I believe) went down, the pilot safely ejected and landed near their return route in Laos. The downed pilot contacted one of the "Pony" (20th SOS) CH-3E's on his survival radio and they went in to pick him up. He was in a jungle area and the Pony hovered in the tree tops and lowered the penetrator to him. While the downed pilot was being brought up through the trees on the penetrator, the helicopter began to vibrate intensely. To maintain control, the Pony pilot was forced to start forward out of the hover. A tree limb apparently knocked the downed pilot off of the seat. Although he had failed to put the penetrator harness on, he was hanging onto the seat. He was within a few feet of the helicopter door when he could no longer hold on and fell several hundred feet to his death.

### **Helicopter Trap**

In October 1969, we lost two CH-3E's on the Bolivens Plateau in a helicopter trap set by a company size force of the North Vietnamese Army. This was on one of the 7th/13th AF/DOSA missions that we flew in support of the CIA efforts in the Laotian panhandle. I was in the SAR center in the command post throughout that day with the DCO. Eight CH-3 crewmembers with the 50 Laotian troops they were inserting were pinned down in a small depression in an open area. (The lead helicopter was on the ground and the second just about to touchdown when the NV opened fire.)

Their A-1 escorts provided support but the NV were well dug in. Several attempts were made throughout a very long day by HH-53 Jollys to pick them up. However, each time the Jolly's had to abort with battle damage (several damaged HH-53's landed at NKP). Finally at dusk, the wind dropped off and the A-1's delivered "Peanuts" (non-lethal debilitating gas) which allowed two HH-53's to make the pickup. Six of our crewmembers and 49 Laotians got on the first Jolly leaving two lonely 21<sup>st</sup> SOS crewmembers on the ground. However, # 2 Jolly was right behind and picked them up. One Laotian had been killed but everyone else got out. (Phil Conran, aircraft commander of one of the downed Knife CH-3s, returned to one of the aircraft under heavy fire to recover an M-60 machine gun and ammunition to assist in their defense. Phil was recommended for the Medal of Honor and received the Air Force Cross -the Nation's second highest award for valor -for his actions in recovering the machine gun and leading the downed group's defense throughout the day even after being wounded. Ted Silva, the squadron commander, flying as Phil's co-pilot, received a deep crease in his back from a round. As I recall, several Laotians were also wounded.)

This incident and the fact that Phil Conran was nominated for the Medal of Honor is mentioned in the book, "US Air Force in Southeast Asia, Tactical Airlift", mentioned above. (Phil was awarded the Air Force Cross, the Nation's second highest award for valor, for his actions that day.)

One thing that I also remember about that day in the SAR Center relates to the MIA notices that were not sent. The personnel folks prepared missing in action (MIA) messages on our eight crewmembers and the Chief of Personnel advised the Wing Commander that they were supposed to be sent to AF HQ after personnel were downed and not recovered within 2 hours. My boss the DCO, Colonel Ransom, and the Wing Commander, Colonel Crosby, told personnel, "Not no, but HELL no!!". Throughout the long day, the personnel folks kept telling the Wing Commander that regulations required that the messages be sent. Thank God he had the wisdom not to comply with the regulations or eight wives would have been notified during that day that their husbands were MIA!

### **Another Helicopter Trap**

By

Jerry Bucknall (21<sup>st</sup> SOS Flight Engineer / gunner)

On 15 January 69, I was flying with Maj. Henery and Capt Adams on a fateful mission. As I remember it, we were coming out of Nam from an over night stay due to a long mission the day before. We were a three bird gaggle and we were the low (lead) bird. We had no real data pertaining to angels or anything ---- no current codes because we were not on a mission, only dead heading home. It might have been a FAC but not sure who flagged us to help out in a pick up of a downed pilot. Understand, we were just RTB, when we got a call to assist. After minimal coordination we decided to give it a try and we wound up in a trap. VC machine guns were at the spot we were vectored into. Within seconds our number two engine, control tubes and hydraulic accumulators were gone. I remember the red mist in the cabin from the compressed air and hydraulic fluid. Rounds came up through the floors and in through the door. Everything seemed to be coming from the right side. We banked up and to the left (uncontrolled flight) did a 360 and went in hard. I remember everything flying around the cabin it felt as if we were almost inverted. After we hit we exited with our weapons and gear and set up a perimeter off the nose of the ship. Maj Henery got on the radio and

started calling for assistance. Since we were in direct sight of our sister ships we had no trouble correlating our position. We all had our radios out but only Gerry talked. If I remember correctly, Capt Adams was badly hurt. I remember I had my M-60 and the M-79 grenade launcher along with ammo. I looked back at the ship and it looked like a big spider with smoke coming out of the engine areas. The tail boom was broken and leaning off to the side, the front cockpit windows shattered and the electronics compartment door was pushed up to the window areas. The spider effect came from the blades, broken and hanging down. From the front it looked like a big dark spider smoking from its head. That particular sight remains in my memory till this day. Anyway, the attempt was made to get a Jolly Green to assist, they seemed to be in the area, not sure why. It was determined the area was too hot, VC were said to be on the ground and coming our way, Jolly Green did not want to come in at that time. Number two bird (I believe it was Capt Shetter, not sure about the name) said we are not leaving our own down there and came in and picked us up. An experience I'll never forget. Things could have been quite different had it not been for the courage of our brothers on the number two ship. Evidently we did everything right as we were referred to at the jungle school in the P.I. after that as part of the references of what to do in the event you get shot down. Anyway, memories do flood back with the appropriate stimuli, sometimes vague but always there. If my recollection is inaccurate in any way, it's mine and I'll stay with it.

