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# 307

## DAYS TO GO!

**A**t 4 am, the radio in the next room is crackling. I roll back the mosquito net, light a cigarette, then half stumble into the room asking the operator how things are going. He gives a tight-lipped grimace, "Not so hot, two KIAs, at least 4 WIAs, they are out of water, low on ammo and been reporting trucks and possibly tracks around their position all night. A FAC is on station, Spad A-1Es alerted at Plekiu, looks like you guys are going to get an early morning extraction."

The rest of the crew is still asleep as I wander outside. The FOB II compound is serenely quiet. Hard to believe over the line in Laos 80, or now apparently 78, men have been fighting for 16 straight hours, yet here it is tranquil. I walk over to our Bell UH-1C, sit in the cabin door and pat the rocket pod.

Some helicopter  
missions in Southeast  
Asia really seemed to extend  
one's tour of duty

*By Jim Kreutz*









UH-1C with XM-21 mini-gun instead of M-540mm launcher at staging area near Dak To.

This is 27 November 1967, and it has been a fast 58 days in the country. I reminisce on flying Slicks for the 189th Assault Helicopter Company "Ghost Riders" in support of Special Forces Project Omega out of Plejerang for a month until that operation closed down then, because of combat losses, getting assigned to the gun platoon "Avengers" just in time to pick up the FOB II, CCC mission.

"FOB DEUCE"; Command & Control Central, CCC; SOG, Studies and Observation Group, the more socially acceptable terms for the pleasure of supporting the Special Forces organization at Kontum. Its mission was to conduct covert and clandestine cross-border operations in Laos and Cambodia, doing wild and crazy things with Hatchet, Snatch, Spike and Recon teams manned by a mix of Montagnards, Nung, other ethnic minority (and some unidentifiable) troops. Sometimes it was a nicker-flipper if the majority of the troops' aggression was directed toward the NVA or each other, but this problem was too confusing for a rookie pilot to worry about.

The Special Forces team leaders ran the gamut from careerist to idealist from old timers on their umpteenth tour to young guys just wanting to do their job and get home; the nervous and concerned, the cool and

calm and "Mad Dog" — arguably one of the better killing machines in the Army.

His and the other team leaders' exploits make Sly "Where were you when Viet Nam was going on?" Stallone's *Rambo* look like a nerd. Last rumor had "Mad Dog," regrettably (or possibly it was the way he would have wanted it or even the way it had to be) last seen in a fire-fight inside Laos in '71-72. Regardless of individual goals, motives, temperament or experience, they collectively made an impact on the war far greater than their numbers, gathering a tremendous amount of intelligence, destroying copious quantities of equipment and killing large numbers of NVA — on their own turf.

Combat is a health hazard but CCC took this a couple extra steps further, considering their accomplishments without much glory or fanfare. SFC Fred Zabitosky of CCC was awarded the Medal of Honor and, in my opinion, earned at least three more but because most of the missions were at classified coordinates and these people were more concerned with results than ceremonies there weren't many medals thrown around. The missions were highly classified. On some we were briefed they would never be declassified; however in recent years a number of books and articles have been published about them. Permanent classifications didn't really make a lot of sense. We knew where we were, the NVA damn well knew we were there; timing, methods, techniques

and fine touches were sensitive but who were permanent classifications hiding the operation from? Hmmmmmm.

Our mission was to insert the teams, hopefully extract the same number and destroy targets they couldn't take out with other methods. We lived in the FOB II compound for about three months and spent about nine months out of twelve supporting them. Yet with several individual exceptions, I had the impression the "berets" were extremely close and tight knit among themselves and even tighter with their individual teams but didn't particularly like to associate with pilots — it's conceivable because of the mission they wouldn't have associated with their mothers at that time. However this was at a social level, professionally we knew if we went down they were going to fight their way in and get us and I believe they knew when calling for help we were coming.

The previous day, Cpt. John J. Holland, Hornet Company Commander, took 80 men in on a Hatchet Force operation. The Target Area "Hotel Nine" had and later was to get an even worse reputation for being an ass-puckering environment. The aircrew briefing was sketchy at best, no specifics on the target, only general area and coverage responsibilities. We were accustomed to supporting small Recon teams with most of the work and excitement coming from insertions into "Hot LZs" or making Emergency Extractions of teams in contact. This oper-





ation was unusual in its size, the relatively large number of aircraft and the fact the team was scheduled to remain on the ground only long enough to destroy the target then get out, couple of hours max.

