

**A WRONG DECISION FOR SOME BAD REASONS**

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**INTRODUCTION**

This article is both a response and an amplification to one of the installments of Tom Phillips fine series on the adventures of HAL-3, Det Nine. It is not an apologia but is an admission that, of all the decisions that I made over a number of years on active duty, one stands out as a choice that I would like to have back. On the other hand, one episode that Tom described, and on which I will offer my reflections, had a great deal to do with shaping my subsequent posture regarding decisions on people and other matters for which I was responsible. I thought that I had always taken a fairly tough stand on matters of principle but thereafter, I became much more willing to do exactly what I believed in and let the chips (career, if necessary) fall where they might. In the end, nobody on our side got killed or even hurt because of my decision, but we did lose a Huey with all it's equipment. But lots of Hueys with all equipment were lost in Vietnam and so it might have been easy to forget the episode. "Put it behind us" as the politicians say. I did not forget it then or thereafter. It still comes back to me when some program needs a little "smoothing over" to get by some obstacle and those "go along to get along" demons rise from the mists. When somebody tells me that "everything's gonna be OK", I find myself back on an LST trying to fix things so that a pilot (who qualified for Fire Team Leader (FTL) according to the book but with less than the full confidence of his peers and supervisor) can get just one mission as the Big Guy in his log book for record purposes and for some good feelings about himself. As I said, nobody

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got hurt but, *but, but!!* **But they nearly did** and it would have all been for nothing. And now, let me tell it as I recall it.

The way Tom wrote it, I was new on Det, not yet qualified as a FTL or even an AHAC, and therefore needed the endorsement of the qualified FTLs in the detachment at the time. I suppose that version makes me a little less culpable in the telling but the facts are that I had been on detachment for quite a while and was fully qualified as a Fire Team Leader as well as assigned as the Det OINC. (I checked my Flight Log on this one.) Thus I was fully qualified and totally responsible for the decision to recommend LT Prudence for FTL. I was also fully qualified to make, and totally responsible for, the decision to allow him to take the Fire Team out for a mission prior to his leaving Det Nine to return to the States. I don't recall the discussions between Tom, Ian Refo, and myself that Tom wrote about, but I have no doubt that something of the sort did occur. Tom was never shy about sharing his feelings with me about most anything that came up. Ian may have been a little more suave about it but I wouldn't want to try to make a living on any difference between them on that issue. I had and still have the utmost respect for both Tom and Ian, as combat professionals, officers, and leaders. I would have then been, and would now be, happy and proud to lead or follow either of them into any situation, combat or otherwise. They represent those things we prize about Naval Aviators and need not take a back seat to anyone in that regard.

And so it came to pass that, for whatever reasons and contrary to the judgment of some people, that LT Max Prudence was recommended for his FTL check ride. I don't recall making

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any deal with Tom and Ian about letting Max qualify but arranging the FTL schedule so that his turn wouldn't come up before he had to catch his Freedom Bird. The Squadron NATOPS Officer came out to the LST and the flight was flown. It is not clear to me at this point whether LT Prudence passed on his first or second check ride but it is clear that he passed. It is also clear that, regardless of the fact that the check flight consisted of a combat mission involving a strike on an enemy target under standard operating procedures. However, as we all know, there are combat missions and then there are **COMBAT MISSIONS!!** Even though we like to hang on the bar and tell about our death-defying feats of valor with whizzing rockets and green 51-cal tracers flying by the windows and rolling in on the bastards while taking fire by the bushel from the flanks, the fact is that many combat missions are plain vanilla strikes against a bunker or two that just have not yet collapsed. But what the hell, a bunker is a bunker and air medals are 20 strikes apiece (or is it 40?) and check flights have to be flown. And so LT Prudence's check flight was about as sterile as most. What the NATOPS Officer was really interested in was whether or not the guy knew what to do and how to do it; procedures, really. And LT Max did know his procedures and what he was supposed to do and how to do it.