Gerard (Jerry) Bucknall

*Note: Jerry Henery's description to me in 1969 of the "shoot-down" was quite similar to Jerry Bucknall's. Henery recalled that when the CH-3 was hit, the controls were completely shot out and the uncontrolled helicopter went into a big loop which it completed just before impacting with the ground. The crew was indeed fortunate to just survive the impact of the crash! Capt Dave Shetter was awarded the Silver Star for his rescue action on that day. Jerry Henery was shot down for the second time during the evacuation of Muong Soui, Laos on June 27, 1969. In that joint USAF / Air America operation (described elsewhere, herein), Henery's CH-3 was coming out of the LZ, which was under attack by North Vietnamese Army regulars, when automatic weapons fire brought him down into a flooded rice paddy. I'm glad to say, that he went home in one piece after that one! Bob Amau*

**Heavy Hook**  
**(MACSOG Prairie Fire Detachment at NKP)**  
 by  
 Bill Shelton (Detachment Commander)

SOG reconnaissance teams performed missions "across the fence" from various locations in SVN, and Thailand. SOG stood for Studies and Observations Group, part of MACV. The HQ was located in Saigon, with Command and Control detachments at: Danang, C&C North or CCN; Kontum, C&C Central or CCC; and Ban Me Thuot, C&C South or CCS. Prairie Fire was the code name for the SOG ops in the northern half of the AO, while Daniel Boone was the code name for the southern AO.

Our unit was the "back door" launch/recovery site for SOG Ops. We used 56th SOW assets, fragged to us daily from 7/13<sup>th</sup> AF. The package consisted of 2 FACs from 23d

TASS, 3 H3s (later H53s) from the 21st SOS, and 4 A1s from the 3 sqdns of the 56th). On some of the "troops in contact" emergencies, we used Army and USMC assets that would hear our plight and "wander" into the AO with their gunships.

Targets were assigned to a recon team (RT) by MACSOG, Saigon. A 6km X 6km "no strike" box was put on the center of the target, before the team was inserted. Several days before insert, one of my troops would fly out with the FAC, taking 35mm hand held photos of the route to the target, the target HLZ, and the planned" route back. The film was developed immediately in our small photo lab, made into slides. The mission FAC and team were briefed as soon as possible. On the day of the insert, one of us would brief the aircrews at 56th, showing the slides, and make final preps. We had even developed a "silent" insert technique, where no radio xmsn took place from take off until the team was on the ground and broke squelch to let the insert A/C know they were OK. CPT Jay Merz of the 21st SOS flew lead helo on the first of this type insert. I think I was in the FAC, and we were orbiting several miles away from the HLZ. The 21<sup>st</sup> birds were in and out of the HLZ before I could get back to the actual site.

Heavy Hook personnel wore camo fatigues, and a black baseball cap. No rank, no US Army, and no name tags. (plausible denial). Once on the ground, teams did their jobs. Our FACs monitored daily, but at night, the teams only had contact via survival radio with the ABCCC birds, or with the BAT CATS. Any of the 23d or 20th TASS FACs who were flying night missions could also monitor and assist the teams. It happened with some regularity. Our teams were almost always outside the range of friendly artillery. so USAF assets were essential in keeping our guys alive, and bringing them home. There were so many acts of bravery on the part of these aircrews, that it would take pages to relate the stories. Jim Henthorn has some of the info, Bob Noe of the Special Operations Association has some, and lots of us have them in our failing memories. (Bob Noe's site contains chrono lists by year of casualties, all services, for SOG missions. As folks like me wander into the site, they send Bob updates. (Very teresting reading.)

On completion of the RT mission, or after they made contact, an exfiltration would be called for. Most were done under fire. Bob Arnau can attest to the "intensity" of these. There were no easy ones. After a successful exfil, the RTs were usually brought back to the Hook, for initial debrief. After that, a party ensued. In the Hook bar, the RT members (US only) could quaff a few, and swap stories with the air crews. (The indigenous team members were required by treaty, to remain in the back room. We sent food and drink so they could have their own small celebration of life in a more subdued and dignified manner.) The next a.m., the "Blackbird" C130 would arrive and take the RT back to their home base where they were further debriefed.

### **Unusual Night Rescues**

The following recollection is from my squadron mate **John Holt**  
*In 1969 while I was on night recon an F4 crashed on the runway at Ubon. The wingman of the crashed F4 could not land because the runway was closed. He headed for Udom.*

*We heard him on guard call for a tanker as he did not think he had enough fuel to make it. I proceeded towards his flight path. About 50 or so miles west of the base the pilot and observer ejected when they ran out of fuel. Rescue helicopters were scrambled from Udom. I arrived in the general area about 10 minutes after they punched out. It was a very hilly area and dark night but I located both crewmembers by of all things their "strobe lights". I got permission to proceed with the rescue as the choppers at Udom were not even airborne. When we came to a hover over the pilot the damn hoist failed to work. We then found a clearing where we could land about 1 mile from the downed crewmembers. We sent out two of our crew on foot to try and find them. About 45 minutes later they returned with both crewmembers from the F4 without a scratch on them. We flew back to NKP. No one met us so we all went to the O Club and had some drinks. I filled out my reports and never heard a thing about the incident again. Last year I told the story to one of the F4 pilots on their website and he promptly told me who the F4 crew was and what happened from their end.*

*My roommate crashed on a night recon around Xmas 68 when he was hovering over a burning A1 that had crashed. He got vertigo while looking at the fire. One Thai Guard was killed.*