Initial insertion was uneventful, we covered the area until the team cleared the LZ then returned to the staging area at Dak To to refuel/rearm and standby for the extraction. Monitoring the tactical frequency revealed they had made contact shortly after clearing the LZ. They weren't calling for an out so it couldn't be determined if the troops hit the target or unexpected bad guys. Nevertheless, replenishing was expedited.

As usual, communications were between the team, the FAC, another radio-relay site and FOB II "Head Shed" at Kontum, leaving the recovery force to wait and wonder at old Dak To. Bits and pieces of information started rumors ranging from "the team was totally wiped out" to "they are kicking ass and going all the way to Hanoi." The anticipated extraction time passed and it was hot, crews got tired of swapping lies, some went to harass Slick crews, others sat in the cabins for shade and a couple wandered into the elephant grass, possibly for the non-command sponsored but time-honored/traditional romantic liaisons with short-time boom-boom girls. Maybe we should have tied in with the ladies' intelligence net, they

always seemed to be in position to send us off before we knew we were going.

Late in the afternoon information came that the team was pinned down and needed water, ammo, entrenching tools and had wounded to recover. The flight got to the LZ just before dusk and, during the approach, the first aircraft took twelve hits. The Aircraft commander received multiple serious wounds and the pilot took a round in the leg but managed to fly the heavily damaged aircraft back to Dak To. The other aircraft couldn't land because of the intense ground fire so he made passes over the LZ, tossing equipment to the team.

A night extraction was impossible so we returned to FOB II. After a hot meal came optimism: Hell, with 80 friendlies on the ground, massed targets in a small area — it would be a turkey shoot. However, my last thought before going to sleep was that it would really be nice if the team broke contact during the night.

Just prior to sunrise the compound comes to life, the word is that more Slicks are coming from Plekiu so the extraction can be completed in one lift. WO William "Bull" Durham — short, stocky, friendly (with everyone but FNG co-pilots) and still sleepy, allows as though we ought to get a bite to eat and find out if anyone knows what the hell is going on. After breakfast he goes

looking for a briefing while I pre-flight.

We had flown this aircraft for the last week, her problems were familiar and the walk around confirmed that nothing had fixed itself: ADF — Inop; crazed windshields; Fuel pump — chatters; Throttle linear actuator — sluggish; Fuel pressure gauge — intermittent inop. (probably a bad gauge and a mental note is made that EGT had been creeping up a few degrees and power dropping off — not drastic so it probably just needed an engine flush).

Crew Chief SP/4 Orville "Chief" Sheohips and Gunner SP/4 Raymond J. Reigadas wiped down the critical areas but, by any standards, the aircraft is filthy — the engine deck has suspicious fluid marks but no identifiable leaks, tail rotor blades have several new dings probably caused by expended door-gun brass. Up on top a blade grip-seal is seeping-dripping-leaking? Who can tell the difference? Chief just refills the reservoir every day. We don't find any show stoppers, as long as the "Jesus Nut" is on top, skids on the bottom and the engine runs, we are going to be going. There are no spare gunships.

Still no sign of the Bull so I recheck the weapons system. It is a UH-1C with a 40mm grenade launcher (M-5, Frog, Thumper) on the nose and two seven round 2.75 in. rocket pods on the sides. Bull has been trying to



WO Orrion "Len" Dyer Jr., a "Ghost Rider" aircraft commander on the described mission. Killed in action 3 February 1968.

convince me this weapon will revolutionize the art of war. Temporarily I am a believer — no choice. With the onset of age and maturity combined with the fact Bull later sluffs the aircraft off on another pilot, a preference is developed for dropping "Ham & Limas" C-Rats on the NVA, they are deadlier, don't jam and you can carry more rounds. A 40mm is not a bad system for a bunker or point target that doesn't shoot back but you have to get awfully close to be in range and the rounds come out so slow I have watched a guy dodge them by jumping out of the way (he didn't outjump the door-gun!). Very seldom are all of the rounds expended without a malfunction which always occurs at the worst possible time. A mini-gun is much nicer.

At any rate, 40mm ammo-box and feed chute is rechecked to ensure rounds are linked and not binding. The rockets were loaded in a hurry so Chief and I remove and retorqued them, loose rocket heads tend to determine their own flight path and targets. Finally we size the door-gun's M-60 ammo to ensure long rounds don't cause any malfunctions, decide to throw a couple extra boxes of M-60 on board and borrow some M-79s.