And after the flight was over and de-briefed and the paperwork done, Max was designated an FTL. He was supposed to rotate home almost immediately but there was a day or so left on his tour. Det Nine was FTL rich at that point, what with Tom, Ian, me and now Max all qualified. In such situations, the FTLs usually took turns leading the Fire Team on missions. We were almost never called out for scrambles because our LST was

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anchored out a ways from the coast which caused communications problems. So we had to drum up our own business. To the US Army advisors in the regional headquarters, we were like manna from heaven because they had to go through several layers of the beauracracy to get air support from Vung Tau. Yet here we were with two gunships and all they had to do was flag us down as we flew by in order to arrange a fire support mission or pass on intel about suspected enemy targets. So we found it easy to get a clearance to fire on something almost any time we flew. In fact, we had a set of reasonable targets that were always good for a strike if we couldn't find anything better. They were mostly bunkers and huts that were out in the swamps in the secret zones at the ends of the peninsulas that made up the mouths of the Mekong. The Rung Sat was the most well known but there were several more further south and, in fact, our Area of Operations pretty much consisted of those secret zones. These secret zones were mostly controlled by VC or NVA and were used as R&R sites or storage points for supplies and troops en route to units operating in the Delta. It was fairly easy to find a reasonable target almost any time. And because the bad guys did not want to call attention to locations and quantities of war materials, they mostly kept as low a profile as possible. On discovery, they often attempted to evade rather than fight-a pitched battle. Consequent to all of the above, not only were there plenty of targets, I personally knew of lots of "sterile" targets, i.e., targets that would not be defended even if enemy personnel were present.

When Max asked about taking the Fire Team out, I was somewhat apprehensive but had neither the stomach to tell him that his FTL qual was "just for show" nor the confidence to put

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him in the rotation. When the day came that he was supposed to take the next flight to Binh Thuy, he asked to take the Fire Team out that afternoon. Before I answered, I walked out on deck and checked the weather. There was not a cloud in the sky nor on the horizon. We were anchored about five miles off the beach and we had "surveyed-in" the ship's position by passing over an easily-identified position on the beach, establishing the heading, and timing the run to the ship at 40 knots and 40 feet. We did this for several positions on the beach so that, if caught by a thunderstorm and the low visibility conditions that sometimes accompany them, we could get within sighting distance of the ship by dead reckoning. We practiced this technique regularly and it worked every time. And so the scene was set. Absolutely perfect weather, a sterile target that all personnel were familiar with from previous missions, and a fuel dump not very far from the target. I told Max to get the Team ready, brief them for a strike on that sterile target (which was right on the coast and easy to find and even easier to get clearance to attack), launch and check in with the Army for the clearance, put in the strike, refuel, and come home. Pretty simple, I thought. What could go wrong? Well, just about everything. About half an hour after they launched, a thunderstorm developed but I was sure that they could find the ship. We had all practiced coming home in low visibility. When they didn't show up at the expected time, I began to get agitated. Maybe there was a mechanical problem and they were at the fuel dump. Maybe they landed at an Army outpost to wait out the storm. We could not talk to the Army on the ground from the ship because they were on VHF and beyond line-of-sight. Where the hell were they?? Then the Maydays began. Army helos in the air heard the call for help and scrambled. I

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was putting out Flash messages by the minute trying to find out the situation and get them out of wherever they were. It was a while before things settled down.