John Holt's recollection regarding the F-4 crew reminded me of similar nighttime incident. I hadn't been at NKP very long and was still flying as co-pilot. I had flown night recce with Bud Kerr and we thought we were through for the night. Around 0300, we were awakened and told to launch ASAP as an A-1 was headed back from the "Barrel Roll" (northern Laos) with a chip light illuminated and a rough running engine. We were airborne within minutes headed north. Shortly after we were in the air, we heard from the A-1's wingman that the rough engine had quit and the pilot had punched out just as they crossed over the Mekong from Laos (up near Grove Jones as I recall). The pilot had landed OK not far from the river on the Thailand side. We were shortly in the area, guided by the fire of the crashed A-1 on the ground. We were able to contact the downed A-1 driver on his survival radio (URC-64?). He said he heard distant ground-fire, thought it was probably the 20MM cooking off from his crashed "Spad" but wasn't sure. (He was on the Thai side of the river but none of us were all that sure of the safety of that remote area with known insurgents.) At any rate, he said that he was in a dry rice paddy and asked us to pick him up if we could. It was a very dark night but the wingman said he had one flare left. In hindsight, making a night, remote area approach under those conditions was certainly questionable, but we weren't about to leave the guy on the ground for a couple of hours until daylight after he asked to be picked up! The A-1 dropped his flare on target and we started our approach. Bud told me to stay on instruments in case the flare went out. Sure enough, the flare went out when we were a couple of hundred feet AGL. I took control and continued a slow descent on instruments until we were low enough for the searchlight to give Bud enough light to go visual. We touched down and a very happy A-1 driver quickly came aboard. We got back to NKP well before daylight.

Like I said, I hadn't been at NKP very long, so I don't recall which O-6 met us when we landed. I do recall that first, "unofficially" ----- he thanked us for bringing the pilot home, then ----- "officially", chewed our ass a wee bit for making an unauthorized night pickup. (Unfortunately, we had been "unable" to contact the command post. That had been one of those cases where "you don't ask a question if you can't stand a no answer"! ) Like John Holt, we heard nothing more about our incident. (Thankfully, so!)

### Last Sensor Drop CH-3 Loss

John Holt has the dubious distinction of being the pilot of the last CH-3 shot down on a sensor drop mission (Feb 1969). (After his "shoot-down", the last of several such losses, the AF decided that placing sensors with helicopters wasn't viable, and transferred the mission to the F-4s. Since 7<sup>th</sup> AF didn't want us to be bored, they replaced the sensor drop mission with MACSOG "Prairie Fire"! The "Heavy Hook" SF guys were far more interesting than sensors. The only catch was that, unlike the sensors, you had to go retrieve them after they had done their job! ) This is John's memory of that fateful sensor drop mission:

*I well remember the day we went down. John Hughes was my copilot and C.F. Hill and W.J. Smith were the FE / gunners. While we were dropping a string of sensors near the "Trail", ground fire knocked out one of our engines. We were unable to climb on one engine and steadily getting closer to the trees. As we were circling around while receiving ground fire I saw what appeared to be heavy tracer fire directly in front of me and we were going to fly straight into it. I thought we are dead for sure. As we entered the zone it turned out to be leaflets dropped by a psyops Litterbug flying overhead at about 10,000 feet. As the leaflets fluttered in the sun they sparkled and gave the appearance of heavy ground fire. (This is confirmed on the "Waterboy Radar" rescue tape when the Litterbug reported in on the radio. Is war crazy or what — people getting shot at while leaflets are raining from the sky!)*

*I finally decided we could no longer fly. The remaining engine's temp was well over the red line and we were unable to dump fuel — we had a bird without fuel dump capability! I recall Jim Dunn, flying #2, saying on the radio, "You better think about it hoss — trying to get over those mountains on one engine". Colonel White, the 56<sup>th</sup> SQW Wing Commander was the lead Hobo (A-1 escorts). He transmitted that I should head south as there was a gun behind me firing at us. There were some flat rice paddies to the southwest but I figured we would be in the open there and very subject to getting our butts shot. So I elected to land on top of a hill in some trees and brush. John Hughes reminded me on approach that we would not be able to hover which was good thinking and I elected to go in gear down to absorb the shock. When we hit (smooth landing of course) we were cutting down trees all over the place and the chopper was really shaking but we stayed upright. It was only minutes until the bombs from the A-1's were exploding (at least that is what I thought the concussions were). I was concerned that #2 could not see us on the ground but alas, Jim Dunn and crew soon showed up. (You know, I was never really scared until the next flight a few weeks later but that passed when the mission began. You are just too busy in those situations to be scared.) I always wondered what was going through the crews mind in back as I don't think they could hear all the radio chatter. They could see a lot of fuel coming out of the engine and smell it so I guess they had a right to be scared. Thanks to the skill and guts of Jim Dunn and the crew of #2, we were picked up under "trying" circumstances. Only those who were involved know just how trying those circumstances were!*

## Tactics, History etc

More recollections by John Holt:

When I arrived at NKP in August 1968, the original group of pilots that came with the 21<sup>st</sup> from the States were still there. I believe nearly all them were converted fixed-wing pilots. This original cadre had established tactics for sensor string drops which used two CH-3s, a high bird and a low bird. They had the high bird fly down with the low bird to perhaps 1000 feet AGL or lower. I think I was the first lead pilot to have my second helicopter stay high out of small arms range so we would not both be shot down at once. I understand that the tactics were later changed to use two high birds. We only used one high bird during my tour.

The group of pilots that arrived with me in 1968 to replace the initial cadre were very experienced in flying helicopters. Many had been instructors at the conversion school at Shepherd AFB. Our new commander, Lt Col Welch, was one of them. He had given me my final check ride a couple of years earlier when I went through the helicopter conversion school. (I was in the first group of fixed wing pilots to go through the conversion school. That was around 1966 as I recall.) Although I was former fixed wing, when I arrived at NKP I was an experienced helicopter pilot with around 2000 hours of helicopter time in UH-1's and the H-43B. I was lead qualified after just one mission. At one point, the squadron considered allowing only Instructor Pilots to become leads. I really was not too happy about that as only a few of us were IPs. Wisely, they did not do that as nearly all the unit pilots at that time had a lot of helicopter experience.

The pilots of the first three helicopter losses that the squadron suffered had all lived in the same room in the squadron hooch, Tryon Lindabury, myself and one of the pilots from the original group. What are the odds on that? I carved a note to that effect in the wall over my bed so the next guy sleeping there would have something to think about.