Bull and the other Aircraft Commanders exit the briefing and he waves a small circle indicating time to get ready. Suiting-up starts with the flight jacket, not required by regulation and certainly not for warmth but a personal idiosyncrasy. I have heard and believe that in a crash you can only plan on getting out with what you have on your back; other than a weapon what I want most is the jacket's orange inner-liner as a marker panel for chase/rescue birds. Next, the pistol is repositioned from the hip to the front, at least a psychological barrier against a hit in that vital area. Recheck dog-tags and good-luck tiger tooth. Reluctantly the ceramic armor "chicken plate" (a real pain-in-the-ass), there are believers but I think it has more potential for taking your head off in a crash than stopping a bullet and, finally, the flak-jacket to prevent ricochets off the chicken plate from wiping out your neck and face.

The Slicks from Plekiu arrive and Bull gives the pre-mission briefing. "Aircraft ready? Yup. Throw on some more M-60. OK. Spads are on target, guns are going to Dak To and wait for the Slicks to launch. Roger. You got any extra coffee?" Ya, it's on the console. "OK. Let's crank."

"Avenger VI" Cpt (now BG) Lynn Hooper leads the first fire team and Bull moves into position to lead the second. It is still early, density altitude is down and we are light for a "C" Model but the compound is small with a narrow takeoff path so he



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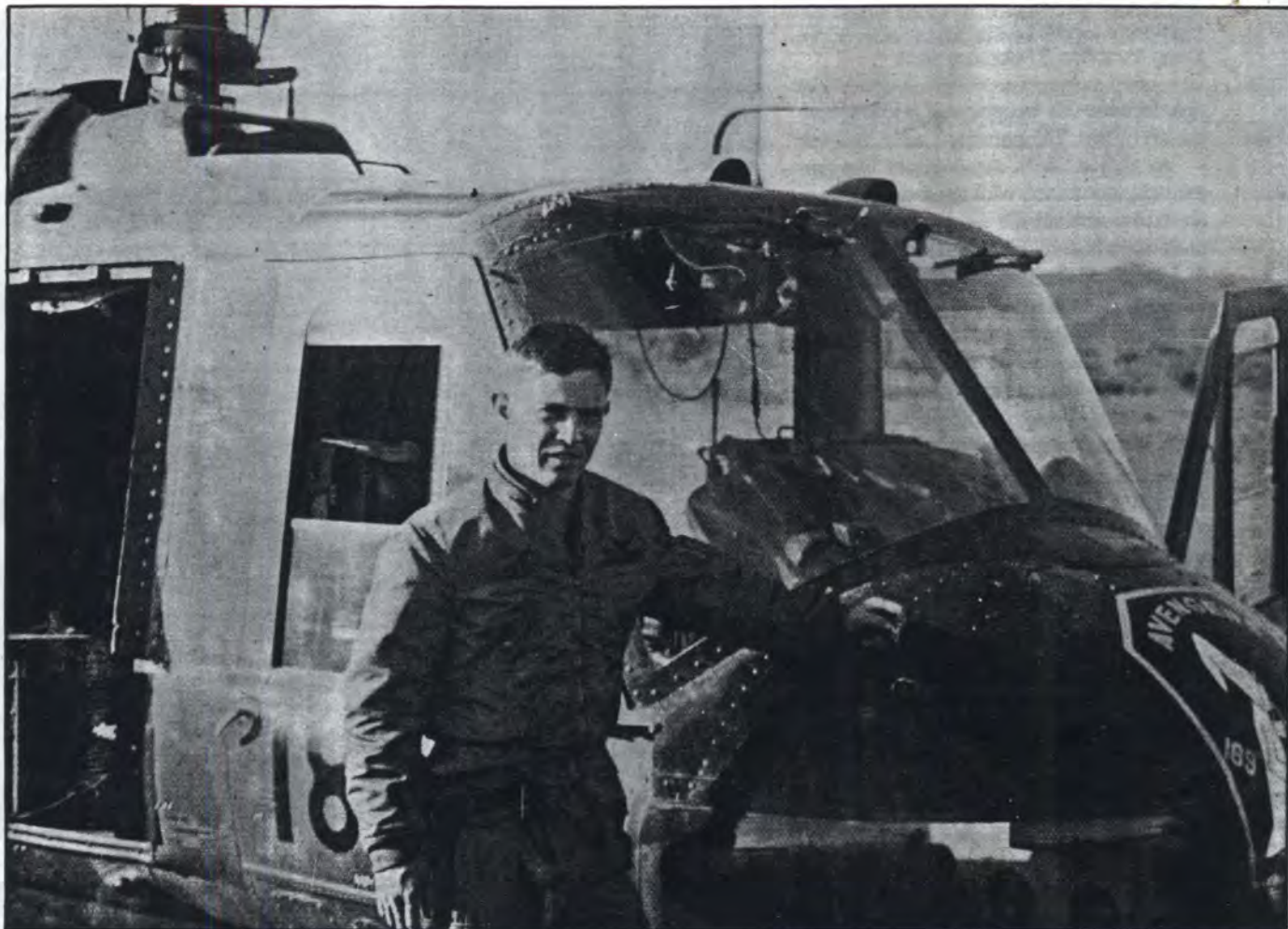
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Author and helo at Dak To.