On reconstructing events, it seems that all was well at first. They got their clearance and put in the strike on the target bunkers near the coast and rearmed/refueled as planned. Then Max headed back to the ship but by then the thunderstorm had become a player. Max couldn't see the ship from the beach so he started to circumnavigate the storm to the north, hoping to get around it. After a bit, he decided to try the southern side and so he came back towards the beach and swung south. With still no ship in sight, he again turned back toward the beach, low on fuel by this time. He never called the ship for weather or assistance of any sort. He never attempted the 40 foot/40 knot dead reckoning run that was SOP. Finally, being low on fuel, he decided to land and wait for help. Where he landed was almost exactly where he had put in the strike! And were the locals pissed!! At helos in general and dark green ones with NAVY on the side in particular. After they deployed a perimeter defense, the locals came out in full force. It soon became apparent that this was no place to be. While the pilots cranked up the helos, the gunners returned fire and then pulled back and jumped aboard. The Det LPO, Glenn Zurfluh, was the rear guard and last aboard. Both helos tried for a sandbar that was temporarily high and dry but the trail ship (Steve Hanvey) took a hit and went in. Max made it to the sand bar and shut down. I don't recall much about the details of getting the surviving helo refueled and back to the ship. I found out what went on in the water from the guys who got wet, Zurfluh in particular. It turned out that one of the gunners

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couldn't swim. He had gotten his second class swimmer's card signed off by a "buddy" for a bottle of scotch. With his life jacket inflated, the wind was blowing him towards the beach and the enemy. Steve Hanvey called to him to deflate his jacket but he refused and hollered back that he couldn't swim. Enemy fire was splashing in the water all around him. The rest of the troops had swum out to sea and out of range. At that point, Steve deflated his own jacket, swam into the fire, and helped him deflate his jacket. Steve then towed him out to sea and out of range. By that time, there was help overhead and all were rescued as Tom relates. I later put Steve in for a Silver Star which was awarded. The requirements for that award are valorous conduct in combat, in the face of the enemy, and that others, in position to do this act, did not. So it is not an attendance award and Steve rightfully deserves to wear it.

While all the furor was going on, the surviving helo got some fuel and returned to the ship, the thunderstorm having passed on out to sea. It turned out that the mail helo arrived shortly thereafter and Max packed up and got aboard. He went back to Ben Thuy and rapidly onward to Saigon for DEROs. I never spoke to him after the incident. Probably just as well.

So all's well that ends well?? Not by a long shot!! I should never have recommended Max for the FTL check ride. Once the recommendation was in place, it was just a pro forma thing, no matter whether he needed one or two flights to pass. The NATOPS Officer could easily overlook some things as a "having a bad day" or "checkitis". He must have thought that I had confidence in Max or else I wouldn't have put him in for the ride. I figured that it wouldn't hurt if he had it in his record that he has qualified. Why set him up for failures

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later on? None of us had any real specific deficiencies that we were able to articulate. It was all just vague feelings and after all, Max's time on detachment was fast running out. This issue comes up over and over when there are no specific criteria for pass or fail. Where is the dividing line? Everybody has to make judgments about people and their abilities from time to time.

Since that episode I have been much less likely to use a criteria of "Why not?" than one of "Why?". If I had it to do over, I suppose I would ask myself how I would feel about sending my own kid out to fly missions with Max as his FTL. That question is easier to answer than why deny this guy his one chance to be a big deal, to have his story to tell at the bar. In the final analysis, it seems to me that there must be others who went down the same slippery slope that I did but lucked out because nothing went wrong. I could have been luckier myself that day but maybe I had used up my luck inventory. I recognize that I have pulled off some miracles here and there, mostly minor but some major. It also seems to me that I should have asked myself questions such as what if something goes wrong, what if everything goes wrong, what is there in reserve for bad luck. Since that episode, I have discovered Murphy's Laws of Combat. Some examples are: "The important things are always simple. The simple things are always hard. The easy way is always mined." I took the easy way that day and it was, indeed, mined.

It has been quite a while since that day on the LST and we have all been out of Vietnam for a long time. That part of Vietnam will never be out of me. I hope that the telling of this episode, both from Tom's perspective and from mine, will

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be useful to somebody, somewhere. I will offer some advice to those who care to hear it. Juniors, speak up and speak out, particularly on matters of principle. Seniors, never compromise for the sake of smoothing things over. All officers, be true to your oath of office in all things, small as well as large!!