I flew a mission to an unused airstrip in Laos to sling load out a large special bomb that was still on an A-1 that had to make an emergency landing there. The A-1 had landed on an abandoned runway and the pilot had no injuries. Unfortunately, he had hit one or two water buffalo that were accompanied by some young people. (I did not witness this but was told about it prior to my mission) I don't know the nomenclature of the bomb we picked up but it was being tested for clearing jungle areas by spreading a combustible vapor that then exploded. It was very large and almost touched the ground when hung under an A-1. The bombs were being tested at NKP (I only saw them a few times during the test) and there was a high priority placed on getting the unused one back from Laos. On my way to the bomb a formation of T-28's made a fighter type pass and scared the hell out of us. Undoubtedly some Thai or Lao pilots having fun, probably out of Udorn AB.

During our spare time, we began building a party hooch in back of our sleeping hooch. It was about half complete with the roof and walls up when without warning, it totally collapsed. Fortunately no one was inside. I guess we were better at flying than construction!

The first mission for all of us was an orientation flight with a Nail FAC putting in strikes to give us a good look at the terrain in Laos. I flew in an O-2. We found no targets in our area and all we did that day was bob and weave at low level. He did fire off some smoke rockets to show me how that worked.

About half way through my tour we got a new Wing Director of Maintenance. He came through our squadron office on a visit and recognized me as former head of the

A & E Squadron at Turner AFB which maintained the avionics on B-52s and KC-135's. Our unit had won the award for the outstanding A & E Squadron in the Air Force during my tenure. Consequently, he requested that I be made commander of the A & E unit at NKP. I was given the choice of taking the job or not. I would certainly have liked the job but turned it down. I guess I was afraid I would be viewed as Chicken Little so I stayed with the 21<sup>st</sup> SOS. Looking back I am glad I did.

John Holt

*Bob's comments: The use of three CH-3s — one low, two high — was adopted when the sensor drop missions were eliminated and replaced with Prairie Fire. Prairie Fire infils / exfils were consistently at high density altitudes near the Trail. To make matters worse, nearly all exfils were emergencies and usually required out-of-ground-effect hoist recoveries. Even after dumping fuel, we were often damned close to max power in the hover while recovering the last members of the team. Had we gone down at one of those locations, there would have then been 10 people to pick up rather than 6, an impossible task for a single CH-3 at those high density altitudes. Two high birds were definitely required. On one such emergency recovery with the team under fire, I was hovering in the tops of tall trees. (I can still envision the tree top against my windshield that I was using as a reference point to hold my hover position over the team.) We had to lower the penetrator three times to get all six men. As the penetrator was coming up the first time, an engine compartment fire warning light came on. Since we had a slight tailwind, I optimistically ignored the light. The second time the hook was coming up, the other engine fire warning light also came on. I now had both engine fire lights on and two team members still on the ground. I suppose that I should have pulled off and called #2 in ——— but there was no way I could leave those two guys on the ground alone. We got them up on the third cycle of the penetrator and fortunately the fire lights went out after I got translational lift and was able to reduce power.*

*Keeping the low helicopter in sight from the high birds was often difficult. (The helicopters had camouflage paint that worked the way it was intended blending into the dense jungle backdrop.) Someone came up with an excellent solution — painting a portion of the top of one rotor blade with white paint. That greatly aided us in keeping sight of the low bird from above.*

*The orientation FAC mission was still the policy when i arrived. I went with an OV-10 Nail. (The back seat of an OV-10 is one of the most uncomfortable rides I've ever had. The prop tips come within inches of your head and the noise / vibration levels are awful. Of course, adding to my discomfort was the fact that it was the first time I had been shot at!) We put several strikes in that day including one of Navy birds dropping mines of some sort in a narrow river. On one of the strikes on a "suspected truck park" we got some pretty large secondary explosions. A very interesting mission.*

*Throughout my tour, I was continually impressed with the outstanding leadership and maturity displayed by the FACs, most of who were young captains and lieutenants. Their ability to keep track of multiple flights of fighters, assign priorities based on the fuel state / ordnance loads of each flight and ability to remain calm under great pressure was truly impressive. I remain an ardent admirer of the SEA FACs and particularly of those Nails (with the MACSOG Covey rider) who coordinated the fighter / helicopter efforts on Prairie Fire emergency exfils. They saved a lot of lives.*

Bob Amau

## B-52 Arc Light – Up Close

I had the unwanted opportunity to observe a B-52 Arc Light strike from a too close vantage point in 1969. We had "infilmed" a MACSOG "Prairie Fire" team near the trail in Laos just south of the DMZ and landed at Quang Tri to refuel. While leading the flight as we climbed out of Quang Tri on our return to NKP, I called every air and ground control unit in the book for clearance through the area to avoid air strikes and artillery. (Friendly, outbound artillery shells go quite high and always win mid-air with helicopters!) I was leading the flight of 3 CH-3E's and 4 A-1 escorts and we were still climbing, headed west about 4,000' AGL when the ground at our 1 o'clock position about a mile away started erupting! Between curses, I had the flight break hard left. Looking up, we could hardly see the Buffs high above through the haze. As we watched what looked like Armageddon below, I remember feeling sorry for the poor SOBs on the ground! It was truly awesome! I don't care how deep they were dug in, if the "Gomers" were there, they were dead! The psychological impact of Arc Lights on the enemy had to have been significant.

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The following are recollections of another squadron mate, **Jay Merz**. They are taken from Jay's e-mails.

### Long Tieng, Laos (Lima 20A)

Who remembers the green and red plywood and machine gun tower signals for road traffic at Long Tieng?