goes to the far end, stabilizes power at a one-foot hover, gently nudges cyclic forward then locks the controls to prevent disturbing ground cushion. The aircraft slowly accelerates and bumps through translational lift, nose down for a couple extra knots then a cyclic climb just skimming over the top of the berm surrounding the compound and a dive toward the rice paddy to pick up speed for the climb enroute altitude. Confined area gunship takeoffs are not for the faint hearted. On the way to Dak To doorguns are test fired and the 40mm flexed, no use firing and giving it the opportunity to jam.

Fuel is topped off in South POL at Dak To and communications established with the FAC. He gives the order to launch, the Slicks have departed Kontum and the A-1Es have only 15 minutes more station time. Bull flies and I have time to think. Responding to an emergency is one thing, you react and do what is necessary to accomplish the mission; not having time for extensive prior planning means you don't have time to worry about the risk. This mission is my first exposure to a different and not particularly pleasant set of conditions. The NVA have .50 caliber machine guns, probably triangulated by now and 23 mm, 37mm and 57mm antiaircraft

weapons in this area. They know we are coming and because the team is very close to a major road network they have undoubtedly prepared a reception. A sudden flash of insight: *What in the hell am I doing here?*

Smoke from the A-1E strike and a Command & Control (C&C) Huey with our Company Commander flying, lead us into the area. The FAC reports the team is receiving fire from all quadrants except the east, are extremely low on ammo, have had more wounded and are concerned about being overrun. He acknowledges the Spads are on their last firing pass and clears us into the area as soon as they depart. Gun/rocket systems "Hot," Bull reminds the door gunners not to fire toward the team until their perimeter is identified, then dives down to tree-top level. A dry run to checkout the terrain and threat was made at a smoking 120 knots from the south-east (actually we had difficulty locating the LZ), approaching the team a break in the foliage exposes twinkling gun flashes — *many* twinkling flashes. Bull calls a visual on the LZ, I look but can't spot it. Avenger VI confirms firing passes will be from the east, his fire team on the south of the LZ and ours on the north. Rolling inbound, Bull fires a pair of rockets and, finally spotting the LZ, I plunk out some 40mm, the team is around a small bomb crater surrounded by 100-120 foot trees with

smoke, haze and mist hampering visibility. One more firing pass then a low-slow-cold pass to draw fire in order to locate the enemy and determine if the Slicks can be brought in. The team reports hearing automatic weapons, we don't spot them or take any hits, happiness is not seeing any green basketballs coming up, indicating .50 cal's in the area.

Time was crucial and the situation wasn't going to get any better so C&C vectored the first Slick toward the LZ. We pick up coverage and vectoring about a half mile out. "10° right, 1/2-mile, hold what you got — it's at 12 o'clock, 1/4-mile," Bull places a pair of rockets abeam the LZ, the door-gunners and I start putting down covering fire. "Slow down, start your flare, damn-it slow down," he slightly overshoots the LZ, comes to a stop, does a pedal turn and descends into the hover hole.

The LZ was shaped like a frying-pan with the handle to the west. To minimize exposure to ground fire the aircraft approached from the east, did the 180° pedal turn, descended 120 feet to a low hover, held the hover while the troops loaded, did a vertical 120 foot climb and departed to the east. Cpt Holland later reported the area had only 14-inch clearance on the sides and 48-inches fore and aft, it might have been a little larger but was extremely tight and in spite of our





UH-1C thinking about takeoff.

fire suppression, enemy fire was constant.