The runway at Long Tieng in Northern Laos was unusual to say the least. The west end "barrier" was a karst (black larva rock) mountain that formed a vertical wall at the end of the pavement. All fixed wing traffic landed west and departed east without regard for the wind. The west third of the runway had a hump that prevented aircraft on one end from seeing aircraft on the other end. There was a heavily used municipal street that crossed near the middle of the runway. The tower operators would pull in a green and slide out a red sheet of plywood to stop road traffic when an aircraft was departing or arriving. If their signal was ignored by the road traffic the tower operator would step out and fire a machine gun into the air. That happened several times a day and it usually stopped the road traffic. All this is background for a couple of short stories. If they put this stuff in a war movie everybody would think it could never happen that way.

#1. We parked our two H-3's on the north gravel apron near the east end of the runway at Long Tien. A CIA pilot came down in an old Dodge six passenger truck to take us to a weather brief at the west end. Half way up the runway we pulled off to the side because the tower put out the red signal for a departing Air America C-123. We could just see the tail of the C-123 at the west end. A Laotian captain had just parked his T-28 and he was also heading for a weather brief while his aircraft was re-armed. He was stopped in front of us on a red motor cycle impatiently waiting for clearance from the tower. Several minutes and much motor cycle engine revving went by. The C-123 was not moving. The Laotian pilot started up the runway with his white scarf flapping in the wind. He waved for us to follow him. As we passed in front of the tower

the tower operator stepped out and started firing his machine gun into the air. The Laotian pilot took his 38 out and emptied it into the air while racing up the runway one handed. Our truck was in close trail. We made it before the C-123 departed.

#2. One of our CH-3's split away from a refugee shuttle with a maintenance problem. He landed at Long Tieng. The tower operators sometimes had problems with English. Our pilot was cleared to hover taxi across the runway to the south apron. A departing armed T-28 struck the helicopter on the right main gear and the electronics compartment nose door. The T-28 pilot ejected and landed with a serious head injury. The H-3 lost the nose door, the pilots lower right window and the right main gear scissors was broken. After "expedient" repairs (duct tape) at Long Tieng, I escorted the CH-3 (at 40 knots) that night to Udorn for repairs. The boat hull made the H-3 a tough bird.

### **Guests of the General**

The 21SOS was on one of the major mission (of two that occurred during my first tour at NKP, Aug 69-Aug 70) to northern Laos to relocate refugees for General Vang Pao. All ten of the squadrons HH-3E's had been picking up refugees from an LZ just West of North Vietnam (north of the PDJ) and very close the Laos/China border. We normally spent the night in Thailand because a lot of H-3's spending the night in Laos were too attractive a target for a night attack. Two days into the shuttle bad weather was forcing us back to Lima Site 20A. We made it in through the "back door" under the capable guidance of one of our CIA friends. A gaggle of 10 H-3's in trail in a narrow winding series of valleys with very limited visibility was not much fun. We planned an early morning stage out for the relocation of thousands more Mao Tribesmen and their families. I was the lead aircraft commander with our Squadron Commander as my copilot. We were to restart the shuttle of refugees following an early morning coordinated join up with our NKP A-1 escorts. We were met at 20A by another CIA escort who set up rooms for the crews in their little BOQ/Club hooch.

The Sq./CC and I were surprised when he and I were invited to dinner at General Vang Pao's Headquarters. We were escorted by our CIA host who served as our interpreter. It was late afternoon and the three of us were standing with some of the General's staff along the wall of a large meeting room. The general was seated at the end of the room. Several armed guards physically drug a very distraught uniformed Laotian Captain into the room for a hearing before the general. Our interpreter provided a brief summary. The Captain was being accused of being less than aggressive in leading his men in the defense of a hilltop position. He was declared guilty and sentenced to time in an underground tiger pit. This was not considered a good sentence by the captain. His legs collapsed and he was carried protesting from the room. My boss was called forward by the general and presented with a Mao antique rifle (I believe it was a muzzle loader with a pistol grip stock). We adjourned to the next room for drinks followed by dinner. The three of us were the only non Laotians of about 20 at the table. Everybody was provided with a water glass that was  $\frac{3}{4}$  filled with Napoleon Brandy. The General was very gracious and pleased to be offering us an excellent brandy. Serving plates were passed with rice, with a vegetable that looked like spinach and two sauce and meat and or vegetable dishes. I did not know it but my squadron commander and I were about to provide our escort with his entertainment for the evening. I started with a small bite of the spinach. It was absolutely the second

hottest (peppery) thing that I have ever put into my mouth. My mouth was on fire. Tears were welling up in my eyes. The only drink on the table was brandy and I was afraid that it would not provide me with any relief. I did not want to create a scene so I sought out a large fork full of the rice dish to quell the fire. The harmless and familiar looking rice was far spicier than the spinach. It was absolutely the hottest (peppery) thing that I have ever put in my mouth. Our escort sitting to my left was nearly in stitches. He had seen this before. My boss to my right was whispering something along the line of "what is your problem?" I grabbed for the brandy. My boss was next. In seconds we were both rinsing out our mouths with brandy. Neither of us ate much for dinner. I was glad to get back to the hooch for a cold beer. So much for that cultural exchange.

A short follow on -----the next morning the Long Tieng valley was socked in. After numerous checks with the weather people at NKP we decided it would be hours before we could restart the shuttle. My boss took off for the CIA main hooch to wash some cloths. Minutes later the weather started clearing. I got back together with NKP weather and their latest data said it was a go. I called for our escorts and sent the crews the word to crank up. My boss arrived aboard (after some delay) with a great wet wad of dripping flight suits and underwear. The laundry was plopped down under the flight engineers seat were it could drip down into the electronics compartment below. I was leading our ten H-3's, talking up a rendezvous with our escorts coordinating with the ABCCC and the TUOC at NKP. My boss was ringing out his shorts and tee shirts and draping them around the cockpit on the seat backs and over the armor plate. I did insist that he let me uncover the chip lights and some of the other silly things I thought were important. War is weird.