Normally the fire-team leader's responsibility is to concentrate on the target and the wingman is to cover lead. This mission required the guns to maintain continuous suppressive fire for the Slicks, covering each other was incidental. The firing runs were oriented in a basic race track pattern but the actual flight path dictated by maintaining position on the Slicks.

On the outbound leg, right after the brake, we had a pest armed with what sounded like an SKS. Every pass in his vicinity was greeted with a loud CRACK — CRACK. We were staying low and varying track so he must have been on high ground or in a tree platform.

In spite of all the problems and heavy fire around the LZ, Chief was taking this one-shot Charlie very personal. He hollered, cussed and hung out the door on his monkey strap firing his M-60 under the aircraft and down the tail-boom in a desperate attempt to locate and silence this guy. Good intentions, outstanding effort, yet pass after pass was acknowledged with CRACK — CRACK.

The Slicks' timing was great, as one would exit the LZ the next was on 1/2-mile final. I had isolated concentrations of weapon flashes and aimed some rounds at them but suppressing fire when the Slicks were vulnerable was more important than zeroing in on a few individuals. The majority of rounds were spread to keep heads down in areas that had likely fields of fire into the LZ. Bull kept us in beautiful firing position,

as the fourth aircraft descended I sensed it, felt it, heard it. "Oh shit, we are hit!" A searing burning in the neck, the Master Caution flashes, the hydraulic segment light illuminates. I let go of the sighting system and grab the back of the neck. No blood — just a poorly timed piece of hot brass from the door gun. A glance at Bull, sweat running down his forehead — this is not good. Although designated a UH-1C, this particular aircraft is a hybrid B/540 and only has a single hydraulic system. Total hydraulic failure this far from home is the thing nightmares are made of. Caution panel reset, the hydraulic light flickers. Bull exercises the controls and asks me to feel them. They feel normal. He shrugs and rolls inbound to pick up the next Slick.

As the number of people left on the



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ground decreases, the potential for a full blown assault to wipe them out increases dramatically — so the situation got particularly tense for the last couple of aircraft. Frequently, in the past, our Slicks had complained about gun coverage being too close. Although the ground next to his skids was saturated and the helicopter virtually obscured by dust from exploding rockets, 40mm and the M-60 rounds from mini and door guns, the Aircraft Commander of the last aircraft kept calmly repeating, "Come on Avengers, get it closer, get it closer!"

Departing the LZ his path was marked by a line of smoke grenades identifying locations where previous aircraft had taken ground fire. The Hatchet Force had six more wounded, all of the live and wounded were extracted, the dead couldn't be recovered because of the intense enemy fire in the area.

Flying guns had its perks, you wore black hats, acted macho, talked dirty and a certain amount of deviant behavior was both expected and tolerated. A favorite pastime was proclaiming "Slicks are for kids" and ragging Slick pilots about gunny's constant exposure to fire. The seven crews of the 189th AHC "Ghost Riders" and the one "Alligator" crew from the 119th AHC that flew into the hover hole on Hotel Nine were not subject to being ragged. The skill, determi-

nation and courage required to fly through intense fire, descend into a hole barely big enough for the aircraft and load troops while maintaining a stationary hover in the midst of bedlam, explosions, carnage and constant incoming fire probably has to be experienced to be appreciated — but these Slicks were definitely not for kids!

After the last aircraft departed, the FAC spotted an NVA company-sized force 900 meters north of the LZ apparently massing to overrun the team. Avenger VI made a quick ammo check and determined that although most was expended there were a few rockets, some mini-gun and enough door-gun, .38 and M-79s to make a going away pass. This was vetoed by the C&C who said the Air Force was being called in to work over the area. Turning for home we began to wonder about the hydraulics, the light remained out. Later it was discovered a round had hit the 40mm pod and creased a hydraulic line causing the light to flicker; one of the better things the 40mm did was stop the round that otherwise would have come through the cockpit. The Slicks were just dots on the horizon and our two fire teams were in more of a gaggle than a formation. Bull looked over and growled "OK, you've had enough rest, let's see if you can fly us home and try to maintain your damn altitude."

"Yes sir, I have the controls." Only 306 1/2 days to go!

**ACT**