After a couple of days of this evacuation mission, the first bird into the LZ one morning had a rocket hit the LZ just outside the rotor disk. It killed and wounded many people ready to load. The H-3 took over 200 hits. It vaulted into the air and one of the back enders emptied his M-16 into the source of the rocket smoke at the bottom of the hill the LZ was on. His BIM light came on and hydraulic fluid started leaking into the cabin but it turned out to be coming from the rotor brake reservoir. The vault into the air resulted in a main gear box and double engine change due to over torque and over temp. Two days later we continued shuttling from another LZ a few miles away. These LZ's were east of the PDJ about 3-4 miles from the N Viet border. We were moving loads of 50 to 70 pax per bird. I believe these pax were dependents of Gen Vang Pao's troops trying to get back to a more secure area prior to the start of the rainy season. Jay Merz H-3 Pilot 21SOS Aug 69-Aug 70.

### **No Hover, No Go**

In April 1970 in Laos the 21st Sp Ops Sq had been conducting emergency refugee evacuations from a high narrow LZ that was east of the Plain De Jars and about three miles from N Viet Nam. Each of our 10 HH-3E's had been shuttling 50 to 75 refugees per sortie to a base near the PDJ for several days from dawn to dusk. Most armor plate, the refueling probe, seats, forward door, aft ramp and the drop tanks were removed from all the birds to reduce weight.

One of the newer pilots in the squadron came up to me and told me that we were right when we told him that if you don't know what you weigh don't take off if you can't hover. This was his tale:

*"Since we were the last bird on the last sortie of the day, we had the irrigation pump that had been converted to pump fuel from drums tied down at the back. We dropped off four Laotian soldiers. The three soldiers whom they relieved and the body of a fourth (wrapped in parachute material) were loaded first. The sun was setting and the refugees were in a panic to escape capture by the N. Vietnamese. They scrambled aboard in a horde and packed in like sardines. We had no seat belts. The dust chased the rest away when we tried to hover. It wouldn't hover so we decided to try a running take off. Our tail rotor just cleared the lip of the LZ. At an optimum climb speed and at maximum power plus all the extra torque that backing out the topping screws would get us we were still descending at 200-300 Ft/Min into a jungle covered valley where we had drawn fire earlier. Our fuel was already below the level that would dump. We ordered the flight engineers to reduce our load. They threw out both M-69 machine guns and the ammo cans. One engineer started climbing over the refugees to get to the back while the other began fighting our passengers for their sacks of pots, rice and personal belongings. These were going out the front door. The webbing and tie downs at the back were cut so that the pump, the hoses and the body of the soldier could be jettisoned. His three friends threw out their weapons and grenades. For a few seconds they thought they were next. Dumping the pump was the key. We circled the valley twice while climbing at about 100 Ft/Min just to clear the hills. The first time we came off maximum power was to land at the refugee drop off point. The next time she won't hover, we don't go."*

Jay Merz H-3 Pilot 21SOS Aug 69-Aug 70.

### **More Prairie Fire**

Reading about some of the missions some of you experienced or heard about brought up some of my memories. One of them follows. This may not be error free. It has been a few years.

On 21 Apr 1970 I was scheduled for a before dawn get up to be the aircraft commander of the third (in a Prairie Fire team infiltration gaggle) of three CH-3E's and four A-1E's. We had studied the LZ photos and did most of our flight planning the evening of the 20th. The briefing included six 21SOS pilots, four A-1 Hobo pilots and a Prairie Fire OV-10 FAC with his Army (Heavy Hook) liaison troop in the back seat. The third helicopter was needed due to the high elevation of the LZ and the size of the team (two US and six indigenous). We always planned for enough high birds to pull out the team and the lead helicopter crew when needed. The infiltration point was about 35 miles west of Quang Tri where we planned to hot refuel (one engine and rotors turning) while our A-1's circled to escort us back to NKP. The LZ was near a nearly bald ridge near the ankle of a mountain called "the boot." It was in Laos east and a little south of the Tchepone (Muang Xepon) Pass. The OV-10 reported the weather good in the LZ area. The black C-130 dropped the black pajama clad team off into Heavy Hook's step van. The van backed up to the running lead bird. The team loaded and we launched the gaggle out of NKP. The gaggle drew a lot of AAA (23MM) fire from a ridge near our "safe" trail crossing point just as we started our decent through the scattered clouds. We were above 23MM range but I marked the muzzle flash points on my map for the debrief. The lead H-3 and two A-1's inserted the team while the rest of us stayed above small arms range just below the clouds. We gassed up at Quang Tri. A check with the FAC on the way back to NKP established that all was quiet with the team. We placed

our birds on alert by setting all the switches for a scramble start and went to the NKP club for lunch.

A few hours later we were ordered to scramble for an emergency exfiltration because our team was in a fire fight and two team members (including the US team leader) were wounded. The number two H-3 could not launch due to a maintenance problem so I moved up to the number two position. The team was fighting their way toward a steep ridge clearing and due to the slope both helicopters would be needed to get the team out. We drew the same AAA fire at our trail crossing point. The lead H-3 approached the LZ from the SW where there was a notch in the trees. He reported small arms fire with no hits during his final approach. The A-1's were working over the area SW of the team with CBU's (cluster bomb units) and 20MM with fleshettes (small steel darts in the head of an explosive 20MM machine gun shell).

The indigenous tribes people in Laos practice slash and burn agriculture where the jungle is cut down and burned free of brush. A crop is planted in the clearing for a year or two until the poor soil needs to be left for a new site. The ridge top clearing that the team was trying to reach was fairly flat. The team was exhausted and couldn't make it to the top carrying the wounded. The steep slope where the lead bird hovered over the team was covered with 6 ft tall stumps that had been cut by somebody standing on the uphill side of the trees. There was no ground cushion due to the steep grade of the slope. The lead bird hoist loaded the two US troops and the wounded indigenous troop. He drew fire with no hits going out of the LZ and reported that he had overtemped both engines and he had overtorqued his main gear box picking up the three team members. He departed for the hospital and fuel at Quang Tri.

We always gave the lightest H-3 to the flight lead. I was now heading into the LZ to pick up five exhausted team members with a heavier H-3 and no high bird. The A-1's worked over the SW approach route but we still drew fire from troops in the jungle along the approach course. They probably were shooting at our noise because the tree cover below the LZ area was too thick to see us. We could tell where the bad guys were by the direction that the team was firing. I came to a hover over the team with my rotor blades about a foot from the tall stumps in the front. The team was about 25 feet below the front (rescue hoist) door.

I was using all available power just to hold that hover. If we had tried to hoist the team aboard the weight would force us down into the tree stumps off our nose and rolled us down the hill on top of them. I moved up the hill to the level clearing and landed. We told the OV-10 that the team would have to come up where we were because we could not pick them up off the slope. We later learned that there was an enemy command post a click (1000 meters) south of our position. The A-1's continued to make strafing passes (below where we were sitting) to the south to help keep heads down. Our backenders were watching the tree lines for bad guys. We were very low on fuel because we always dumped to lighten our load on the way into an LZ. It took the team what seemed like forever to move up the hill. It probably was about ten minutes. They finally made it most of the way up to us to an area that had shorter stumps and that was not so steep. Just as we lifted off and hovered over to the team a cobra gunship arrived over the LZ and circled the area. We didn't know it, but the Heavy Hook liaison troop in the OV-10 had been working the army net to get us some cover. We picked up three team members on the first hoist lift and two on the second. I hover taxied up to the flat area and dove off the hill to the SW. We drew small arms again from the same SW source. Two team members lying on their stomachs at the door and both of our gunners fired into the jungle to keep heads down as we departed. We made

it to Quang Tri to drop off the team on fumes with an in-commission H-3. While we were hot refueling we got an HF radio call from the 21SOS Ops Officer at NKP. He directed that we switch aircraft. They wanted our more experienced crew to stay in Viet Nam to test hop the broken H-3. The first crew took off in our bird and joined the four waiting A-1's for the flight to NKP and a great party.

We spent four wonderful nights in Quang Tri putting two new engines and a new main gear box on the H-3. Quang Tri is on the ocean and very sandy. We could walk from our hooch to the latrine, to the little PX and to the dining hall without stepping off of a rotor blade. The whole base used damaged UH-1 rotor blades for sidewalks. We flew down to Da Nang for some technical assistance from the Jolly Green H-3 maintenance unit there. The next day we joined up with a Lt. in a lone NKP A-1 that had just received a new engine at Da Nang. We all tested out our new engines while flying over the Ho Chi Minh Trail back to NKP.

Jay Merz, 21<sup>st</sup> SOS, NKP Aug 69 to Aug 70.

(I ended up with 1000 hours in the H-19 and almost 3500 hours in the H-3. I was a captain with about 3000 helicopter hours at the time of this 1970 story.)

### Tactics

The following are some of my recollections of our efforts to improve the success of our SOG teams and some one or two of a kind missions that I remember.

False Infiltration: We had experienced several missions where our road watch teams were being pursued or harassed almost as soon as we put them in. Somebody came up with the idea of using one of the high H-3's and their escorts to confuse the troops on the ground. The formation would split up after crossing the trail. While the team was being inserted on the planned LZ or ridge line with an H-3 and two A-1's and an OV-10 on another nearby ridge or clearing an empty H-3 would hover for a minute or two with A-1's passing nearby to confuse any forces assigned to pursue or investigate a possible team. It is very difficult to pinpoint where helicopter rotor noise is coming from when heavy vegetation obstructs your view. I recall participating in several false infiltration's in order to improved the chances that our teams would be able to accomplish their missions.

Radio Silent Infiltration: We decided that some reduced success of some of our teams may have been caused by enemy monitoring of our routine radio traffic to air traffic control agencies, command posts, FAC's, escorts and wingmen. We pre-briefed and pre-coordinated several radio silent mission. I recall one mission where it worked too well. I was the lead H-3. We arrived over the LZ. We split away from our high birds. We passed by the FAC and inserted the team. We rejoined our high birds and departed for Quang Tri for a hot refueling. Probably due to low clouds the FAC had totally missed the infiltration and our entire gaggle. The first time they new that they had missed the team insertion was when the team call in from the ground that all was quiet. Sometimes special tactics fake out more people than intended.

Snatch Missions: I recall pulling a special two man team out that had only been in one or two days. The team consisted of a blue eyed American NCO with dyed black hair and one local troop. They came out with three people. The third was snatched to provide some current intelligence. That same NCO on another mission ejected from the back seat of an OV-10 and was the sole survivor of shoot down near the DMZ hat caused some very sad days at NKP for us all.

Jay Merz, H-3 pilot, 21 SOS, Aug 69-Aug 70

### Cambodia Missions

Cambodia infiltration: This mission turned out to be a learning experience for a young A-1 driver. I was one of the high birds on a four H-3, four A-1 long range mission way south to west central Cambodia. It was a six man team with no Americans. About 20-30 miles into Cambodia and not far from the LZ my H-3 developed a serious problem that was a clear indication that I needed to head for a friendly base. We turned for Korat with one of the A-1's. The team was inserted without incident without us. The weather at Korat was turning bad. There was a mean looking thunderstorm just west of the base. The wind was out of the east so all traffic (a Specter C-130 gun-ship and several Wolf, F-4's) was landing to the east. The east half of the base was clear and VFR. At about ten miles I asked for a special VFR. I was cleared in special VFR and turned over to the tower. The A-1 liked the sound of that clearance but they ignored his request for it. He was vectored to a downwind that took him right into the storm. He landed about 30 minutes after we had shutdown. He described a harrowing radar vectored trip through the storm with turbulence, hail, heavy rain and lightening. It did not sound like fun. He asked me what was that "special VFR." I had to explain to him that they wouldn't give it to him because it was a helicopter only clearance.

Cambodia exfiltration: The same team above had been in for a week and I was the lead H-3 on the exfil. The LZ area was covered with low (40'to 50') thinly spaced trees that were just thick enough to prevent landing so we started a penetrator and hoist exfil. The team had apparently never seen a penetrator. They fiddled with it to a point where my hoist operator saw the need to pull it back up. He folded down the seats and sent it back down so they could see how to use it. Two got on and we almost lost one of them during boarding because they failed to use the nylon strap. The hoist operator pulled out the straps and showed them to the rest of the team. The second time three team members boarded the penetrator. One on a seat with straps properly under his arms and around his back the third was standing on the seat holding on to that cable two feet above the penetrator with no safety strap. The third was hanging below the seats with a safety strap on. We just barely managed to get them aboard without dropping them. The last team member came up alone without incident. This three ring circus penetrator exfil that almost resulted in dropping two of the team took about three times as long as it should have. The team is lucky my hoist operator didn't kill them all after he got them aboard. When we got back to NKP I put a penetrator over my shoulder and marched off for a discussion with Bill Shelton at Heavy Hook. I respectfully asked that they hang the jungle penetrator in their briefing room so we would never have to pull out a team that had never seen one.

Jay Merz, 21<sup>st</sup> SOS, CH-3 Pilot, Aug 1969-70

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**ABC Evening News, Feb 16, 1971 ----- Commentary by Harry Reasoner**

*You can't help but have the feeling that there will come a future generation of men -- if there are any future generations of men -- who will look at old pictures of helicopters and say -- "You've got to be kidding".*

*Helicopters have that look that certain machines have in historical drawings -- machines or devices that came just before a major breakthrough -- record changers just before the lightweight vinyl LP, for instance.*

*Mark Twain once noted that he lost belief in the conventional pictures of angels of his boyhood. when a scientist calculated that for a 150 pound man to fly like a bird he would have to have a breastbone 15 feet wide supporting wings in proportion.*

*That's sort of the way a helicopter looks. The thing is, helicopters are different from planes. An airplane by its nature wants to fly, and if not interfered with too strongly by unusual events or by a deliberately incompetent pilot, it will fly.*

*A helicopter does not want to fly. It is maintained in the air by a variety of forces and controls working in opposition to each other, and if there is any disturbance in the delicate balance, the helicopter stops flying, immediately and disastrously. There is not such thing as a gliding helicopter.*

*This is why being a helicopter pilot is so different from being an airplane pilot, and why, in generality, airplane pilots are: "Open, clear-eyed buoyant extroverts" and helicopter pilots "are brooders, introspective anticipators of trouble."*

*They know if something bad has not happened, it is about to.*

*All of this, of course, is greatly complicated by being shot at. American helicopter crews are being shot at more often and more accurately these days from North Vietnam to Khe Sanh to Tchepone, than at almost any other time in this whole war. It has been a helicopter war all along -- and the strange, ungainly, unlovable craft have reached the peak of being needed and the peak of being vulnerable at the same moment.*

*Everyone who has flown over combat zones in Vietnam in a helicopter knows the heart-stopping feeling you get when you have to go below 2 thousand feet: the men going in and out of Laos and North Vietnam rarely get a chance to fly that high. They must be very brave men indeed.*

*This is a war we could not have considered without our helicopters. The pilots and crewmembers are beginning to feel like Mark Twain's man who was tarred and feathered: "If weren't for the honor of the thing, they would just as soon have missed it."*

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## 21<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Squadron

CH-3E's  
Aug 31, 2002

| Tail number | survived / destroyed | Remarks                         |
|-------------|----------------------|---------------------------------|
| 62-12579*   | destroyed, 6 Nov 69  |                                 |
| 63-09676*   | survived             | Wright-Patt AF Museum           |
| 63-09681**  | destroyed, 13 Aug 70 | ground fire near Ubon, Thailand |
| 63-09689*** | survived             |                                 |
| 63-09691*** | no info              |                                 |
| 64-14222*   | no info              |                                 |
| 64-14223**  | survived             |                                 |
| 64-14237*** | destroyed, 26 Feb 69 | last sensor drop mission loss   |
| 65-15692**  | survived             |                                 |
| 65-15695*   | survived             |                                 |
| 66-13287*   | destroyed, 24 Oct 70 |                                 |
| 66-13288*   | destroyed, 3 Feb 69  |                                 |
| 66-13291*   | survived             |                                 |
| 66-13292*   | survived             | Tunisian AF                     |
| 66-13293*   | no info              |                                 |
| 66-13294*** | destroyed, 30 Mar 68 |                                 |
| 66-13295*** | destroyed, 23 May 68 |                                 |
| 66-13296*   | survived             |                                 |
| 67-14702*** | destroyed, 15 Jan 69 |                                 |
| 67-14703*   | survived             | Warner Robbins AFB Museum       |
| 67-14718**  | survived             | Desert Storm, Tunisian AF       |

\* Arnau Form 5

\*\* Kibby Form 5

\*\*\* Squadron yearbook

Survived/destroyed info from Jolly Green list at: <http://www.jollygreen.org/hh-3e.htm>  
And from Jim Henthorne's list at: <http://www.nexus.net/~911gfx/vietnam.html>

AF records indicate that during 1969, seven CH-3s were lost to ground fire in SEA. Among these, on 27 June 69, one CH-3E was lost to ground fire during evacuation of Muong Soui, Laos (Hennery & Mattos). On 6 Oct 69, two CH-3Es were lost while inserting Laotian SGUs near Muong Phine, Laos in a helicopter trap set by the NVA.